

Global Population Control and the Status of Women in Iran

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The drastic change in the population control policy in Iran in the 1980s immensely enhanced the status of women. Amid prevailing conservative values and an emphasis on traditional family structures, it is important to understand the driving forces behind the regime's decision to urgently implement such a progressive population policy.

Population control as a strategic tool in Iran

Rapid population growth in developing countries raised global concerns over potential economic and social instability in the 1960s. The discussions on women's rights, their bodily autonomy and abortion were superseded by the global development program of population control, primarily supported by the United States. Following the global persuasions, Iran removed legal barriers. Consequently, the Ministry of Health initiated its Family Planning Program in 1988.

While Karamouzian, Sharifi, and Haghdoost ([2014](#)) and Mehryar and colleagues ([2022](#)) describe the transformation of the population control as suspicious, scholarship on the population control in Iran largely elaborates on its impact rather than the cause of implying changes to the population policy. I argue that the vulnerable status of the Islamic regime of Iran in the early years after the 1979 revolution enabled the emergence of a less conservative stance on population policy and bodily autonomy in Iran. Viewing the world as a global field where states constantly struggle to accumulate different and convertible forms of capital ([Go 2008](#)) can unravel the Islamic regime's motivation to accumulate capitals in the 1980s as a latecomer state in the global field.

Population control as a global concern

In 1952, the concept of population control received significant recognition when John D. Rockefeller III was appalled by what he had seen as a "population explosion" ([Heim/Schaz 1994](#)) in his travels to the 'third world'. Together with influential figures, Rockefeller organized a conference in Williamsburg, Virginia, inaugurating the establishment of the Population Council to reflect his belief that the problem of population growth and its connection with the world's material and cultural resources was a pressing and vital issue of the time ([Hartmann 1997](#)). The United States' government supported that belief and assumed a pivotal role in financing international population control initiatives through the creation of the U.N. Fund for Population Activities. This marked a substantial commitment to addressing demographic concerns on a global scale. Despite the evolving calls for re-evaluation, population control retained its significance within the frameworks of both international development and national security policies in the United States. The intersectionality of demographic concerns with broader geopolitical considerations underscored the persistent centrality of population control as a component shaping the trajectory of national and international strategic objectives.

Population Control in Iran

One of the countries with historical records of drastic changes in its population policy is Iran. In the late 1960s and 70s, the political situation in Iran was quite unstable. During this period, Iran was in the process of dethroning the king and creating its new theocratic constitution to reject the influence of what it considered Western culture that had deeply influenced the country. The Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979 brought about significant changes in Iranian government's policies and international relationships. The anti-modernist and radical pro-Muslims tried to establish a new Islamic identity as a reaction to Western liberalism with Ruhollah Khomeini's leadership. The Islamic Republic of Iran implemented discriminatory policies towards women, including banning them from certain occupations and social roles. Additionally, the regime repealed the Family Protection Acts of 1967 and 1973, which had previously prohibited polygamy, increased the minimum age of marriage, and granted women the right to divorce ([Abbasi-Shavazi et al. 2009](#)). The regime also imposed strict limitations on contraception and family planning. The Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1988, created a strongly pro-natalist environment in Iran, where families were encouraged to bear more children to supply soldiers for the military. Government and religious authorities commended women for their contributions in having and raising large families ([Abbasi et al. 2002](#)).

A new family planning program

In December 1989, the Iranian government drastically shifted its approach by introducing a new family planning program. This initiative was notably effective, as evidenced by various statistics, and Iran received the United Nations Population Award. This award signified global endorsement and could be strategically used to enhance Iran's diplomatic and economic positions. This shift was part of a broader effort by developing countries to align with international standards and receive related benefits, such as financial aid and international recognition. The new population policy led to several reforms that improved the status of women. As McDonald ([2000a](#), [2000b](#)) explains all instances of fertility decline are connected to a transformation in the husband-wife relationship, which elevates the wife's position beyond what is usual in most patriarchal traditional societies. The availability of contraceptives in Iran, provided women with the opportunity to have boyfriends and marry for love while gradually challenging traditional gender roles ([Afary 2009](#)). Implementing family planning measures in Iran in the wake of significant political and religious changes is marked by conflicting viewpoints regarding reproductive rights and healthcare services. The legalization of contraceptive measures signifies a proactive response to evolving global order. The integration of religious principles into public health initiatives can be viewed as a plan to reflect Iran's commitment to modernizing healthcare practices while upholding traditional values.

The perspective of global fields

Considering the global environment as a multifaceted field entails examining various dimensions including both objective configurations and subjective perceptions. This approach operates on multiple levels of analysis, encompassing the micro level of agents' habitus and strategies, the meso level of social and cultural relations, and the macro level of larger structures or environments ([Buchholz 2008, 2013, 2015](#)). Moving beyond mere consideration of norms or established models, the global space is conceptualized as a field governed by rules, akin to a game where these rules encompass not only norms but also cultural or symbolic capital. Consequently, subjective dimensions play a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics of global interactions. Understanding this perspective allows for the

interpretation and analysis of societal changes, recognizing that the everyday lives of people are influenced by decisions made by political actors on a global scale. Within the context of understanding the actions of powerful states, the concept of a global field emerges as a global arena where states and other actors, such as corporations, non-governmental institutions, and international organizations, compete over different forms of capital. As emphasized by scholars, a key consideration in global fields is how to conceptualize the “global,” its dynamics, and its impact on state action. The global field underwent significant shifts following World War II. Pierre Bourdieu suggests that individuals and institutions operate within specific fields, each with its own set of rules, power dynamics, and hierarchies ([Bourdieu 1991, p. 230](#)).

Iran in the global fields

Khomeini’s regime faced pressure from the global field, where adherence to certain international norms and standards was necessary to maintain legitimacy and to avoid isolation. To gain (the convertible) symbolic capital and maintain its position within a field, Khomeini’s regime recognized the importance of complying with international norms to preserve its standing and influence on the global stage. As the world became increasingly interconnected, the Islamic regime recognized the importance of engaging with the international community to secure economic, political, and diplomatic benefits. Compliance with international norms, including improvements in human and women’s rights, was viewed as necessary to gain acceptance and legitimacy in the global arena. The changes in the population control policy in Iran reflect the complex interplay between internal dynamics and external pressures, demonstrating how compliance with international norms was perceived as a priority to navigate the global arena and safeguard the regime’s interests. Although authoritarianism involves unquestioned authority of one person or group over others who voluntarily obey ([Arendt 1973](#)), there are nevertheless semi-autonomous fields within authoritarian regimes over which authoritarianism cannot fully rule. Whether this fosters hopes for women’s liberation or helps to overcome authoritarianism remains to be seen. Further research is needed to understand the potentials of the global field theory in this context.

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Zitation

Saba Mirhosseini: Global Population Control and the Status of Women in Iran, in: *blog interdisziplinäre geschlechterforschung*, 27.08.2024, www.gender-blog.de/beitrag/global-population-control-iran/, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17185/gender/20240827>

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DOI: 10.17185/gender/20240827

URN: urn:nbn:de:hbz:465-20240827-121746-3



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