

## Pronatalism Strips Autonomy from Women

By Chelsea Silvia

In Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, shadowy female figures glide silently through the streets and the bedrooms. In the Republic of Gilead, their destinies were defined by their reproductive parts, with the handmaids' only task being to bear children for the wives of the Commanders. Handmaids endure a violent re-education process for women who are both fertile and reject the laws of mandatory pronatalism. Running this process are infertile Aunts who constantly remind them of the serious threat of exile to the environmental apocalypse known as the Colonies or to employment as forced sex workers known as Jezebels if they don't conform.

While it is highly unlikely that this fictitious society will become a reality, there is always a possibility of some aspects of it lie in our future as the US moves toward restricting women's autonomy in making reproductive health decisions by valuing pronatalism. I call for feminist researchers to take a stand today by increasing the amount of research and public awareness of the harmful effects of this agenda and ideology.

Pronatalism is define narrowly as the he policy or practice of encouraging the bearing of children, especially government support of a higher birthrate. Rulers and legislators can pass policies that incentivize birth and prohibit attempts to engage in family planning or that limit access to contraceptives and abortions. Iran, for example, once had a comprehensive system of family planning but as birth rates fell, the government began in 1914 to pass a set of pronatalist policies, which included replacing public-health slogans that used to praise "Fewer kids, better life" with billboards that show large, happy families juxtaposed with sad small families; cutting budgets for subsidized condoms and family planning; increasing already generous paternity and maternity leave; and seeking to enact a bill that would make [vasectomies](#) and [tubectomies](#), which were free of charge until 2012, treated like abortions - punishable by a jail term of up to five years and payment of [diyya](#) (blood money).

In other cases, governments may not enact policies, but the society as a whole is swayed by an overall ideology of natalism, defined as a belief that promotes the reproduction of human life. Natalism promotes child-bearing and parenthood as desirable for social reasons and to ensure the continuance of humanity. This set of persuasive cultural norms forces women into reproductive and childbearing roles. These roles are harmful towards both women and their families who do not conform to the expected norms. Motherhood varies from woman to woman, which is why society should not force certain roles on all women.

It is my personal choice to abstain from having children in the future. While the United States is not a particularly dominant society regarding pronatalism, I have still directly felt the effects of natalist ideas directed toward women. "You'll change your mind one day," people tell me. "You're too young to make that decision." But in fact, I am not too young. I am a strong

independent woman, who doesn't particularly care for children. I am an advocate and user of assisted reproductive technology services, or ART services, which aid with family planning – including a wide range of services from various birth control methods to in-vitro fertilization, or IVF.

Pronatalist societies, such as The Buddhist community in Ladakh, India experience extreme religious opposition to contraceptive methods, making family planning seen as a sinful practice. In the rural areas, the number of children is the highest, mainly caused by the lack of access to ART services. This directly increases the intensity of pronatalism in Ladakh. Buddhists often point to the authority of his holiness, the Dalai Lama, who happens to support the increase in population. Because Buddhists equate contraception with abortion, contraception is immediately categorized as a sin by Dalai Lama's comments and practices. Preventing pregnancy is synonymous with preventing rebirth since from a Buddhist perspective, family planning interrupts Bardo, the internal liminal time between death and rebirth. In order to allow women proper choices when family planning, she must break some harmful social norms.

Pronatalist bias perpetuates harmful social norms while undermining a woman's reproductive autonomy. While the goal of pronatalism is to increase population in declining societies, the effects of the ideology and policies are often harmful. In order to combat these flaws, both men and women must work together to begin to redefine pronatalism to mean pro-birth for those who choose it, keeping the notion of choice at the center of reproductive freedom.

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