

Report: Politicians use religion to restrict reproductive rights

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Politicians around the world are using religion to restrict reproductive rights, a recent report has found.

[*Welcome to Gilead: pronatalism and the threat to reproductive rights*](#) (pictured) warns "extremist, religious, nationalist currents" leading to clampdowns on reproductive rights in countries like Poland are "spreading across the globe".

The report, published by Population Matters late last year, finds "governments and politicians now want women to have more children, and some are resorting to coercion to achieve that goal".

Nationalist politicians may be motivated by fears that low birth rates will result in a loss of national power, or that minority groups with higher fertility rates will 'erase' the culture of the existing ethnic or religious majority, the report says.

It says a wave of "Christian white nationalism" has swept across the formerly communist countries of Eastern Europe, and that politicians in the region have used the uncertainty of demographic change as an opportunity to increase support for their "nationalist, religion-infused politics" including anti-choice policies.

For example, in Poland extremist Catholic organisation Ordo Iuris has "bolstered" government claims that women are "selfishly choosing careers over their duty to preserve the nation through procreation". Education minister Przemysław Czarnek has said women should prioritise motherhood over careers because it is what "God called on them to do".

Additionally, the government hired an anti-contraception Catholic theologian to design Poland's new sex education curriculum, which mentions the word "sex" only twice, but the word "family" over 170 times.

Poland's [clampdown](#) on reproductive rights now means it ranks the lowest out of all countries in the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights' contraceptive policy atlas.

The report also highlights religion's role in restricting reproductive rights in Russia. In 2010, Russia's parliament established a working group including members of the Orthodox Church which aimed to decrease abortions. As a result of this political-religious collaboration, a 2012 law requires women who want an abortion to undergo counselling geared towards dissuading them from the procedure, which in many cases must take place with a priest.

Christian nationalists in the US have "strong" connections with their European counterparts, which the report says is partly due to the World Congress of Families (WCF) which was founded by right-wing American Christians and conservative Russians. WCF regularly holds gatherings for international followers on topics such as the "demographic winter" and "natural" family values.

The report also referenced the role of Islam in anti-choice policies. In Iran, prominent clerics have worried about low birth rates among the Shia Muslim population. Because Iran is governed by Shia

clerics, maintaining a Shia majority is important for the regime's political future. In a 2013 speech, supreme leader of Iran Ali Khamenei said reproduction is "women's *jihad*", or religious duty. Recent reforms in Iran have cracked down on abortion and outlawed free birth control.

The report also details how ethno-nationalist policies have resulted in the oppression of religious minorities. For example, Uyghur Muslims in China have been subjected to forced abortions, sterilisations and long-term contraceptives as part of China's goal of "upgrading population quality".

The report recommends national and international policymakers "maintain absolute commitment to gender equality and all sexual and reproductive health and rights".

NSS head of policy and research Megan Manson said: "This report sheds important light on the alliances between hardline religious groups and nationalist governments which spell disaster for human rights and reproductive healthcare.

"It reveals religious institutions will all too readily lend their support to sinister policies designed to engineer desired populations at the cost of the rights and freedoms of women and minorities.

"International stakeholders must be unafraid to identify and call out the role of religion in these forms of oppression, and help to stop the trend of regressive anti-choice policymaking in its tracks."

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