

Iran has one of the highest infertility rates in the world today, with 10-15% of married couples being infertile.¹ This coupled with the already declining population growth rate was a matter of substantial concern for the Ahmadinejad regime. In fact according to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs there has been a significant drop to the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) in Iran. In 1975-1980 TFR was at 7.0 and this compared to 2000-2005 where the TFR dropped down to 1.97 is reason enough for Iran to be concerned about the substantive drop in their population.² The solution was the promotion of IVF treatment within Iran for infertile couples. The issue of sexual health within the Islamic state of Iran is one that is both perplexing and surprising. When juxtaposed to neighboring Sunni states, Iran is progressive in its attitude towards IVF (In-vitro fertilization) treatment. This difference however can be seen in the Shia and Sunni clerical analysis of IVF treatment within the confines of the respective sects. Furthermore Iran has clear political reasons for their particular stance on IVF treatment as it differentiates them drastically from their Sunni counterparts due to the Shia principle of '*Ijtihad*'; "use of personal reasoning on matters". Throughout presidencies in Iran there have been numerous attempts to both, control population growth or decrease it, and to also push a conservative, traditional agenda. By supporting and supplying IVF treatment, Iran is playing a three level game where they are able to please three distinct groups.

On the international level, it appears Iran is moving forward with women's rights by religiously allowing and institutionally providing IVF treatment unlike their Sunni counterparts;

¹ Mohammad Jalal Abbasi-Shavazi, Marcia Inhorn, Hajiieh Bibi Razeghi-Nasrabad, and Ghasem Toloo, "The "Iranian ART Revolution": Infertility, Assisted Reproductive Technology, and Third-Party Donation in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 4, no. 2 (2008): 4, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_middle_east_womens_studies/v004/4.2.abbasi-shavazi.pdf (accessed February 13, 2014).

² United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "World Population Prospects: The 2012 Revision." Accessed February 28, 2014. <http://esa.un.org/wpp/Excel-Data/fertility.htm>.

this allows Iran to move away from the negative conception the West harbors towards its involvement in women's rights issues. On the domestic front there is (mandatory) family planning for young married couples available and there is IVF treatment available and religiously approved as well; this allows Iran to quell some of the domestic discontent amongst women's rights activists in Iran. The third level of this three-level game is that the IVF treatment and family planning classes are in actuality a means of addressing the high infertility rates with a religiously acceptable solution, and furthermore it is a subtle push or reminder for women to stay within their traditional roles within Iranian society; that of being a wife and a mother as opposed to being employed in the workforce. It is clear that Iran's support and supply of IVF treatment is nuanced with political and social motives that allow it to address several issues such as its conservative agenda, the issue of infertility and its international image as well.

The Politics of IVF: Sunni and Shia Conceptions

The attitude toward a proactive stance on these issues of reproductive health place Iran in a better light in regard to the West than Sunni states; this further solidifies their role as the leader of Shias within the Muslim world as well. There have been very specific reasons that Iran has changed and been proactive with their stance on contraception and furthermore with IVF treatment as well. The actions of the Iranian clergy directly affect the larger Shia populations in the Middle East and abroad, but are also politically charged moves that may be reactionary to the rulings of the Sunni clergy as well. The two groups have been reactionary in their discourse revolving around issues, and the issue of IVF is one that has both sects divided on approaches, procedure and what is allowed within the confines of the Islamic institute of marriage.

While the core of the issue of IVF treatment may be the religious rules and restrictions in

place to protect the sanctity of a marriage, there are deeper political reasons and ramifications for the government's promotion of IVF treatment and family planning from the 1980's to present day. In the late 1980's fatwas were issued by the Ayatollah for the use of family planning methods such as birth control for married couples in Iran. Previous to this there was a push for Iranian couples to have several children due to the high numbers of Iranian men that were killed in the Iran-Iraq war. By 1988 it had been established that one million Iranian men died, causing a substantial blow to the Iranian population and furthermore leaving the country in turmoil.³ The push for Iranian couples to conceive more children was however too fruitful and with a struggling economy and a deflated workforce, the supreme leader had to control the overwhelming population growth within the country. The Ayatollah decided to promote family planning methods for married couples as a means of controlling the increasing population growth. Within the context of the Middle East and the conservative backdrop of Iran, the promotion of family planning was one that seemed to give agency to women over their reproductive health and furthermore portrayed Iran as liberal in comparison to its Sunni neighbor's. Unfortunately these steps towards family planning left the population at a steady decline, leaving the countries population crisis in a different situation altogether.⁴

The issue of IVF within the Muslim world is one that is contested amongst the two main schools of thought within Islam. The issue with IVF treatment within the confines of Islam lies within the legality of third party egg and sperm donations, and furthermore the creation of sperm banks themselves. The Sunni stance on the issue of IVF is that within a marriage, only the

³ Black, Ian. "Iran and Iraq remember war that cost more than a million lives." *The Guardian*, September 23, 2010. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/sep/23/iran-iraq-war-anniversary> (accessed February 17, 2014).

⁴ Pardis Mahdavi. "'But What if Someone Sees Me?': Women, Risk, and the Aftershocks of Iran's Sexual Revolution." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 5, no. 2 (2009): . <http://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed February 27, 2014).

husband's sperm can be used with IVF treatment. Third party sperm donations are not allowed as that results in "zina" or adultery as the wife would be impregnated with the sperm of a man that she is not married to. The Sunni approach focuses on keeping the boundaries of a marriage, understood through an Islamic perspective, safe from the danger of adultery. The issue of surrogates is also out of the confines of Islam according to the Sunni school of thought due to the fact that this is again, adultery as there is no marriage between the surrogate and the husband. The rules and regulations around IVF treatment are restricting in order to preserve the union of marriage and to keep the child that is trying to be conceived as a legitimate within Islam.⁵

The Shia school of thought however has a different conception on the issue of IVF and this has made Iran the outlier in the Muslim world regarding the issue. According to Marcia Inhorn, Professor of Anthropology at Yale, "Unlike Sunni Muslim scholars who are scripturally based in their thinking, Shi'ite religious authorities give precedence to a form of individual religious reasoning known as Ijtihad."⁶ The concept of Ijtihad allows Shias to form individual religious reasoning that allows them to engage in egg and sperm donations.⁷ This was issued in a Fatwa given by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in which he both reassured and allowed women to undergo such proceedings in order to remedy the declining Iranian population. In order for Iranians to actually use egg and sperm donations, temporary marriages called "Muta" must take

⁵ Marcia Inhorn, "Making Muslim Babies: IVF and Gamete Donation in Sunni versus Shia Islam," *University of Michigan*: 428-450, <http://www.marciainhorn.com/olwp/wp-content/uploads/docs/inhorn-article-cult,-med,-psych.pdf> (accessed February 27, 2014).

⁶ Marcia Inhorn, "Making Muslim Babies: IVF and Gamete Donation in Sunni versus Shia Islam," *University of Michigan*: 428-450.

⁷ Moaveni, Azadeh. "The Islamic Republic of Making Babies." *Post Gazette*, January 26, 2014. <http://www.post-gazette.com/opinion/2014/01/26/The-Islamic-Republic-of-making-babies/stories/201401260005> (accessed February 27, 2014).

place. In the instance of an egg donor, there must be a temporary marriage between the man and the egg donor in order for the transaction to be lawful under the auspices of Shia Islam. Conversely for a woman to accept a sperm donation “...she must divorce her husband, wait a religiously mandated three months before marrying the sperm donor, then divorce him, and finally remarry her original husband.”⁸ This process, while convoluted, allows for sperm donations to take place within the confines of the Islamic concept of marriage and furthermore is a statement in contrast to the Sunni approach to the issue.

With Iranian civil law focusing on the family as an institution where the husband or the father is the central bearer of authority and is the financial supporter, this imposes upon women the traditional role of mother and wife not as a choice but as a mandated role. This is explained by Abbasi-Shavazi:

“The Iranian civil law emphasizes that family is a warm and placid institute founded upon the authority of the husband and the father. Motherhood and doing housework are the woman’s responsibility, and outside work is the man’s; and the man is the breadwinner. Such policies reinforce the traditional patriarchal relations within the family.”⁹

The role of Iranian policies is meant to reinforce these roles and maintain the status quo. It is also clear that in a state such as Iran, there is a larger purpose to why such a conservative state is advocating for IVF treatment and family planning. As Mahdavi states:

“... the Islamic clergy in power in Iran since the revolution of 1979 seeks to

⁸ Marcia Inhorn, "Making Muslim Babies: IVF and Gamete Donation in Sunni versus Shia Islam," *University of Michigan*: 428-450.

⁹ Abbasi-Shavazi, Inhorn, Bibi Razeghi-Nasrabad, and Toloo, "The “Iranian ART Revolution”: Infertility, Assisted Reproductive Technology, and Third-Party Donation in the Islamic Republic of Iran,"

operationalize its power through a fabric of morality and by imposing their interpretations of Islamic ways of life on Iranian citizens.”¹⁰

There is a strong correlation between what the Islamic clergy in Iran approves of and the strategic long term goals of the government in regards to societal expectations of men and women, population growth and their international image to both the West and other Shia populations in the Greater Middle East.

Reasons for the focus on Infertility in Iran

Iran has seen significant highs and lows in population growth rates since the Islamic Revolution. These demographic changes are the result of political and economic ideas of its different leaders over time, and not because of a consistent religious ideology as one might expect. The political beliefs of individual leaders have influenced policy in a constructivist sense than a common ideology among all presidents of the country.

Total fertility rate (TFR) in Iran was at 7.0 in 1980 compared to 6.0 just 4 years before that in 1976.¹¹ Even though the fertility rate was high as it was, the moment Ayatollah Khomeini became Supreme Leader, he overturned the 1967 Family Protection Law that provided for contraceptives and other measures to decrease population growth.¹² The new regime started encouraging high fertility and adopted a pro-natalist stance partly because of the increased

¹⁰ Pardis Mahdavi. "“But What if Someone Sees Me?”: Women, Risk, and the Aftershocks of Iran’s Sexual Revolution." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 5, no. 2 (2009): 1-22. <http://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed February 27, 2014).

¹¹ Jalal Abbasi-Shavazi, Mohammed. United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Recent Changes And The Future of Fertility In Iran." Accessed February 7, 2014. <http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/completingfertility/2RevisedABBASIpaper.PDF>, 425.

¹² Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Conceiving Citizens: Women and the Politics of Motherhood in Iran*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 216.

fatalities resulting from the Iran-Iraq War.¹³ Another reason for this highly pro-natalist stance was that the post revolution Islamic regime preferred to keep women at home and engaged with reproductive tasks to be consistent with what they believed to be their cultural heritage.¹⁴ This resulted in a drastic defeminization of the workplace in the country to the extent that by 1986, the rate of participation of women in the labor force had dropped to what it was in 1956.¹⁵ However, a closer examination of the segregation in the work place and the labor force reveals that, “women with financial means or high skills could better resist the gender segregationist policies... [and]... distinguish themselves with their skills and remain in their middle class employment positions.”¹⁶

This nullifies the oft repeated argument that gender segregation was an entirely religious policy because if that had been the case, there would have been a blanket ban on women in the work force. However, the small minority of educated women in the country, and women with ties to the regime, were still allowed to work in the private and public sector.

The early years of the Islamic regime were marked by some highly reactionary policies that included but were not limited to the subjugation of women in public life. A successful post revolution regime has to have a clear break from the past, and this would not have been possible if the regime had allowed women to stay in the labor force to the extent that the Shah’s government had permitted them. The cumulative effects of this marginalization from work policy and pro-natalist stance of the government can be seen by the fact that in 1984 the total fertility

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Hamideh Sedghi, *Women And Politics In Iran* , (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 240.

¹⁵ Farhad Nomani, and Sohrab Behdad, *Class And Labor In Iran: Did the Revolution Matter?*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 198.

¹⁶ Ibid.

rate of the country was 6.8 and in 1988 was 5.5.¹⁷ As can be seen, by the late 1980s the T.F.R. had been steadily decreasing. However, it was the demise of Ayatollah Khomeini that led to the demise of many “policy taboos” and the implementation of more liberal policies.¹⁸ Immediately after taking over office in 1989, President Rafsanjani pledged to curb fertility rates in his First Five Year Development Plan (1989-93).¹⁹ This complete turnaround in policy was the result of the increasing costs of the segregationist objectives to the private sector.²⁰ The levels of production in the economy had been severely diminished, first due to the war with Iraq, and secondly due to the absence of women in the labor force. Consequently, while launching the Five Year Plan, Rafsanjani stated that the “...worst mistake a society can do is to consume more than it produces.”²¹ In other words, the state could simply not afford to keep half of its work force out of the job market. Therefore,

“it was the economic requirements of the state, not Islam and Islamic interpretations, that shaped population policies directly, and exploited women’s sexuality indirectly.”²²

Though the population growth rate had decreased to 3.9% by 1993, it was still one of the highest in the world.²³ This put a great burden on the country’s resources and

¹⁷ Jalal Abbasi-Shavazi, “Recent Changes And The Future Of Fertility In Iran.”, 425.

¹⁸ Nomani and Behdad, “*Class And Labor In Iran*”, 196.

¹⁹ Sedghi, “*Women And Politics In Iran*”, 230.

²⁰ Nomani and Behdad, 198.

²¹ Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*, (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1993), 138.

²² Sedghi, 230.

²³ Abrahamian, 140.

social services because of the decreasing levels of family health in the country. However, this time around the regime quoted Islamic scriptures to convince people that small families are healthier and hence more Islamic.²⁴ In accordance with these new policies, the regime also changed its stance on military recruitment. During the war with Iran, the regime's position was to encourage population growth in order to increase the size of its armies, however in 1993 the president declared, "one literate soldier is more precious than ten illiterate ones."²⁵ Another governmental action taken in 1993 to curb population growth was a law passed in the legislation that removed all incentives provided by the state for larger families.²⁶ This was in direct contrast to its policies just a decade earlier which asserted that larger the family, more Iranian it was. Hence, religion and culture have been used by the post-revolution regime time and time again to further the theory of demographics popular amongst the leaders of the time.

This fall in total fertility rate in Iran went on till the mid 2000s with T.F.R. in 2005 going down to 1.97.²⁷ The government's efforts at lowering the population growth rate included lifting bans on women's education and in 1994 it "permitted women to enter all fields of study."²⁸ By 2002, 71% of all first year college students

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Abrahamian, 140.

²⁶ Roudi-Fahimi, Farzaneh. Population Reference Bureau, "Iran's Family Planning Program: Responding To A Nation's Needs." Accessed February 16, 2014. http://www.prb.org/pdf/iransfamplanprog_eng.pdf, 3.

²⁷ United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Population Division, "World Population Prospects: The 2012 Revision; Total fertility by major area, region and country, 1950-2100." Accessed February 18, 2014. <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/Excel-Data/fertility.htm>.

²⁸ Sedghi, 236.

in Iran were women.²⁹ This access to opportunities outside the household helped lessen the fertility rate in the country, It is important to note that this drastic fall in T.F.R. from 5.5 in 1988 to 1.97 in 2005 took place under comparatively liberal Iranian presidents. President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani introduced the first policies to curb population growth and these policies were improved upon by the subsequent government of another relatively liberal president, Mohammad Khatami.

However, since the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, there was a renewed push in the Iranian establishment for a higher population growth rate and T.F.R. He had reversed Iranian population policy within a year of coming into power and stated that he wanted to double the population to 120 million and enable it to threaten the West.³⁰ Infertility treatment has been the most non controversial and domestically acceptable method of trying to achieve this goal of growth. It is the “rapid rate of fertility decline, coupled with women’s public participation (during previous regimes) in debates about contraceptive use, [that] suggest that Iranian women experience a degree of personal autonomy that is unusual in the Middle East.”³¹ Therefore, it is almost impossible for a president to completely undo the family care and health care provisions put in place by two successive regimes however, it was easier for Ahmadinejad to push population growth through infertility treatment. Though it may not be the most efficient or the most practical method of

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Tait, Robert. "Ahmadinejad calls for a baby boom." *The Hindu*, October 26, 2006. Accessed February 16, 2014. <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-international/ahmadinejad-calls-for-a-baby-boom/article3065715.ece>.

³¹ Cincotta, Richard. The Stimson Center, "Prospects for Ahmadinejad's Call for More Rapid Population Growth in Iran." Last modified May 13, 2006. Accessed February 20, 2014. http://www.stimson.org/images/uploads/research-pdfs/Iran_DemBrief1.pdf.

increasing the gross national fertility rate, it is the one women's issue that the regime can support while fulfilling its long term strategic goals as well. Other health issues such as abortion and HIV are taboo for the leaders, therefore allowing and funding fertility treatment earns the regime political capital.

This shows a somewhat cyclical trend in Iranian demographic studies wherein population growth decreases with liberal leaders, and increases with more radical presidents. Though the infertility research funding was started by the regime before Ahmadinejad's, the propagation and increases in funding in his government have increased many fold.

Conclusion

As stated earlier there is a three-level game being orchestrated by Iran in terms of what it wants to portray domestically and internationally. On the international level Iran is portraying itself as a modern Shia state that provides IVF for its citizens, allowing them the ability to conceive. This shows Iran as more moderate, more liberal than their Sunni counterparts that have shunned third party donors all together. On the domestic front this shows Iranian women that the government is willing to assist them in family planning, such as the classes given to newly married couple on such matters; and the IVF treatments available to those who are unable to conceive naturally. While it may seem like a situation where on both the international and domestic front that Iran is addressing the women's reproductive health and accepting modern technologies such as IVF, these policies and fatwas are in actuality a means of pushing a more conservative agenda, the third

level. The emphasis on family planning, IVF and fertility are in reality a tactic of reinforcing traditional roles as mothers and wives onto the women. This helps the state in, eliminating women from the workforce to a degree, increasing the Iranian population, and quelling the women's rights activists in the West and in Iranian society as well. The socio-political ramifications of Iran's stance of IVF and family planning serve Iran's long term strategic goals for a steadily increasing population and also allow them to subtly preserve the traditional roles that Iranian women played within the home.

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