

This article has been accepted for publication in the *Journal of Medical Ethics* (2025) the Version of Record can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1136/jme-2025-110705>

## Why not coercive pronatalism?

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Ji-Young Lee argues that pronatalist policies in countries suffering from declining birth rates, such as South Korea, are ethically flawed. (1) The ‘soft’ pronatalist policies Lee describes aim at persuading citizens to reproduce. For Lee, *coercive* pronatalist policies are so obviously unacceptable as not to merit consideration. However, we suggest that this is an issue that requires further analysis. When ethicists regard certain possibilities as not worth debating, we miss opportunities to examine the basis for our convictions. In short, it behoves us now and again to challenge our convictions, especially if they seem inconsistent in relation to other views we hold.

By comparing coercive pronatalism with enforced military conscription we can notice some inconsistencies. South Korea – which Lee discusses in her paper – enforces military service, as do Austria, Switzerland, Ukraine and Finland to name a few. Many countries that do not currently conscript citizens retain the right to do so during war time. Conscription is an example of coercive state intervention which, even if not widely endorsed, rarely generates outrage or even attention from ethicists. (2)

For those who accept that coercive conscription could in principle be justified, it is not easy to show why coercive pronatalism must be rejected without argument. Indeed, many of those who are alarmed about declining birth rates regard this as an existential threat, in a way that is very similar to the threat of armed military invasion: a loss of nationhood, a loss of cultural cohesion, ethnic solidarity – a genocide even.

These nationalistic, pronatalist values resonate uneasily with the convictions of the liberal left-leaning scholars who tend to write on reproductive ethics. This, perhaps, is what tempts such thinkers to deny the need to take coercive pronatalism seriously. But our point is this: if there are *any* circumstances that justify state coercion, then it becomes far less clear that pronatalist coercion should be an exemption.

Coercion by the state on the grounds of existential threat (whether invasion of a foreign military force or declining birth rates) is challenging in epistemic terms: what level of empirical data that would be needed to justify our taking such threats seriously? But suppose for the sake of argument that we do face existential threats at a national or species level and that the facts of

the matter are agreed by all concerned. What grounds then would we have to treat coercive pronatalism as something obviously abhorrent while other coercive interventions are permitted?

The answer may lie in the gender. History shows us an ugly picture of the horrors experienced by women whose reproductive faculties were 'enlisted' by the state. Where sacrifices are made in order to circumvent existential threats, it may be problematic if they are demanded of a subset of individuals, while the benefits extend to all citizens.

Yet this does not help in showing why coercive pronatalism is obviously not acceptable while coercive conscription *is*. Many of the nations which enforce conscription enlist only men. It is overwhelmingly men who have been killed in wars throughout history. Of course women experience serious, often appalling suffering as a result of war, but women, as a group are not usually conscripted in the way that men are. Perhaps this could be regarded as a form of discrimination against men. (3)

Moreover, coercive pronatalism does not *only* affect women. Sperm is required for reproduction, and in circumstances of coercive pronatalism, men would become (genetically, at least) fathers. (It is worth noting the recent Israeli policy that advocates sperm harvesting of newly killed male soldiers. (4)) Nevertheless, coercive pronatalism clearly has implications for women's freedom, bodily integrity and autonomy that far outweigh the impacts on men. Thus, coercive pronatalism does not entail equal risks for men and women.

Yet returning to the comparison with conscription, the impacts on bodily autonomy and freedom for male conscripts are indeed far-reaching, life-changing and potentially lethal. In this respect, it does not seem unreasonable to regard them as being comparable with the effects on women of coerced pronatalism.

There is a broader question here about the degree to which collective interests outweigh individual freedoms and autonomy, and whether it is acceptable to single out certain groups to be sacrificed for the benefit of the majority. Our societies are built on the idea that coercion is sometimes justifiable in order to secure the collective good. Indeed, we have seen this in practice with the national and global responses to the pandemic. Not only was coercion accepted in this context, but it was eagerly endorsed by many, despite its serious impacts on those affected, especially perhaps those already disadvantaged, and on children and young people.

Coercion, of course, may operate at a number of levels. Coercive pronatalism might be 'negative', in terms of criminalising the provision or use of contraception or abortion; it might simply involve withdrawing support or funding for these activities. It might be 'positive' in terms of undertaking forcible impregnations or other interventions. Between the two, there is a wealth of gradations whereby psychological measures might be employed, in terms of nudging, valorization, threats, etc., or punitive measures such as restricted access to education as recently argued by a Japanese politician. (5)

The scope of coercive pronatalism is broad and some of these phenomena are already operative in today's societies, as Lee observes. However, if we want to establish a sound basis for showing pronatalist coercion is wrong, we need to show on what basis it may be so. Our brief, tentative suggestion is as follows. First, where coercion is employed by the state, the threat should be recognised as such by the coerced population. Second, if the sacrifices are to

be made by a specific group – especially a disadvantaged group – this should function as a red flag, requiring a higher threshold for sound evidence and epistemic agreement as to the seriousness of the threat and the necessity for coercive measures. Finally, ‘positive’ pronatalist policies mandating the use of invasive physical or medical interventions on unconsenting individuals are probably unacceptable whatever the level of threat.

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