

Israel accused of dooming Ethiopian baby boom

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A feminist movement has accused the Israeli government of adopting a racist policy towards the country's Ethiopian Jews.

Activists believe black women are deliberately being given a controversial contraceptive drug to bring about a drop in the population – a claim the government denies.

Thousands of Ethiopians have immigrated to Israel since the 1980s, but their Jewish heritage has been questioned, while their social status continues to suffer.

For nearly four years, Racheli Mangoli has been running a youth center in one of Israel's poorer communities. Forty-five Ethiopian families live here, but throughout that entire time, only one Ethiopian baby has been born in this neighborhood, and that has alarmed Racheli.

She says: "I smelt something not good. I know about the discrimination here – when I am going with the children, I feel this even when I am going to the supermarket. One woman said to me 'I don't know how you can stand next to people like this. When they give me money – I am going and washing my hands.'"

After some investigation, Racheli discovered that many Ethiopian women, keen to avoid getting pregnant while setting up life in a new country, had been placed on a controversial contraceptive, Depo-Provera, a drug few Israeli women have heard of, let alone use.



One woman was first put on it four years ago, and underwent repeated injections every three months. She says it has left her with such terrible pains in her hands and back that she can no longer work. She insists she was never told about its side effects or offered an alternative. Like many Ethiopians in Israel, she's afraid she will be deported if she questions the authorities.

Dr Factor is reluctant to give the contraceptive to his patients. He says it is known to delay fertility for months after women come off it. In some cases it can cause permanent infertility.

“At least 10 per cent develop substantial side-effects – side-effects like irregular bleeding, the period may disappear, they may have heavy periods. And it is impossible to reverse these side-effects, and until it has worked itself out of the system you can’t reverse these. So it’s possible although the contraception works for 3 months at a time, the side-effects may last for two years – three years – four years – five years,” he says.

In 2004, the American Food and Drug Administration warned against the dangers of the drug, but the World Health Organization refused to restrict its use.

Hedva Eyal has tried unsuccessfully to draw attention to the fact that Ethiopian Israelis are given the drug without being warned of the risks. She claims it is her government’s policy and is nothing short of racism.

She told RT: *“They don’t want poor or black children and Depo-Provera gave them the opportunity to have control. If she [a patient] keeps taking an injection every three months, she is not going to have children – you know it is a 100 per cent secure from children I think.”*

Hedva says the policy is working – the number of black babies in Israel is decreasing, but there are no official statistics to back up her claim. For community workers and Ethiopian women here, statistics are unnecessary – they feel their reality speaks for itself.

The Health Ministry admits it issues the drug, but says it was never its policy only to administer it to Ethiopian women and reduce the number of black babies in the country.

In their defense, Jewish agencies involved in immigration say they offered several types of contraceptives to the Ethiopian women, and that all of them participated voluntarily in family planning.

Dr. Yee-fat Bitton from the Israeli Anti-Discrimination Legal Center “Tmura”, says it’s not a matter point of view, but of the statistics.

“The statistics are, that 60 percent of the women receiving this contraceptive, this controversial one, are Ethiopian Jews,” Bitton told RT. *“And you have to understand that Ethiopians in Israel... [...] consist of up to only 1 per cent of the population, so the gap here is just impossible to reconcile in any logical manner that would somehow resist the claims of racism.”*

Professor Zvi Bentwich, an immunologist and human rights activist from Tel-Aviv, doesn’t think there is any ground to suspect a certain negative official policy towards Ethiopian Jews.

“I’m not against looking and inquiring into the claim. If there is a claim, one should investigate,” Bentwich told RT. “But when asked about official attitudes, official policy, official medical policy, I am very reluctant that that is indeed a policy of racism on that part.”

[Watch the full interview with Yee-fat Bitton and Zvi Bentvich](#)

