

Reproductive Justice, Not Population Control:

***Breaking the Wrong Links and Making the Right Ones in the Movement
for Climate Justice***

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Abstract

While mounting evidence of climate change and its harmful effects creates the necessity and opportunity for progressive political action, it also provides an opening for more conservative forces to promote a population and immigration control agenda linked to national security interests. Mainstream population and environment organizations are increasingly identifying population growth in the Global South as a major cause of climate change and promoting family planning as the solution. This flawed analysis places blame on the world's poorest people who are least responsible for carbon emissions and encourages an instrumentalist view of family planning as a means to an end, rather than as a basic reproductive right. It also plays into the hands of right-wing anti-immigrant groups and national security interests who strategically deploy population and climate change fears in the pursuit of repressive agendas.

We argue instead for an approach based on the linkages between reproductive, environmental and climate justice, drawing connections between the same powerful forces driving climate change at the global level and environmental injustice and gender discrimination at the local level. Challenging corporate food systems and land appropriation to ensure food security, supporting immigrant and refugee rights, preparing for socially just and effective disaster response, opposing nuclear power, and ending militarism, we argue, are all crucial links to addressing climate change while reducing inequality. We conclude that the reproductive justice movement, with its holistic analysis of biological and social reproduction, can serve as a positive model for political thinking and organizing around climate change.

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Climate change is clearly one of the most urgent environmental, economic and social issues of our time. After years of U.S. inaction, it is likely to be a high profile policy priority of the Obama administration. As such, it is attracting the attention of multiple political constituencies, some operating out of genuine conviction, others out of a strategic calculus that it is pragmatic to link their particular policy focus to climate change in order to achieve higher visibility and support. This paper argues that we are presently witnessing the development of a population/immigration/national security nexus in the climate change arena. This nexus poses a serious threat to the advancement of climate justice both nationally and internationally. To counter this threat and to strengthen the climate justice movement, we need to clearly articulate an alternative vision based on progressive linkages between reproductive, environmental and climate justice.

Wrong Links: Population/Immigration/National Security

The past year has witnessed escalating rhetoric from mainstream population and environment organizations about how population growth is a major cause of global warming. For example, the Washington-DC based Population-Health-Environment Policy and Practice Group, a coalition of key NGOs and the U.S. Agency for International Development, recently issued a fact sheet on Human Population Growth and

Greenhouse Gas Emissions. It argues that population growth threatens to offset progress in emission reductions and investments in family planning and reproductive health should be a key part of strategies to address climate change.¹

There are a number of obvious and not-so-obvious problems with this approach. For one, it doesn't make demographic sense. Today most countries in the world are already moving to a smaller family size. While world population is projected to increase from 6.7 billion today to 9.2 billion in 2050, the rate of growth has slowed considerably. The average number of children per woman in the Global South is now 2.75, and the UN predicts this figure will drop to 2.05 by 2050. The future trend is towards population stabilization.²

Moreover, per capita carbon emission rates are low in countries where birth rates remain relatively high, as in sub-Saharan Africa. From 1950-2000, the entire continent of Africa was responsible for only 2.5 percent of greenhouse gas emissions. In Kenya the average per capita carbon emission in 2002 was 0.3 tons, compared to 20 in the U.S. Rapidly industrializing countries such as China will account for a higher percentage of emissions in the future, but it will be a long time before their accumulated emissions reach the level of today's already industrialized nations.³ China already has a negative birth rate; the most effective approach to emissions reduction there is clearly investment in conservation, green technologies and alternative energy. Worldwide, reducing the population of cars makes a lot more sense than trying to drive down already decreasing birth rates.

Focusing on population growth as a major cause of climate change places the blame on the world's poorest people who are the least responsible for global warming

and lets rich countries, corporations and consumers off the hook. It obscures the difference between survival and luxury emissions. It is part of a long tradition of eugenic environmentalism in which environmental and economic resource scarcities are attributed to “too many people” – usually meaning too many people of color – and not to highly inequitable and environmentally damaging capitalist processes of production and consumption.⁴

While most mainstream population and environment organizations insist that they oppose coercive family planning and support women’s rights, viewing family planning as a means to an end (in this case the mitigation of climate change) rather than as a basic human right tends to undermine the quality of contraceptive delivery services and freedom of choice.⁵ The fertility of poor women of color becomes a target of elitist social engineering.

Arguably, current rhetoric on population and climate change is based less on reality than on the decision of population and environment groups to hitch their horse to the global warming bandwagon. This strategy is seen as a way to build political support for international family planning after eight years of the Bush administration’s anti-abortion, abstinence-only policies. Though understandable, this strategy is shortsighted. In trying to counter one segment of the Right, namely the anti-abortion movement, population and environment groups play into the hands of conservative anti-immigrant and national security forces that deploy overpopulation fears to further repressive agendas.

In the greening of hate, anti-immigrant groups masquerading as liberal environmentalists argue that immigrants are overpopulating the U.S. and causing

everything from urban sprawl to traffic jams to water scarcity. For example, the headline of a recent ad in the New York Times by right-wing anti-immigrant groups reads, “Population, Immigration and the Foreseeable Limits of America’s Capacity: A Conundrum of Epic Proportions for the Progressive Thinker [our emphasis].”⁶ Now they are adding climate change to the mix. In August 2008, the Center for Immigration Studies released a report blaming immigrants for rising carbon emissions and suggesting they remain in their home countries where they consume less energy. The message is that reducing immigration is a far more effective way to address global warming than investing in conservation and renewable energies!⁷ Many of these anti-immigrant groups are directly tied to white supremacist organizations.⁸

In the national security arena, narratives about climate conflict and climate refugees build on racialized fears of overpopulation in the Global South and encourage anti-immigrant sentiment. A 2003 Pentagon-sponsored study of the potential impacts of abrupt climate change paints a grim scenario of poor, starving, overpopulated communities overshooting the reduced carrying capacity of their lands, engaging in violent conflict over scarce resources, and storming en masse towards Western borders.⁹ Such narratives provide a rationale for further militarization of immigration enforcement and the expansion of U.S. military intervention, especially into Africa.¹⁰ Unfortunately, this kind of reasoning is not limited to national security and intelligence reports. A recent article on global warming and sea-level rise in Bangladesh in the Natural Resources Defense Council’s *Onearth* magazine depicts millions of destitute Bangladeshi environmental refugees as potential Islamic terrorists.¹¹

This is not to argue that climate change won't displace large numbers of people -- it well could in many places. But to portray those people as a dark, dangerous, overpopulated mass of violent migrants instead of human beings with human rights is deeply problematic. During Hurricane Katrina, the media whipped up the same kind of fears about African Americans in New Orleans, with devastating effects on rescue, relief and recovery efforts. It is a tragic irony that the people who are likely to be the main victims of climate change are doubly victimized by these vicious stereotypes.

By normalizing the idea that population growth is a major cause of global warming and giving it a liberal, feminist gloss, mainstream population and environment organizations make these kinds of stereotypes more palatable to the general public and contribute to generating a negative climate of fear. They also reduce reproductive rights to an instrumental means to an end, rather than ends worthy of pursuit in and of themselves. Meanwhile, they obscure the real causes of the climate crisis, hindering action on realistic economic and political solutions. Going down the population road is a diversion we can ill afford in the movement for climate justice.

Right Links: Reproductive Justice/Environmental Justice/Climate Justice

Developed and advanced by women of color activists, the concept of reproductive justice strongly condemns population control, noting its long history of targeting the fertility of oppressed communities. At the same time it includes support for full access to safe, voluntary birth control, abortion and reproductive health services. But reproductive justice goes far beyond the need for adequate services. According to Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (ACRJ), reproductive justice "will be achieved when women

and girls have the economic, social and political power and resources to make healthy decisions about our bodies, sexuality and reproduction for ourselves, our families and our communities in all areas of our lives.”¹² Reproductive justice refers not only to biological reproduction but to social reproduction.

Feminist scholar Giovanna Di Chiro argues that the concept of social reproduction is crucial to understanding the possibilities for linking struggles for women’s rights and environmental justice. “Social reproduction is the intersecting complex of political-economic, socio-cultural, and material-environmental processes required to maintain everyday life and to sustain human cultures and communities on a daily basis and intergenerationally.”¹³ Whether or not individuals and communities can fulfill their basic needs and sustain themselves depends critically on the extent of race, class and gender inequalities in access to resources and power. Unlike the population framework with its focus on numbers, social reproduction focuses on social, economic and political *systems*. It helps us to look more deeply at the underlying power dynamics that determine who lives and who dies, who is healthy and who is sick, whose environment is polluted and whose is clean, who is responsible for global warming and who suffers most from its consequences.

Looking through this lens lead to a much more liberatory understanding of the convergences of reproductive and climate politics. It encourages us to consider:

Connections between the Local and the Global: Some of the same powerful forces that drive environmental injustice at the local level contribute to climate change on the global level. While marginalized communities all over the world experience environmental injustices at the hands of powerful corporate and political actors, their

experiences and concerns are diverse. Local battles against environmental injustice include coal mining towns in rural Appalachia, indigenous communities of the Arctic and Subarctic, the oil fields of Nigeria and the oil refineries of the Gulf Coast. The task of confronting global climate change challenges us to build alliances, coalitions, and political solidarity across borders and among a wide range of communities. The global nature of climate change means our struggles are not in isolation from one another.¹⁴

Environmental Dimensions of Health: Communities subjected to environmental racism experience daily exposure to cancer-causing chemicals and other toxins that cause respiratory, reproductive, and skin disorders. Women experience this toxic burden two-fold. They often must shoulder their own health concerns while taking on the role of caring for others in the community who have been harmed, particularly children and the elderly. Women are also physiologically more susceptible to the health effects of a number of common pollutants which can build up and be stored for long periods of time in the fatty tissue of their breasts. Women may then pass on concentrated doses of toxins to their infants during breastfeeding. Women have spearheaded many of the battles against environmental injustice. This stems largely from their roles as caretakers of their families and the fact that they are more often in a position to bear direct witness to the health impacts of toxic infrastructure on their community. The dialogue on climate change must open space for these women to contribute their knowledge and voice their concerns.

Food Security: Climate-related scarcities of food and other natural resources such as water and firewood are likely to create burdens that fall disproportionately on poor people, especially women and girls whose domestic responsibilities include the

management of these resources. In some families and communities, gendered food hierarchies in the household can put women at greater risk of malnutrition in times of crisis.¹⁵ Achieving food security for all people should be a high priority in national and international responses to climate change. This means challenging present corporate food systems that appropriate land from peasant producers (many of whom are women) for large-scale luxury export crop production; engage in environmentally unsustainable mono-cropping and chemical-intensive agriculture; and draw down water supplies through inappropriate irrigation technologies. It also means opposing the transformation of lands that grow food crops into plantations of commercial biofuels.

The Failure of Corporate Solutions to Climate Change: In the international arena, corporate needs outweigh human needs when it comes to official climate change agreements. Ironically, a number of the mechanisms put in place by the Kyoto Protocol are not only doing little to reduce carbon emissions, but are increasing poor people's vulnerability. Carbon trading schemes allow corporate energy guzzlers to maintain high levels of emissions if they invest in carbon sequestration projects in the Global South. Many of these projects are huge monoculture tree plantations (also corporately owned) that reduce biodiversity and take over lands and forests from indigenous peoples, preventing women from collecting plants and firewood. These projects effectively shut the door on small-scale, non-corporate solutions such as systems that encourage local control of existing forests and improvements in their ability to sequester carbon and produce sustainable fuelwood supplies for community needs.¹⁶

The Nature of Disaster Response: Early warning systems and disaster management schemes often neglect the needs of poor women and communities of color.

In the U.S. Hurricane Katrina illustrated how race, class and gender intersect in shaping who is most at risk during a disaster and who has the right to return afterwards. Activists should work together to press for more socially just and effective disaster responses, including those that take into account women's increased vulnerability to sexual and domestic violence and their need for safe reproductive health services in periods of dislocation. For strategic reasons, the U.S. military presently wants to expand its role in disaster response in the U.S. and globally. We need to resist this development and insist that publicly accountable civilian institutions be strengthened to cope with climate-related natural disasters.

Saying No to Nuclear Power: The reproductive health effects of the release of radiation and toxic chemicals are a powerful reason to oppose the expansion of nuclear power as a solution to climate change. Plutonium, the most dangerous byproduct of nuclear energy, crosses the placenta in the developing embryo and can cause birth defects. Plutonium affects male reproductive health as well. Stored in the testicles, it can cause mutations in reproductive genes, increased incidence of genetic disease in future generations, and testicular cancer. Long ignored, the chemical byproducts of nuclear energy are also linked to genetic mutations, Down's syndrome, autism, and other serious health effects. The U.S. nuclear industry has no regulations to protect women workers from the risk of early miscarriages and fetal malformations or men from potential harm to their ability to reproduce. A resurgence of nuclear power would also bring increased uranium mining on indigenous lands, with consequent environmental pollution and negative health impacts.¹⁷ Nuclear power threatens both biological and social reproduction.

Immigrant and refugee rights: In the U.S. reproductive justice advocates have been some of the most vocal supporters of immigrant rights and effective organizers in immigrant communities. They point out how policies restricting immigration and blocking access to social services prevent immigrant women from getting the reproductive and basic health care they need. They also work with poor immigrant communities who suffer disproportionately from environmental racism.¹⁸ This support of immigrant and refugee rights helps counter the negative scapegoating of immigrants by the population/immigration/national security nexus. Climate justice must include immigrant rights high on the agenda. In the event that people are displaced by global warming, we need to ensure that they are welcomed – not further traumatized and stigmatized.

Ending Militarism: Militarism in all its forms, from the prison-industrial complex to the occupation of Iraq, is one of the most powerful obstacles to the achievement of reproductive, environmental and climate justice. Ending militarism is a point where our struggles can and should converge, where there are multiple overlaps. The list is long: Military toxins damage the environment and harm reproductive health. Militarism increases violence against women, racism and anti-immigration activity. Militarism robs resources from other social and environmental needs. War destroys ecosystems, livelihoods, and health and sanitation infrastructure; it is the biggest threat of all to sustainable social reproduction.¹⁹

Militarism also stands in the way of effective solutions to climate change. Not only is the U.S. military a major emitter of greenhouse gases – it burns the same amount of fossil fuel every day as the entire nation of Sweden – but it spends up to 30 percent of

its annual budget on military actions to secure oil and gas reserves around the world. Imagine if those funds flowed instead to the development of renewable energy, green technologies, and programs to ensure that low-income people are not adversely affected by the transition to a new energy regime. Meanwhile, military research into controlling the climate poses a potentially grave danger to the environment.²⁰

In the 1960s and 70s, the heyday of alarmism about the so-called population explosion, there was a popular slogan: “Whatever your cause, it’s a lost cause without population control.” Substitute “ending militarism” for the last two words, and one gets a much closer approximation of political reality.

There are many more links to be made in an intersectional analysis and politics that forges connections between reproductive, environmental and climate justice. It will take working together to find them all and to formulate effective strategies based on our shared needs and understandings. One thing is clear: The moment to do so has arrived.

Conclusion: Towards a Holistic Politics

While addressing climate change is clearly an urgent priority, a failure to consider how it is connected to a host of other social and environmental justice issues could lead to narrow technocratic proposals that take some steps to reduce carbon emissions but none to reduce inequality. With the escalating rhetoric about overpopulation and climate conflict and refugees, we could also witness a resurgence of population control programs and the increased militarization of the climate policy arena. This could dangerously shrink the space for open democratic participation and debate. Contextualizing climate change, and locating it within a progressive nexus of related concerns, is a way to

challenge these developments and build a broader and more powerful movement for climate justice. The reproductive justice movement serves as a positive model for this kind of political thinking and organizing.

¹ Population-Health-Environment-Policy and Practice Group, *Human Population Growth and Greenhouse Gas Emissions*, January 2008. The members of this coalition are Conservation International, National Audubon Society, Population Action International, Population Reference Bureau, Sierra Club, US Agency for International Development, Woodrow Wilson Center, World Wildlife Fund, and Worldwatch Institute.

² UN Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision (Highlights)*, accessed at http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/wpp2006/WPP2006_Highlights_rev.pdf on 5 January 2009. For a short critique of overpopulation, see the Population and Development Program, “Ten Reasons to Rethink ‘Overpopulation,’” *DiiferenTakes* 40 (Fall 2006), accessed at <http://popdev.hampshire.edu/projects/dt/40> on 7 January 2009.

³ Kirsten Dow and Thomas E. Downing. *The Atlas of Climate Change*. (University of California Press, 2007): 40-41, 96, 100.

⁴ For a history of population control, see Matthew Connelly. *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population*. (Harvard University Press, 2008). On the link between eugenics and environmentalism, see Alexandra Minna Stern. *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America*. (University of California Press, 2005).

⁵ For case studies of the negative impacts of population control on family planning, see Connelly, *Fatal Misconception*; Lisa Ann Richey. *Population Politics and Development: From the Policies to the Clinics*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); M. Catherine Maternowska. *Reproducing Inequities: Poverty and the Politics of Population in Haiti*. (Rutgers University Press, 2006); and Betsy Hartmann. *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Politics of Population Control* (South End Press, 1995).

⁶ *The New York Times*, 12 October 2008. (Page 33). Sponsors of the ad are the American Immigration Control Foundation, Californians for Population Stabilization, FAIR, Numbers USA and Social Contract Press.

⁷ Leon Kolankiewicz and Stephen A. Camarota. *Immigration to the United States and Worldwide Greenhouse Gas Emissions*. (Center for Immigration Studies, 2008). Accessed at <http://www.cis.org/GreenhouseGasEmissions> on 2 January 2009. For a critique, see Angela Kelley, “Voodoo Science Blames Climate Change on Immigrants,” 18 August 2008, accessed at <http://www.alternet.org/story/95493/> on 30 December 2008.

⁸ See Southern Poverty Law Center, “The Puppeteer,” *Intelligence Report* 106 (Summer 2002): 44-51. These groups have periodically organized campaigns to take over the Sierra Club using population as a wedge. Former Sierra Club director Adam Wehrbach has written a strong critique of population control and the anti-immigrant movement, “End of the Population Movement,” *The American Prospect*, 5 October 2005. See also Jessica Leann Urban. *Nation, Immigration, and Environmental Security*. (Palgrave Macmillan 2008).

⁹ Schwartz, Peter and Randall, Doug. *An Abrupt Climate Change Scenario and its Implications for United States National Security*. 2003. Accessed at <http://www.gbn.com/GBNDocumentDisplayServlet.srv?aid=26231&url=/UploadDocumentDisplayServlet.srv?id=28566> on 5 January 2009.

¹⁰ Betsy Hartmann, "Climate Refugees and Climate Conflict: Who's Taking the Heat for Global Warming?" (paper presented at the panel on climate change, 4S Annual Conference, Montreal, Canada; October 2007, available online at <http://www.radixonline.org/ccm2.html>. Also see Betsy Hartmann, "War Talk and Climate Change," *Truthout*, 26 November 2007, available at <http://www.truthout.org/article/betsy-hartmann-war-talk-and-climate-change>.

¹¹ George Black, "The Gathering Storm: What Happens When Global Warming Turns Millions of Destitute Muslims into Environmental Refugees?" *Oearth*, Summer 2008: 22-37.

¹² Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, *A New Vision for Advancing our Movement for Reproductive Health, Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Justice*, accessed at http://www.sistersong.net/documents/ACRJ_Reproductive_Justice_Paper.pdf on 7 January 2009. For a history of the reproductive justice movement and its opposition to population control, see Jael Silliman, Marlene Gerber Fried, Loretta Ross, and Elena R. Gutiérrez. *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice*. (South End Press, 2004).

¹³ Giovanna Di Chiro, "Living Environmentalisms: Coalition Politics, Social Reproduction, and Environmental Justice," *Environmental Politics* 17 (April 2008): 281. This article is must reading for anyone interested in these progressive linkages.

¹⁴ The following sections draw on Stephen Blake Figura, Betsy Hartmann, and Elizabeth Barajas-Roman, "Reproductive Justice, Climate Justice, Peace: A Call for Solidarity, Not Population Control," Working Paper of the Population and Development Program, (March 2008), accessed at <http://popdev.hampshire.edu/blog/reproductive-justice-climate-justice-peace> on 7 January 2009.

¹⁵ For more on gender and climate change, see Irene Dankelman, *Gender, Climate Change and Human Security*, Women's Environment and Development Organization (May 2008), accessed at <http://www.wedo.org/files/HSN%20Study%20Final%20May%202008.pdf> on 7 January 2009. Also see WEDO's gender action link, accessed at <http://www.genderaction.org/images/Gender%20Action%20Link%20-%20Climate%20Change.pdf>, on 7 January 2009.

¹⁶ See the excellent resource, *Carbon Trading: A Critical Conversation on Climate Change, Privatization, and Power*, special issue of *Development Dialogue* 48 (September 2006), accessed at http://www.dhf.uu.se/pdfiler/DD2006_48_carbon_trading/carbon_trading_web.pdf on 7 January 2009.

¹⁷ Meredith Crafton, "Why a Nuclear Renaissance Threatens Our Bodies, the Environment and Our Future," *DifferenTakes* 56 (Winter 2009), available from 15 January 2009 at <http://popdev.hampshire.edu/projects/dt/56>.

¹⁸ ACRJ, *A New Vision for Advancing our Movement for Reproductive Health, Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Justice*, accessed at http://www.sistersong.net/documents/ACRJ_Reproductive_Justice_Paper.pdf on 7 January 2009.

¹⁹ See Population and Development Program, "Ten Reasons Why Militarism is Bad for Reproductive Freedom," *DifferenTakes* 20 (Winter 2003), accessed at <http://popdev.hampshire.edu/projects/dt/20> on 6 January 2009, and Simon Doolittle, "Ten Reasons Why Militarism is Bad for the Environment," *DifferenTakes* 22 (Spring 2003), accessed at <http://popdev.hampshire.edu/projects/dt/22>

on 6 January 2009.

²⁰ On military consumption of oil, see Nick Turse, “The Military-Petroleum Complex,” *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 24 March 2008, accessed at <http://www.fpiif.org/fpiftxt/5097/> on 7 January 2009; on military costs of securing oil supplies, see Anita Dancs, *The Military Cost of Securing Energy*, National Priorities Project (October 2008), accessed at http://www.nationalpriorities.org/auxiliary/energy_security/full_report.pdf on 7 January 2009; on military schemes of climate control, James R. Fleming, “The Climate Engineers,” *The Wilson Quarterly* (Spring 2007), accessed at http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=wq.essay&essay_id=231274 on 7 January 2009.