

‘Population Justice’ — The Wrong Way to Go

Wednesday 3 February 2010, by [ANGUS Ian](#) (Date first published: 31 January 2010).

The combination of population reduction and women’s rights was already like oil and water. Adding CO₂ reductions to the mix only makes things worse.

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For more than two centuries, the idea that the world’s ills are caused by poor people having too many babies has been remarkably successful at diverting attention from the complex social causes of poverty and injustice.

Forty years ago, Paul Ehrlich’s best-seller *The Population Bomb* applied the idea to environmental problems:

“The causal chain of deterioration is easily followed to its source. Too many cars, too many factories, too much detergent, too much pesticide, multiplying contrails. Inadequate sewage treatment plants, too little water, too much carbon dioxide – all can be traced easily to too many people.” [1]

Ehrlich’s book convinced many environmentalists, and led to the formation of a variety of groups that focused solely on the supposed evils of overpopulation.

Today, as women’s rights activist Betsy Hartmann warns in a recent article, populationist arguments are back – but now groups such as the US-based Population Connection (formerly Zero Population Growth) and the UK’s Optimum Population Trust have added a “faux feminist twist” to their attacks on the reproductive rights of Third World women.

“Along with the bad news that women’s fertility is destroying the planet comes the good news that family planning is the solution. In other words, you don’t have to feel guilty about blaming poor women for the world’s problems because you can help them improve their lives by having fewer babies.” [2]

What’s worse, she writes, these arguments aren’t just being promoted by the population zealots in ZPG and OPT:

“In fact, perhaps what is most distressing about the current population control resurgence is how many liberal feminists and progressive media outlets are jumping on board.”

“There’s even an attempt by the Sierra Club and others to bring reproductive justice activists into the fold in the name of ‘Population Justice.’ The assumption is that we live in a win-win world where there’s no fundamental contradiction between placing disproportionate blame for the world’s problems on poor women’s fertility and advocating for reproductive rights and health.”

That prompted an outraged reply from Laurie Mazur, the founder of Population Justice and editor of *A Pivotal Moment: Population, Justice and the Environmental Challenge*.

“Betsy Hartmann implies that everyone working on population-environment issues is part of a misogynistic plot to bring back ‘population control.’ I’m here to tell you she is wrong.

“I am a lifelong, card-carrying feminist and political progressive. I am passionately committed to sexual and reproductive health and rights, to environmental sustainability, and to closing the inequitable divide between men and women, rich and poor. And I believe that slowing population growth — by ensuring that all people have the means and the power to make their own decisions about childbearing — will contribute to those ends.” [3]

Mazur is undoubtedly sincere, but in my opinion Hartmann’s criticisms and concern are fully justified.

In this article I focus on some specific problems with the “Population Justice” concept that Mazur defends. I won’t repeat the broader criticisms of the population growth explanation for climate change that I and others have made elsewhere. [4]

A New Conversation?

Mazur presents herself as the voice of reason in the “polarized debate” between population extremists like Paul Ehrlich on one side, and people like Betsy Hartmann, whom she labels “population deniers,” on the other. Mazur calls for a “a new conversation about population and the environment,” with a goal of “slowing population growth” but doing so without coercion, respecting women’s need for reproductive health services and right to make their own choices.

But that’s not a new conversation. For two decades, even the most reactionary population control outfits have given lip service to women’s rights and voluntary birth control – but they still blame poor women’s fertility for environmental problems, and call for reducing the birth rate in the Third World as the sine qua non of any solution.

The anti-immigrant Optimum Population Trust, for example, says that it favors “non-coercive policies to limit and stabilise population growth,” and talks of “empowering women to control their own fertility.” In language similar to Mazur’s, OPT says, “All environmental problems, and notably those arising from climate change, would be easier to solve with a smaller future population.” [5]

The similarities aren’t coincidental. In the early 1990s, liberal feminists associated with the Clinton administration blocked with population control advocates to outvote the Vatican at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development. Defeating the religious right was important, but in the process the population controllers learned to hide their views behind feminist vocabulary – and some liberal feminists adopted the “too many babies” ideology. Mazur’s approach reflects the views of the latter group.

Non-Coercive Population Reduction?

Mazur tries to distance herself from hardcore populationism by rejecting “coercive population control.” Coercion not only violates women’s rights, she writes, it isn’t necessary. “We now know that the best way to slow population growth is not with top-down ‘population control,’ but by ensuring that all people are able to make real choices about sexuality and reproduction.”

Of course it's vitally important that women everywhere have the right and power to make real choices, but is a focus on slowing population growth the way to accomplish that? Haven't decades of experience shown that women's right to choose is undermined when reproductive health programs are driven by environmental and population concerns?

The line between coercive and non-coercive birth control programs is not easily drawn: programs motivated by overpopulation arguments tend to promote population reduction, regardless of the actual needs of the communities and individuals involved. That's especially true in the impoverished countries that population programs usually target, where poor women have long been deprived to the power to make choices about many aspects of their lives.

Project staff who believe they are protecting the environment frequently pressure women to accept sterilization or unsafe long-term contraceptives. Supposedly voluntary programs have included coercive elements such as denying women access to other services if they don't attend lectures on the importance of having fewer babies, or dividing people into teams that compete for maximum participation in family planning services. [6]

It's noteworthy that Optimum Population Trust, despite its proclaimed belief in voluntary programs, also calls for "national tax and benefits systems to provide incentives to parents to have one or two children only." For the poor, being denied such benefits could very well be a form of coercion.

A particularly brutal case of hidden coercion occurred in Peru in the late 1990s, when a supposedly voluntary family planning program led to the involuntary sterilization of more than 200,000 indigenous women, while the country's president was sanctimoniously declaring his government's support for gender equality and reproductive rights at international women's conferences. An essay included in Mazur's own book concludes that this horrendous campaign was a direct result of the program's focus on reducing Peru's birthrate. The first lesson of that experience, the authors write, is that "human rights abuses are likely where reproductive health services are seen as a means to an end, rather than as an end in themselves." [7]

That's an important lesson for anyone who considers promoting family planning as a way to reduce population and greenhouse gas emissions.

Why Third World Women?

Mazur says that she wants to reduce emissions by slowing population growth – but if that's so, why does her project place so much emphasis on the fertility of the poorest women in the world?

Per capita emission rates in the United States, Canada and Australia are the highest in the world. If more babies equals more emissions, shouldn't Mazur's group emphasize population reduction in rich countries, where each avoided birth will have a greater effect than dozens in the global south?

In *A Pivotal Moment*, Mazur poses that question herself, and gives a strange answer:

"The answer lies in the future. The developing countries are where the lion's share of population growth will occur, and they are also where development must occur for half of humanity to escape from grinding poverty. The affluent countries can reduce emissions by reducing the vast amounts of waste in our systems of production and consumption. But the developing countries are not likely to raise their standards of living without more intensive use of resources and higher emissions."

Let's get this straight. Most emissions come from the developed countries, but they can clean up

their act. However, for some reason poor people trying to get out of poverty can't use low-emission technology, so let's make sure there are fewer of them.

Instead of dealing with the real problems that exist in the North today, Mazur would have us target poor women in the South because of what they might do in the future.

This makes no sense. Not only do Third World countries have low overall emission rates, but within those countries women are low emitters – and the poorest women produce the lowest levels of all. They are the first and greatest victims of global warming, and they bear the least responsibility for causing it – but Mazur tells us that that their fertility is the problem we should address. It's difficult to see either feminism or justice in that.

Mazur's approach directs attention away from the huge ecological debt that rich countries owe to the global South. A central focus for the global climate justice movement is the demand for repayment of that debt, both in financial contributions and through massive transfer of low emissions technology that can enable economic development without promoting climate change. Achieving this won't be easy – but populationists who start from socially conservative assumptions don't even consider the possibility of transforming the way the global economy works.

In Hartmann's words: "Missing from the equation is any notion that people are capable of effecting positive social and environmental change, and that the next generation could make the transition out of fossil fuels."

The wrong way to go

For the poorest women in the world, winning unrestricted access to high quality health services, including safe birth control and abortion, would be a huge victory. But linking that campaign to global warming is the wrong way to go.

The name "Population Justice" sounds good, but the project rests on an illusion, on a self-defeating attempt to combine incompatible causes. As the feminist scholar Asoka Bandarage wrote following the 1994 Conference on Population and Development:

"As liberal feminist activists form alliances with population control advocates and depend on the latter's monetary and institutional support, they, too, come to accept the neo-Malthusian position which reduces 'women's rights' to 'reproductive rights,' which in turn are equated with 'population policies'. ... [S]ubsuming women's issues within the neo-Malthusian framework leads to a neglect of the social structural roots of women's subordination." [8]

The combination of population reduction and women's rights was already like oil and water. Adding CO₂ reductions to the mix only makes things worse, treating the fight for women's rights as an instrument for achieving technical goals, not as a demand for justice in its own right.

By adapting to populationist prejudices, the Population Justice project is heading down a dangerous road. It is adding a liberal voice to the efforts of bigots and misogynists to blame Third World women for global warming, and by doing so it undermines both women's rights and the fight against climate change.

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P.S.

* My thanks to Lis Angus, Simon Butler and Richard Fidler for their advice and comments on this article.

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Footnotes

[1] Paul Ehrlich. *The Population Bomb*. Ballantyne Books, 1968. pp 66-67.

[2] In what follows, all quotes from Betsy Hartman are from “The ‘New’ Population control Craze: Retro, Racist, Wrong Way to Go” which was first published in *On the Issues*.

[3] In what follows, all quotations from Laurie Mazur are from these sources:

“Population & environment: a progressive, feminist approach.” Originally published in *On the Issues*, Fall 2009.

“The Population Debate Is Screwed Up.” *Alternic*, March 28, 2009.

“A neglected climate strategy: Empower women, slow population growth.” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, October 12, 2009.

“Introduction,” to Laurie Mazur, editor, *A Pivotal Moment: Population, Justice and the Environmental Challenge*. Island Press, Washington DC, 2009.

[4] For links to some articles on the population debate, see “Why Population Isn’t the Problem.” *Climate and Capitalism*, December 7, 2009.

[5] OPT News Release, August 17 2009. “Tackle Population Growth to Beat Climate Change.”

[6] James Oldham. “Rethinking the Link: A Critical Review of Population-Environment Programs.” February 2006.

[7] Susana Chávez Alvarado with Jacqueline Nolley Echegaray. “Going to Extremes: Population Politics and Reproductive Rights in Peru.” in Mazur, *A Pivotal Moment*, pp. 292-299.

[8] Asoka Bandarage. *Women, Population and Global Crisis: A Political-Economic Analysis*. Zed Books, London, 1997. p. 7.