

## ENVIRONMENTAL & REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

# Bridging the Environmental Justice and Reproductive Justice Movements

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Those of us who work for reproductive justice — who have long fought for a woman's human right to control her reproductive destiny and that of her family and community — must pay serious attention to environmental toxins that affect our ability to become pregnant, have a healthy pregnancy and give birth to and raise a healthy child. Instead individual women are blamed for these problems, often told to avoid dangerous jobs, move out of contaminated areas, improve our educational status or eliminate language barriers. In a bizarre victim-blaming analysis by the Heritage Foundation after the catastrophic Katrina disaster, we were told that women died because they didn't have husbands to rescue them from the deadly floodwaters.

Our pregnancies are policed, our behaviors are monitored, and we are frequently imprisoned at the whims of callous judges in the interest of "fetal rights." For example, in June 2009 a judge in Maine ordered the incarceration of an HIV-positive pregnant woman, Quinta Layin Tuleh, simply to "ensure that the baby is born free of the AIDS virus" (she was later released on bail). Will the next ill-informed judge sentence a pregnant woman to prison because she lives in a contaminated neighborhood and cannot guarantee the health of her child? In other words, we are told it is our fault for not protecting ourselves and our families from diseases, abuse and disasters.

Moreover, women of color often work in industries that pose severe risks to our health. Farm workers are exposed to many dangerous chemicals that cause spontaneous miscarriages and create lifelong physical damage. For example, the commonly used pesticide methoxychlor can prevent implantation of an embryo in the uterus. Called the "chemicalization of farming," these preventable risks are not individual problems for women to deal with but instead require that we create a society based on human rights in which it is unacceptable to profit from chemicals

that harm us. It is not an individual responsibility, but a collective responsibility. We live in communities that are situated in some of the most dangerous conditions in the United States. The world's poorest people are the least responsible

for causing environmental degradation such as climate change, yet they are suffering the most from its effects. While everyone is affected by climate change, we know that women are disproportionately harmed by climate change disasters. The majority of the world's poor women and their families often live in substandard housing on marginal land subject to drought or flood, or in crowded urban areas lacking essential services.

Women's livelihoods are most endangered by climate change. Due to gendered divisions of labor, women comprise 70-80% of the world's agricultural workers. Women are more likely than men to die from natural disasters caused by climate change because of gendered vulnerabilities. Men are more likely to survive floods, earthquakes, hurricanes and other disasters. In New Orleans, more than 83 percent of poor single mothers were displaced as a result of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Almost four years later, many women and girls remain unable to return home. If women are displaced by environmental disasters and unable to care for their families, if women cannot access even the most basic of social and reproductive health services, then they likewise will be denied the most elemental aspects of reproductive justice.

Emerging research is proving that chemical exposures that occur prior to conception and during pregnancy can have serious ramifications on adult health. A 2005 study by the

Environmental Working Group found an average of 200 industrial chemicals and pollutants in umbilical cord blood from babies born in U.S. hospitals that included pesticides, consumer product ingredients, and wastes from burning coal, gasoline and garbage.



