

## Population Control: An Obstacle to Reproductive Justice

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The world is overpopulated...Population pressure is destroying the rainforest...Poor women keep themselves poor by having too many babies... If Third World countries don't get their populations under control, those people will migrate here and take our jobs...

These statements reflect the conventional wisdom on population in much of U.S. society. Ask almost anyone and they will tell you that overpopulation is one of the major causes, if not the major cause, of hunger, poverty, environmental degradation, migration and even political instability. Most people are not even aware that population growth rates have declined the world over much faster than anticipated. The belief in overpopulation is so pervasive because it is reinforced in schools, the media, and policy circles where scapegoating the poor conveniently obscures the role of the rich and powerful in depleting natural resources and deepening inequality.

The belief in overpopulation leads to discriminatory population control practices that target poor women and women of color at home and abroad. The most well-known form of population control is coercive family planning. While women's health activists support access for all women to high-quality, voluntary birth control and abortion services, population control programs try to drive down birth rates as fast and cheaply as possible through the aggressive promotion of sterilization or long-acting contraceptives like Norplant and Depo-Provera, often in the absence of adequate health care or informed consent.

The 1994 UN population conference in Cairo opposed coercive population control, and today many people assume it is a thing of the past. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Today, in India, for example, a number of states punish poor parents that have more than two children by denying them access to government assistance, employment and election to public office. There is a parallel with 'family caps' implemented here in the U.S. as a part of welfare reform.

Population control has a privatized side too. In Mexico, Human Rights Watch has documented how many U.S.- owned factories force women workers to submit to mandatory pregnancy testing as a condition for getting or keeping a job. Quinacrine, a chemical form of sterilization not approved by any drug regulatory authority, is promoted by private population control interests in clinics in Florida and many countries overseas. In the U.S. the organization CRACK pays poor women drug users to be sterilized.

### **Population control has many other faces as well. These include:**

The greening of hate: To build support in environmental circles, anti-immigrant groups claim that immigrants are destroying the U.S. environment by overpopulating the country. Recently, they tried – and fortunately failed – to take over the Sierra Club.

Blaming terrorism on 'too many' young men of color: U.S. defense and intelligence agencies often blame terrorism in the Middle East on the so-called 'youth bulge,' a high proportion of young males in the population. This serves as a way to justify military intervention and obscure the role of U.S. foreign policy in causing conflict.

The 'war on drugs' and the prison-industrial complex: Mass incarceration is one of the starkest and most destructive forms of population control. The U.S. has the highest number of prisoners per capita in the world, and the great majority of these are poor men and women of color. The new eugenics: Population control is not only concerned with population quantity but also with so-called quality. Without regulation and ethical oversight, new genetic and reproductive technologies could reinforce discrimination against people with disabilities, legitimize present social and racial hierarchies through a pseudoscientific genetic determinism, and encourage sex selection in favor of male children. Whatever forms it takes, population control stands in the way of reproductive justice.

–Betsy Hartmann

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