

Reproductive Justice,
Climate Justice & Peace
A Call for Solidarity, not Population Control

Population and Development Program

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As activists working for reproductive rights, environmental justice and peace, we are concerned about attempts to link birth control and abortion services to climate change debates. Access to safe, voluntary, high quality birth control and abortion services is a basic human right, not a tool to drive down birth rates in the name of saving the planet.

We reject any connection made between women's health and the health of the environment based on targeting women's fertility - particularly that of low-income women, women of color, and women of the Global South - as a root cause of environmental and social problems.

The so-called population explosion is over. Fears of overpopulation are not borne out by demographic statistics. 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 2.75 children per woman, and the UN predicts this figure will drop to 2.05 by 2050. And per capita carbon emission rates are low in countries where birth rates remain relatively high, as in sub-Saharan Africa, thus population there has little effect on global warming.

The focus on population growth as a root cause of climate change prevents an effective collective response to the true driving forces behind global warming: war and militarism, environmental racism, and unsustainable and unjust systems of production, distribution and consumption.

Instead we support the making of connections between the struggle for climate justice - the just and equitable response to the global climate crisis, led by those communities most impacted and least responsible for climate change, reproductive justice - the economic, social, and political empowerment of all people to make healthy decisions about their bodies, sexuality and reproduction for themselves, their families and their communities, and movements for peace around the world.

We invite organizers and advocates for climate justice and reproductive justice to consider and explore contexts in which their struggles align, including:

1) Ending War and Militarism

War and militarism hurt women and play a significant “ but often neglected role” in global warming. War and militarism negatively affect women's health in many ways. These include the impact of military toxics on women's reproductive health and childbearing; the purposeful bombing of hospitals and health care facilities as part of modern warfare; the pollution and destruction of local ecosystems on which women's livelihoods depend; rape as a weapon of war, sexual violence associated with military bases; and forced migration.

War and militarism are also linked to climate change, both directly and indirectly. Militaries are among the main consumers of fossil fuels: The U.S. military is presently using vast amounts of oil to fuel a war in Iraq fought at least in part to ensure future U.S. control of oil supplies. Pentagon statistics indicate the U.S. military burns 5.46 billion gallons of fuel annually, or the same amount every day as the entire nation of Sweden.

War and militarism divert public resources away from spending on human needs and environmental improvements: The war in Iraq now costs the U.S. taxpayer \$12 billion a month” imagine if even a quarter of those funds flowed to the development of cleaner technologies and energy supplies and to ensuring that low-income people were not adversely affected by the transition from fossil fuels. Meanwhile, military research into controlling the climate poses a potentially grave danger to the environment.

Militarism undermines democracy and diplomacy: It erodes civil liberties, pushes women out of the public arena and reduces the space for inclusive debate on how to address global warming. It stands in the way of the kind of peaceful diplomacy and international solidarity needed to forge socially just responses to climate change.

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2) Ending Environmental Racism

Since the emergence of the Environmental Justice movement in the 1970s, EJ activists have highlighted and struggled against the disproportionate placement of waste facilities, chemical plants, landfills, and other toxic infrastructure in low-income communities and communities of color. Witnessing the role played by institutionalized forms of racism and classism in the poisoning of their communities, these activists coined the term "Environmental Racism." Ending environmental racism is central to the attainment of healthy reproductive lives and a healthy climate for all people because:

The global and the local are connected: Some of the same powerful forces that drive environmental injustice at the local level contribute to climate change on the global level. In focusing on the global scale of climate change, it is imperative to recognize local community struggles against environmental racism. An effective, collective response to climate change will have to entail a conscious articulation of the connections between the global and local scales of environmental injustice.

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.

Environmental racism harms women's health and livelihoods: 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.

Environmental justice is a women's movement: Women have spearheaded the battles against environmental injustice and made up the majority of the active participants in almost all communities fighting the issue. This stems largely from women's roles as caretakers of their communities 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.

Environmental justice includes 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. 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.

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Corporate solutions to climate change increase the vulnerability of poor women and communities: 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.

Environmental, social and gender justice must shape 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.

3) Supporting Immigrant Rights

A variety of different actors "some liberal environment and development NGOs, members of the population lobby, the Pentagon" are raising alarm about global warming causing hundreds of millions of poor "climate refugees" who will roam the planet, creating conflict, until they ultimately swarm toward "our borders."

These highly speculative scenarios, based on no real evidence, play into the hands of anti-immigrant forces, especially in the U.S. and Europe. In January 2006, the US Department of Homeland Security awarded a \$385 million contract to Halliburton Corporation to augment existing immigrant detention facilities in the event of "an emergency influx of immigrants into the U.S." as well as the development of a plan to "react to a national emergency, such as a natural disaster." U.S. defense officials meanwhile are raising the specter of climate refugees and climate conflict in Africa to justify the Bush administration's plan for a new regional command, AFRICOM.

Reproductive justice, climate justice and peace activists should resist this kind of scare-mongering. We should defend and advance immigrant and refugee rights. In the event that people are displaced by global warming, we need to ensure that they are welcomed" not further traumatized and stigmatized.

Call for Further Dialogue

We invite activists, scholars, policy makers, and members of communities involved in the struggle for reproductive and environmental justice and peace to participate in a dialogue aimed at the creation of strategies for forging solidarity between our movements. Together we can challenge policies that target women's bodies as tools of population control. We demand democratic control over local natural resources and energy infrastructure and a gender-specific response and adaptation to climate change developed in local, national and international policy making forums.