

The Conflict of Interest Between Family Planning, Environmental Politics, and Third World Women's Rights

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WHAT IS POPULATION CONTROL?

The debates about reproductive health and family planning are one place where the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation can be examined. Wherever there is discussion about development and underdevelopment or poverty and economic growth, it is extreme likely that you will hear ideas about population control expressed and argued about. In fact, often reducing or stabilizing the population, particularly in the third world, is seen as one solution to problems of resource depletion, food scarcity, and environmental degradation — these have become key issues in the Sociology of Development. As theory and practice go hand in hand, there are many organizations dedicated to monitoring and understanding population growth/reduction and carrying out programs designed to reduce population growth. These include governmental, non-governmental organizations (NGO) that are frequently financially backed by international banks and large corporations.

The idea of population control is grounded in Malthusian philosophy, which suggests that people are endangering themselves and the future of their children by having so many children. Malthus, who wrote in the 1700s and 1800s in Britain believed that the world would not be able to sustain the increasing numbers of people who inhabited it. However, as Hartman explains, he did not anticipate the improvements in living standards that would reduce the need for kids in many parts of the globe nor could he know that technology would enable production to become as sophisticated and efficient as it has. Notwithstanding, Malthusian thinking is the basis for population control today. For instance, environmental NGOs like the Sierra Club and explicitly population-focused NGOs like Zero Population Growth frame the earth's and humanity's long-term well-being as closely tied to population. For instance, Zero Population's mission statement states:

Zero Population Growth is a national nonprofit organization working to slow population growth and achieve a sustainable balance between the Earth's people and its resources. We seek to protect the environment and ensure a high quality of life for present and future generations. ZPG's education and advocacy programs aim to influence public policies, attitudes, and behavior on national and global population issues and related concerns.

Population Control vs. Family Planning

While organizations such as the Sierra Club and the Zero Population Growth are concerned with the environment, there are many other ways of framing the discussion. Women's organizations and those influenced by women centered approaches to development such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) prefer to center issues of family planning, reproductive rights, and women's right to choose. The UNFPA grew out of the International Conference on Development and Population held in Cairo in 1994. This branch of the United Nations is dedicated specifically to advocating

awareness about population issues and channeling funds to family planning activities in third world nations. Their approach is one of empowering women and giving them choices about family planning and birth control and they also do extensive education campaigns to convince people to reduce family sizes. In theory this approach is focused on a giving women choices; however, it has received a great deal of criticism for failing to truly offer women choices. For instance, some argue that you get plenty of support if you want to prevent birth, but if you choose to have babies you do not get support (health, psychological, or otherwise). Given this situation, it can be argued that this is much more a form of coercion than choice.

Human Rights

These debates are further complicated by a history of human rights abuses that have come with programs that are seen by some to be tied to ethnocentric, even white supremacist values and norms. For instance, in the United States during the 1970's there was a massive campaign for sterilization of Native American, African American and Puerto Rican Women. It was discovered that women made decisions to become sterilized after being repeatedly accused by social workers of being "bad mothers." Other women were lied to about the procedures and the consequences and some were even operated on without consent during other medical procedures. The United States government funded the campaigns and medical procedures.

As recently as 1998 there have been similar cases reported in India and Peru. In 1997, the United States State Department reported that doctors in hospitals and clinics had been coercing women into sterilization with food bribes and by not providing them with details about the alternatives. Peruvian authorities were said to be investigating these issues and those found in violation of human rights would be punished. Yet the *Miami Herald* (Jan. 11, 1998) and the *Washington Post* (Feb. 12, 1998) reported that of the more than one hundred thousands women sterilized between the 1995 and 1998 many had not consented. Some women were promised food, others were sterilized without knowing during other procedures and many were not informed of the options or given complete information about the consequences of sterilization. Additionally, the *Washington Post* noted that some doctors were working under the "quota system" so that their jobs and the funding of their medical facility was contingent on the number of sterilizations performed.

Women in the Development Process

Scholars of women and development have also added to the debate and pointed to several issues for consideration. One of argument put forth is that environmental campaigns against reproduction among poor and third world women fail to consider the reasons why women have children. In the case of some women in India and Latin America, for instance, there are a myriad of concerns including survival of children to work on the land, assurance that enough boys are born to take care of parents when they grow old, and that enough girls are born so that some of them will survive. The survival of female children is a concern because they receive less rigorous health care than boys. There is often pressure that a boy is born to satisfy the pressure to have a male child present in many cultures. These make clear the logic behind having more than two children, and the degree to which women battle for control over their bodies. In addition to these issues of culture and patriarchy, Mies and Shiva have also delineated the relationship between colonialist intervention and women's traditional birth control practices (see Mies and Shiva). For instance young indigenous women in the state of Zulia, Venezuela who enter western schools are taken away from a very structured educational system in which they have traditionally learned craft, about their bodies, and natural birth control methods (see Watkins). Women's knowledge of birth control is displaced and becomes mediated (to varying degrees) by pharmaceutical corporations, health workers who are lying or misinformed, or business people whose livelihood depends on how many "cases" they bring in for sterilization (see Bai, *Something like War*).

Theorists like Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva point out that what needs to be addressed are issues of equality between men and women issues of resources distribution including systematic health care and strategies for fighting against environmental degradation from all angles. If people did not have to worry about losing children and or basic livelihood fertility rates would be likely to drop on their own. So instead of eliminating poverty through reducing births they argue that birth rates will go down if poverty is eliminated.

THE SETTING

The setting of this role-play is a forum on Poverty and Family Planning in Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic. A group of students in the Gender and Development Master's program at a private university in the Dominican Republic have put together a conference to discuss the theoretical and practical implications of Family Planning as a strategy for and component of development planning. Because the students themselves are trying to work through the various perspectives on Family Planning they have tried to bring together a diverse and representative group of voices to an open forum. Each speaker is asked to answer the question: What is the relevance of family planning to development theory and practice? In the end the group as a whole is asked to work together to create a collective statement that answers this question in a way that is acceptable to everyone.

A JESUIT PRIEST

Your character is a Colombian Jesuit Priest who has been working in rural communities in the Caribbean for many years and is committed to transforming the lives of the rural poor.

Position Statement

Based on the teachings of the church he does not support the idea of birth control of any sort. Moreover, he believes that international corporate sponsored campaigns for population control are not only immoral on the basis of holy link between sex and procreation, but also immoral because they are part of larger patterns of disregarding the rights of the poor. The idea that population control will solve the problem of poverty is completely misguided. What is needed is radical redistribution of wealth especially land to grow food both for subsistence and the market. Many of the people who are targeted by population control programs are landless. Their land was expropriated from their parents and grandparents by sugar plantations in the early part of the 20th century. They kept getting pushed further into the mountains to farm and now most of the people don't even have a little bit of land of their own to grow food on! People are starving because they do not have access to land, food, or health care — not because there are too many people. What is needed is empowerment for people and resources for people not a reduction of people. There is every bit of evidence that there are enough resources to feed everyone we are short on equality — not food.

CALIFORNIA UNIVERSITY STUDENT

You are a radical environmentalist, profeminist, antiracist male Global Studies major from a northern California state university doing a semester abroad in the Dominican Republic and your Development Professor at the university has invited you to speak.

Position Statement

OK just to set the record straight this whole thing about the poor causing environmental degradation is completely inaccurate. The environmental organizations accuse the third world poor of harming the environment but they don't mention that first world OVER-consumption is what is really posing a problem for the earth. I mean, the average child born in the United States consumes approximately 30 to 40 times the natural resources that a child does in the periphery countries! What does that say about overpopulation and resource depletion? The other thing that does not get

mentioned by those of you advocating population control as a way to “defend” the environment is that what is destroying the earth are the activities of corporations that are unchecked by governments who are rapidly finding themselves victims of the globalized market machinery. Shell, BP and the other oil corporations are making a mess out of the ocean (and making a killing while they are at it). The chemical fertilizers being dumped into the land (and rivers) by the corporate tomato, coffee, and banana growers are extremely hazardous. The free trade zones are swarming with fumes that are destroying the ozone layer and the air that we breath — not to mention that all of these pose extreme, even deadly health risks to those who have to work directly with them. Oh and by the way logging all around the South American continent and the Caribbean is destroying forests (all in the name of export wood and grazing land for the cows to supply McDonald’s with their 49 cent cheeseburger or whatever). Sorry to go off, but I’m really tired of these so-called environmentalist talking about the third world as the problem; especially when their brand-new SUV and the fuel they put in it is destroying California. (On average, US Americans own twice as many cars and drives two and one-half times farther than in 1950.)

And let me also mention, while I am on the topic, the irony of this whole “energy crisis,” I mean the first thing Dubya wants to do is exploit the earth for more fuel. Does someone care to explain how this is all falling on the shoulders of poor women in peripheral countries?

MUJERES UNIDAS EN DESARROLLO: MUDE

Women United in Development is a grassroots organization that works with rural women in the Dominican Republic to improve their quality of life. Their projects often involve educational and empowerment workshops for women. They were asked to come and speak but rather than provide their own organizational statement on the issue, they wanted to provide the opportunity for two women from a rural community to speak about their experience with family planning. The women, although from the same small community, had very different testimonials. This is a testament to the diversity of women’s experiences, not all women, even from the same village, can be lumped into one monolithic category.

MUDE Testimonial: Josefina

People don’t really get it. For us, kids are joy and beyond joy kids are security. When we get old we need our kids to take care of us — we work extremely hard out here and our bodies seriously cannot take the kind of labor we do forever. Frankly, when I grow old, a even if I am young and, God forbid, anything happens to my husband I would need enough sons to take care of me and my daughters. It is not easy to be a woman here. There is no work unless you leave for the cities or the free trade zones. You cannot be guide in the park and who is going to hire you for paid agricultural work when they think that it is men’s work. Basically if it’s paid work it’s men’s work. That is why I was very upset when they forced me to have the operation. They told me if I had it right after my baby was born I would be eligible for baby formula and a basket of food, baby supplies, and medicines for my baby. It was a confusing time because you are in pain, in a lousy hospital and of course you think at the time — I don’t want to do this again. Anyway, it’s not like I could go on the pill or something — I don’t have the money to take the trip to the hospital every month for that. Even if I did have the money, I can’t just take off what about the house, the work, the kids? That’s why I agreed to the surgery but now I regret it. My husband says I am not a whole woman now and he is going to leave me for a woman that is whole — that can still have babies. I’m not the only one either and we have a theory about the doctors here — if you have two C-sections they sterilize you automatically and more and more women are being given C-sections without any need. I think they do it on purpose so that women wont be able to decide for themselves.

MUDE Testimonial: Patricia

I personally want to keep my family small. My husband and I agree on this — well — he really wants to have more kids but I told him I was only having two, I'm the one who has to raise them and take care of them and unless he plans on giving birth to the third he'll have to settle for the two we already have. I have certain goals for myself and for my family and if I have to be busy all the time running around after little ones there is no way I can accomplish them. Right now I'm finishing eighth grade so that I'll be able to at least help my children get an education so they will have opportunities and not be in the dark like our generation. My dream is to study agronomy because I know I could help people around here — but who knows if that will happen. Anyway, I am on birth control I have to go and get an injection once every few months. Some people want small families like me. My neighbor was taking the birth control pill because she just got married and wanted to wait before having kids. Unfortunately, the pill made her dizzy and very ill so she had to go off it. Now she's pregnant. Most people want large families. It's because lots of people leave this area and if we don't have lots of kids we might get left all alone one day. And because we don't even have a clinic up here we have lots of kids die and you have to have spares. That is sad but true — it's the reality we struggle with everyday because we are poor. Another reason some people have lots of kids is because they need them to help with the agricultural production — most people don't see kids as a burden and it's true that they can really be a help. I told my two kids I don't care if you move to the city but I will go with you if you do.

SIERRA CLUB

You are a Dominican woman, an executive for the Sierra Club's Branch office in the Dominican Republic.

Position Statement

One of Sierra Club's areas of concern is stopping population growth so it works closely with organizations like Zero Population Growth and channels population control funds through major international development organizations such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Their mission statement states that:

The "population explosion" has severely disturbed the ecological relationships between human beings and the environment. It has caused an increasing scarcity of wilderness and wildlife and has impaired the beauty of whole regions, as well as reducing the standards and the quality of living. In recognition of the growing magnitude of this conservation issue, the Sierra Club supports a greatly increased program on education on the need for population control.

The Sierra Club has multiple interests in the area some more general and some more specific. In general terms Sierra Club is concerned with protecting the world's resources which are in great danger both from over consumption in the developed nations — especially the United States — and over population in the developing nations. Additionally, they are concerned with environmental protection. The region they are currently working in — Manabao — is located in the Dominican Republic's Central Cordillera and houses a critical watershed known as the Cuenca Alta del Yaque. This watershed is the origin of nineteen rivers and tributaries that irrigate regions that are key agricultural producers. In the past the Sierra Club has supported national campaigns for the relocation of the region's inhabitants because their farming techniques as well as subsistence activities are a threat to the watershed and surrounding forest. Relocation of the inhabitants of the area has never materialized and the establishment of a national park around the watershed has contained environmental degradation of the area.

Nevertheless, local as well as international branches of Sierra Club are committed to funding

population control projects in the area as a way to protect the environment and contain the widespread poverty. Steps must be taken and educating women about the environment and providing them with access to health education and birth control is one an important place to start. They have sent a representative to the meeting because they will be funding the project in partnership with USAID and several private corporate foundations including Hewlett-Packard.

UNITED NATIONS POPULATION FUND: UNFPA

Your character is a woman and the Dominican Projects Coordinator for UNFPA who will be speaking on behalf of the organization.

Position Statement

(This text was taken directly from the mission statement and overview of programs in Latin America and the Caribbean found at <<http://www.unfpa.org>>.)

UNFPA extends assistance to developing countries, countries with economies in transition and other countries at their request to help them address reproductive health and population issues, and raises awareness of these issues in all countries, as it has since its inception. UNFPA's three main areas of work are: to help ensure universal access to reproductive health, including family planning and sexual health, to all couples and individuals on or before the year 2015; to support population and development strategies that enable capacity-building in population programming; to promote awareness of population and development issues and to advocate for the mobilization of the resources and political will necessary to accomplish its areas of work.

Many of UNFPA's programmes in Latin America and the Caribbean focus on meeting the needs of young people. These young people, below the age of 24, are faced with a wide variety of situations — many are not yet sexually active, while many others are; some are already married, while many are not; some live at home, while many, even at an early age, are on the own; many are in school, while many others are in the work force or are surviving in precarious situations. They all need and want information about their own sexuality, about how to maintain their reproductive health, and about how not to have children before they are ready. UNFPA supports programmes in schools and in a wide variety of other situations to give them the information and education they need. The Fund also sponsors, through governments and non-governmental organizations, programmes that will provide them with accessible services in an atmosphere that responds to their needs.

The Latin American and Caribbean region covers a wide range of social situations, from some of the wealthiest and most cosmopolitan to some of the poorest and most isolated. With its limited resources, UNFPA concentrates on supporting reproductive health information and services for populations not well served by public or private services, marginal urban areas, remote rural regions and indigenous populations. In all regions, the Fund advocates for the rights and needs of women. As it does elsewhere in the world, UNFPA also supports governments in collecting and analysing population data so that these data can be taken into account in the design of government programmes.

BE PREPARED TO ARGUE THE POSITIONS OF THE CHARACTERS IN THE CASE

1. In class, you will be given a character to role-play. Take some time prior to class to study the setting and various arguments regarding family planning programs as development projects. The positions include (1) Josefina, a MUDE member, (2) Patricia, another MUDE member, (3) the Sierra Club, (4) UNFPA, (5) the college student, and (6) the Jesuit Priest.

2. Be prepared to give a brief 2-5 minutes statement of your character's position by addressing the question "what is the relevance of family planning to development theory and practice?" The six individuals/groups will draft a collective statement acceptable to everyone.
3. The following description is a starting point for your evidence and argument. Feel free to be creative and draw on knowledge you have gathered throughout the course. If there is a gap in your knowledge, make sure you seek the answers independently outside of the class period. Be prepared to present your ideas with conviction and to support them with as much care and persuasion as you can. At the same time, be equally prepared to listen respectfully to the comments of your classmates.
4. Re-read the general suggestions about case preparation in "Analytical Decision Cases" handout. While reading, also consider the necessary practices in developing an enriching case discussion such as reading *relevant internet sites*.
5. Consider the following questions while preparing for the case discussion:
 - a. What is the relevance of family planning to development theory and practice from your character's perspective?
 - b. In what ways do issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect in discussions over reproductive health?
 - c. Should population control be part of the development agenda in Third World nations? why or why not?
 - d. Is there a difference between reproductive health, reproductive rights and population control?
 - e. What would it take for the above positions to find common ground and mutual solutions to questions about reproductive health?
 - f. What do you think about the absence of men's bodies and men's responsibilities from these debates? should this absence be challenged? how?