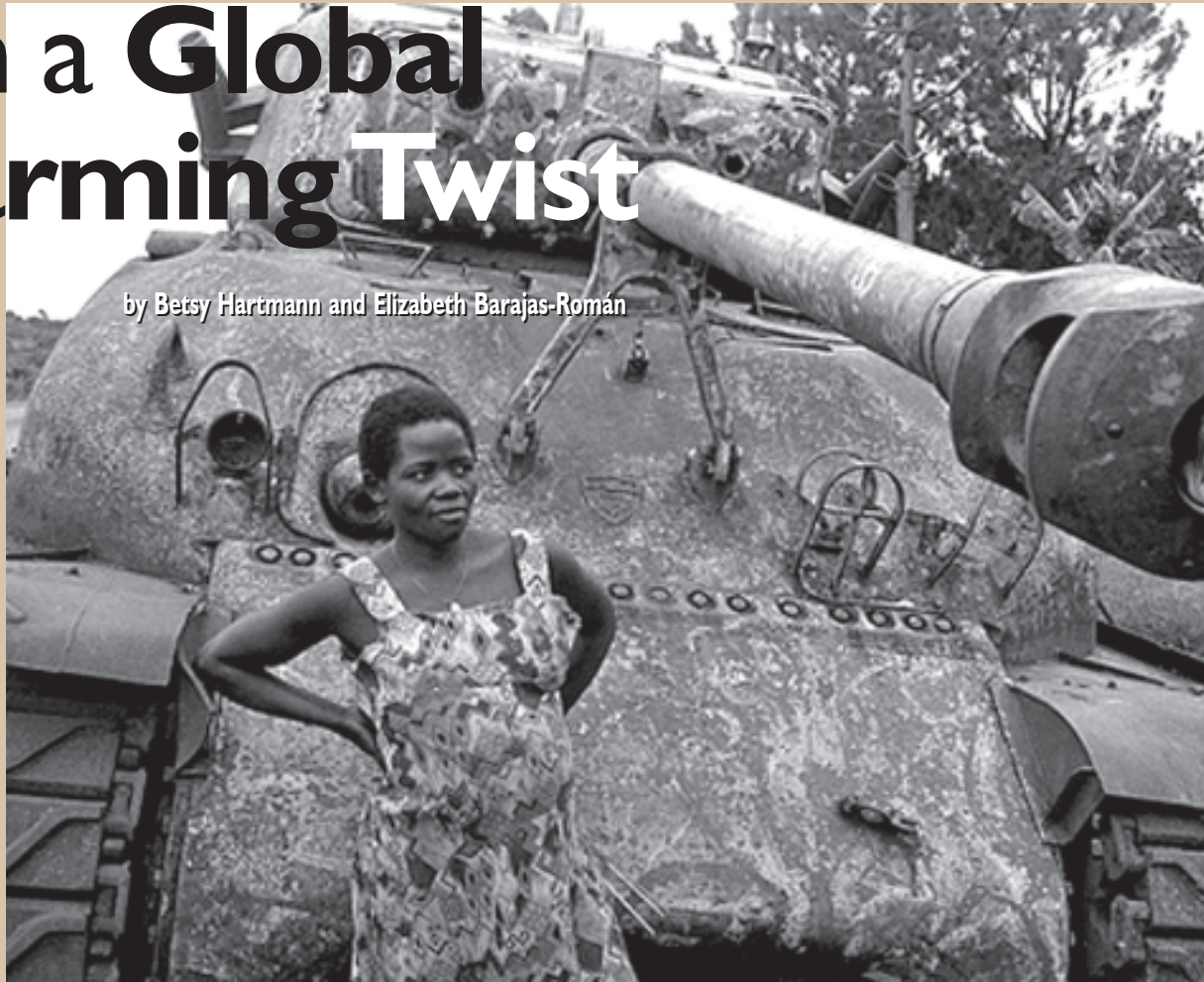


features

# The Population Bomb is Back – with a Global Warming Twist

by Betsy Hartmann and Elizabeth Barajas-Román



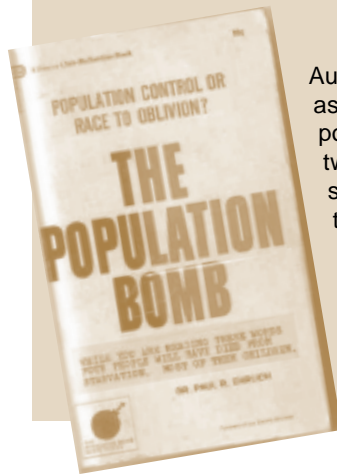
**Not On My Body.** Women are now being blamed for the environmental stress around them, particularly with their exercise of sexuality and reproduction. Yet there are so much beyond women's bodies that need to be held accountable. Neoliberalism, militarisation and nuclear energy, among many others have far more to explain.

Photo by David Blumenkrantz.

*Hunger, poverty, environmental degradation and violent conflict are just some ills that the elites have blamed on the poor since the days of 18<sup>th</sup> century social scientist Thomas Malthus. Now the list includes climate change.*

**Population** pundits and advocacy groups claim that overpopulation is the main cause of global warming, that only massive investments in family planning will save the planet. This argument threatens to derail climate negotiations and turn back the clock on reproductive rights and health. It is time for women's movements to defuse the population bomb – again.

## (Re)Telling Tale



Authored by Paul R. Ehrlich in 1968, *The Population Bomb* asserted that there would be famine in the years to come unless population growth is abated. The book was a hit as more than two million copies were sold but it was criticised for its sweeping predictions. Forty years later, Ehrlich admitted that the title of the book can indeed be misleading. He likewise acknowledged that he underestimated the impact of the green revolution. He maintained though that the general conclusions of the book remain valid to this day.

**Source:** Ehrlich, Paul R. and Anne H. Ehrlich. (2009). "The Population Bomb Revisited." In the Electronic Journal of Sustainable Development (Vol. 1, No.3) URL: <http://www.docstoc.com/docs/12166078/Population-Bomb-Revisited>

When Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich wrote *The Population Bomb* in the late 1960s, he argued that a population "explosion" would wreak havoc on the environment and cause hundreds of millions to starve to death by the 1980s. His predictions did not come true. Instead world food production outpaced population growth. Birth rates started to fall for a variety of reasons, including declines in infant mortality, increases in women's education and employment, and the shift from rural to urban livelihoods. Yet his kind of dire forecast served as justification for the implementation of coercive population control programmes that brutally sacrificed women's health and human rights.

When feminists won reforms of population policy at the 1994 United Nations (UN) population conference in Cairo, Egypt, many thought family planning had finally been freed from the shackles of population control. The more immediate threat seemed to be fundamentalist forces opposing reproductive and sexual rights. But population control never went away. Mounting concern about climate change has provided a new opportunity for the population control lobby to blame the poor and target women's fertility.

Within the United States (US) population lobby, the influential Population Action International organisation has taken the lead in linking population growth and climate change.<sup>1</sup> Paul Ehrlich is back on the circuit and popular media is spreading fear and alarm.<sup>2</sup> For example, a June 2009 ABC prime time television documentary on climate change, *Earth 2100* scared viewers with scenes of a future apocalypse in which half the world population dies of a new plague. And in the end, humans can get back into balance with nature again.

Unfortunately, even some feminists have jumped on board this fear-factor bandwagon. Although their message tends to be softer – they believe investments in voluntary family planning will meet women's unmet need for contraception and reduce global warming at the same time.<sup>3</sup> They assume we live in a win-win world where there is no fundamental power imbalance between the rich and the poor or contradiction between placing disproportionate blame for the world's problems on poor women's fertility and advocating for reproductive rights and health.

The reasoning behind these views is fundamentally flawed. Industrialised

countries, with only 20 per cent of the world's population, are responsible for 80 per cent of the accumulated carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. The US is the worst offender. Overconsumption by the rich has far more to do with global warming than the population growth of the poor. The few countries in the world where population growth rates remain high, such as those in sub-Saharan Africa, have among the lowest carbon emissions per capita on the planet.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the recent resurgence in overpopulation rhetoric flies in the face of demographic realities. In the last few decades population growth rates have come down all over the world so that the average number

suburbia, green energy rather than fossil fuels and nuclear, would do a lot to help a more populated planet.

Serious environmental scholars have taken the population and climate change connection to task,<sup>5</sup> but unfortunately a misogynist pseudo-science has been developed to bolster overpopulation claims. Widely cited in the press, a study by two researchers at Oregon State University blames women's childbearing for creating a long-term "carbon legacy."<sup>6</sup>

Not only is the individual woman responsible for her own children's emissions, but for her genetic offspring's emissions far into the future! 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. It also places the onus on the individual, obscuring the role of capitalist systems of production, distribution and consumption in causing global warming.

A second study to hit the press is by a population control outfit in the United Kingdom (UK), Optimum Population Trust (OPT), whose agenda includes immigration restriction. OPT sponsored a graduate student at the London School of Economics (LSE) to undertake a simplistic cost/benefit analysis that purports to show that it is cheaper to reduce carbon emissions by investing in family planning than in alternative technologies.<sup>7</sup> Although the student's summer project was not supervised by an official faculty member, the press has billed it as a study by the prestigious LSE, lending it false legitimacy. Writing on the popular blog RHRealityCheck, Karen Hardee and Kathleen Mogelgaard of Population Action International endorse the report's findings without even a blink of a critical eye.<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, it is time for feminists to keep their critical eyes wide open to these developments.

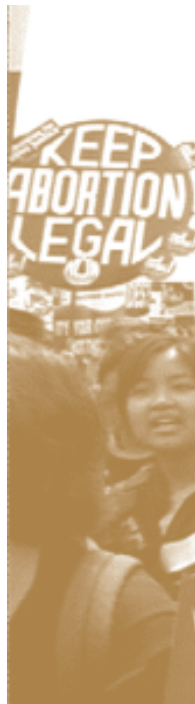
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of children per woman in the Global South is now 2.75 and predicted to drop to 2.05 by 2050. The so-called population "explosion" is over, though the momentum built into our present numbers means that world population will grow to about nine billion in 2050, after which point it will start to stabilise.

The real challenge is to plan for the additional three billion people in ways that minimise negative environmental impact. For example, investments in public transport rather than private cars, cluster housing rather than





**Beyond Reproductive Health and Choice.**

*Reproductive Justice is an emerging framework in advocating reproductive rights, placing an emphasis on women's agency over her body in relation to her multiple identities based on class, ethnicity, race, citizenship, geographical origin and many other social categories.*

Photos from Sister Song.

We also need to develop alternative frames and politics to address reproductive rights and climate change. We not only have to criticise the wrong links, but make the right ones.

**Right Links: Reproductive Justice/Environmental Justice/Climate Justice**

Developed and advanced by women of color activists in the US, the concept of reproductive justice strongly condemns population control, noting its long history of targeting the fertility of oppressed communities. At the same time it includes support for full access to safe, voluntary birth control, abortion and reproductive health services. But reproductive justice goes far beyond the need for adequate services. According to Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (ACRJ), reproductive justice “will be achieved when women and girls have the economic, social and political power and resources to make healthy decisions about our bodies, sexuality and reproduction for ourselves, our families and our communities in all areas of our lives.”<sup>9</sup> Reproductive justice refers not only to biological reproduction but to social reproduction.

Feminist scholar Giovanna Di Chiro argues that the concept of social reproduction is crucial to understanding the possibilities for linking struggles for women's rights with environmental justice. Social reproduction includes the conditions necessary for reproducing everyday life (access to food, water, shelter, and health care) as well as the ability to sustain human cultures and communities.<sup>10</sup> Whether or not individuals and communities can fulfill their basic needs and sustain themselves depends critically on the extent of race, class and gender inequalities in access to resources and power.

Unlike the population framework with its focus on numbers, social reproduction focuses on social, economic and political *systems*. It helps us to look more deeply at the underlying power dynamics that determine who lives and who dies, who is healthy and who is sick, whose environment is polluted and whose is clean, who is responsible for global warming and who suffers most from its consequences.

Looking through this lens leads to a much more liberatory understanding of the convergences of reproductive and climate politics. It encourages us to consider:

***Connections between the Local and the Global.*** Some of the same powerful forces that drive environmental injustice at the local level contribute to climate change on the global level. While marginalised 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.<sup>11</sup>

**Back-breaking Backlash.** For many women, the impact of climate change is felt in their management of the land. The increasing unpredictability of the elements has affected the quantity and the quality of the harvest.

Photo from Media Global.

**Environmental Dimensions of Health.** 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.

Women have spearheaded many of the battles against environmental injustice. This stems largely from their roles as caretakers of their families 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.

**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.<sup>12</sup> 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. It also means opposing the transformation of lands that grow food crops into plantations of commercial biofuels.

**Failure of Corporate Solutions.** In the international arena, corporate needs outweigh human needs when it comes to official climate



**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 corporate-owned monoculture tree plantations that reduce biodiversity and displace indigenous peoples, preventing women from collecting plants and firewood.**



**More than Gender.** *The disproportionate impact of disasters cannot only be appreciated through the prism of gender. In many cases, the vulnerabilities of women are aggravated by their race and citizenship as what happened in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in the United States.*

Photo from [Hurricanekatrina.org](http://Hurricanekatrina.org)

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 corporate-owned monoculture tree plantations that reduce biodiversity and displace 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.<sup>13</sup>

One of the big questions in the upcoming climate negotiations in Copenhagen is whether it will be big business as usual – or whether solutions to climate change will challenge corporate interests.

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**Nature of Disaster Response.** Early warning systems and disaster management schemes often neglect the needs of poor women and communities of color. In the US 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 US military presently wants to expand its role in disaster response in the US and globally. We need to resist this development and insist that publicly accountable civilian institutions be strengthened to cope with climate-related natural disasters.

**Saying No to Nuclear Power.** The reproductive health effects of the release of radiation and toxic chemicals are a

powerful reason to oppose the expansion of nuclear power as a solution to climate change. Plutonium, the most dangerous byproduct of nuclear energy, crosses the placenta in the developing embryo and can cause birth defects. Plutonium affects male reproductive health as well. Stored in the testicles, it can cause mutations in reproductive genes, increased incidence of genetic diseases in future generations, and testicular cancer.

Long ignored, the chemical byproducts of nuclear energy are also linked to genetic mutations, Down's syndrome, autism, and other serious health effects. The US nuclear industry has no regulations to protect women workers from the risk of early miscarriages and fetal malformations or men from potential harm to their ability to reproduce. A resurgence of nuclear power would also bring increased uranium mining on indigenous lands, with consequent environmental pollution and negative health impacts.<sup>14</sup> Nuclear power threatens both biological and social reproduction.

### ***Immigrant and Refugee Rights.***

In the US reproductive justice advocates have been some of the most vocal supporters of immigrant rights and effective organisers in immigrant communities. They point out how policies restricting immigration and blocking access to social services prevent immigrant women from getting the reproductive and basic health care they need. They also work with poor immigrant communities who suffer disproportionately from environmental racism.<sup>15</sup> Climate justice must include immigrant rights high on the agenda. In the event that people are displaced by global warming, we need to ensure that they are welcomed – not further traumatised and stigmatised.

***Ending Militarism.*** Militarism in all its forms, from the prison-industrial complex to wars of occupation, is one of the most powerful obstacles to the achievement of



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reproductive, environmental and climate justice. Ending militarism is a point where our struggles can and should converge, where there are multiple overlaps.

The list is long: Military toxins damage the environment and harm reproductive health. Militarism increases violence against women, racism and anti-immigration activities. Militarism robs resources from other social and environmental needs. War destroys ecosystems, livelihoods, and health and sanitation infrastructure. It is the biggest threat of all to sustainable social reproduction.<sup>16</sup>



**Wasteful Wars.** *The US military not only disturbs and destroys the natural resources that it finds on its path with its so called “war on terror.” The per capita energy consumption of the US Department of Defense (DOD) is ten times more than the consumption of China and 30 times more than that of Africa. Its published figures on fuel consumption are also inconclusive, that it often describes it fuel consumption in terms of “gallons per mile” or “gallons per hour.” A B-52 bomber burns about 3,300 gallons per hour while F-15 and F-16 planes spend 1,580 and 800 gallons per hour respectively. Sohbet Karbuz asserted that even as the US military is undoubtedly the world’s single largest energy consumer, “the reality is that even the US DOD does not know precisely where and how much energy it consumes.” Source: Karbuz, Sohbet. (20 May 2007). “US military energy consumption- facts and figures.” URL: <http://www.energybulletin.net/node/29925>*

Photo from Wikimedia Commons

Militarism also stands in the way of effective solutions to climate change. Not only is the US military a major emitter of greenhouse gases – it burns the same amount of fossil fuel every day as the entire nation of Sweden – but it spends up to 30 per cent of its annual budget on military actions to secure oil and gas reserves around the world. Imagine if those funds flowed instead to the development of renewable energy, green technologies, and programmes to ensure that low-income people are not adversely affected by the transition to a new energy regime. Meanwhile, military research into controlling the climate poses a potentially grave danger to the environment.<sup>17</sup>

The resurgence of population control is a major roadblock on the route to effective and equitable climate policy and the achievement of reproductive health, rights and justice. It is time to knock it down and get on our way. ■

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## Endnotes

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