



The Ecology Movement: Targeting Women for Population Control

by Betsy Hartmann

Today many mainstream U.S. environmental groups blame overpopulation for the ecological crisis threatening the planet. According to the Sierra Club: "The continuing rapid rate of population growth is a core problem contributing in a major way to nearly all other environmental problems". Whether the problem is the greenhouse effect, rain forest destruction, or air and water pollution, controlling women's fertility is viewed as an essential part of the solution.

Recently, a coalition of family planning and environmental organizations in Washington backed legislation calling for a dramatic increase in U.S. and multilateral family planning assistance to developing countries. "Between now and the end of this century", the draft bill states, "world population stabilization must be pursued as an urgent environmental objective" and "a principal objective of the foreign policy of the U.S."

Why should feminists be concerned about these developments? First, blaming environmental destruction on overpopulation obscures the main causes of the crisis: corporate irresponsibility, militarism, elite control of land and other resources, and skewed development priorities. All too often poor women (and men) are the victims, not the culprits, of environmental degradation.

Second, though couched in the language of expanding women's reproductive choice, population control programs sometimes distort the delivery of safe, voluntary family planning services and harm rather than improve women's health.

Some environmentalists go beyond family planning to call for more drastic measures to reduce population

growth. Lester Brown and Edward Wolf of the Worldwatch Institute, for example, write favorably about financial incentives such as those used in China's one-child policy. According to "Miss Ann Thropy" in the *Earth First!* journal, "If radical environmentalists were to invent a disease to bring human population back to ecological sanity, it would probably be something like AIDS".

Fortunately, there are other environmental groups such as Greenpeace that take a more balanced position on population. "Countries that are most often targeted for population control efforts consume far less per capita than the industrialized countries that are doing the targeting", writes Greenpeace Executive Director Peter Bahouth. Mainstream organizations also may be open to change. If you are a member of an environmental group like Sierra Club, National Audubon Society, and the National Resources Defense Council, get information about their position on population and challenge them if necessary. On a more formal level, you can participate in efforts that are under way to create a feminist initiative on population and the environment with the goal of reforming national policy.

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