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Feminism

Population growth is a feminist issue

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World population has grown from 2.5bn in 1950 to 6.8bn in 2007. By 2050 it is predicted to reach 9.2bn, and then stabilise (UN figures). This estimate assumes rates in many countries in the North will continue to decrease, and that the South will gradually follow suit.

Are such numbers ecologically and socially sustainable? The huge problems posed by climate change have reignited this debate.

In Britain the Optimum Population Trust says a firm 'No', claiming that our planet is already beyond carrying capacity, and we would need yet another one to support 9.2bn people. They want governments in both North and South to address this issue with measures like the 'Stop at Two' family planning policy of the 60s and 70s in Britain. They also want controls on migration.

Capitalist states in general (both the rich North and the 'catch-up' South) look to advances in technology and market competition to take care of both sustainability and population growth. So switches to alternative energy, agribusiness (like the misnamed 'green revolution') and genetic engineering will heat, cool, feed and transport the world. There is no need for population policies. Actually it is increased life expectancy, rather than high birthrates, which currently accounts for large populations in the North. Hence all the talk going on now about retirement age and pensions.

Nevertheless, birth rates also remain a factor. Historically high fertility rates have been seen as a positive accompaniment to high economic growth – ensuring an expanding, flexible, mobile workforce and carers within the home. So now that rates are dropping in the North, governments in Europe are offering financial incentives to women to have more babies to bump it up again (£1,650 per child recently in Spain).

By contrast, many governments in the South, unable or unwilling to aid their huge and growing poor (resulting from inequitable, export-led development), are adopting population controls to reduce these numbers. These have sometimes been coercive, inhumane and damaging to women's health. So, perversely, in the high carbon-emitting rich North, with its huge average carbon footprint, we have policies to increase the birthrates. But in the low-emitting poor South they are being restricted. Apart from economic issues, there are the morality, justice and rights aspects of population growth and control.

Many religious leaders oppose any restrictions on human numbers as interfering with divine purpose. They may oppose both government policies and women's individual reproductive rights (the Vatican position). On the other hand liberals (and others) may oppose limits as going against natural law, human rights, migrants' rights, women's rights. In the 60s and 70s many greens did consider rates of population growth ecologically unsustainable, particularly after the publication of the UN Limits to Growth report. But they later dropped the issue.

Reds also tended not to talk about it. Both are now returning to the issue, especially as public opinion often links it to climate change. Reds and greens support the rights arguments and are against the top-down social control and engineering aspect of population policies.

But they see the unfettered profit-driven growth models of both the rich North and dependent South as the problem. Alternative, sustainable growth models and the elimination of inequality and poverty are seen as the main issues. Concerns about population growth are seen largely as a diversion.

Population growth is a feminist issue

George Monbiot argues along these lines in recent articles in *The Guardian*, as does Jonathan Neale in his book *Stop Global Warming, Change the World*. In a chapter on population, Neale confines himself to economic arguments. Cuts of 80-85% in carbon emissions, he maintains, will allow both economic development to continue and population to grow to the predicted 9.2bn in the South. Monbiot takes up some more areas, including lifestyle, which would also have to change for Neale's ideas to have a chance of succeeding.

Green Party leaders like Caroline Lucas have taken up the issue by defending population policies if they answer the real needs of women.

Phil Ward, in his latest article in *SR* argues for a very radical alternative development model, involving social and cultural as well as economic changes. He also points to the rights, interests and needs of women as linked to this transformation. This is the kind of approach that seems to be needed. But we need to explore and expand this second area.

For instance, looking at more sustainable and equitable alternatives to agribusiness, we can learn much from women farmers in relation to the land. Small-scale, organic cooperatives are favoured by most, and are better for communities and for the planet. Similarly, women tend to know best in relation to our own bodies and our own fertility. Given the choice, most women, both North and South, actually decide to limit their families. This usually brings benefits to health and welfare, greater independence, educational and job prospects, and so on. So reproductive rights and their underpinning through family planning provision have always been fought for and have been core feminist demands. This is goes for women (and men) and is good for our overstretched and overstressed planet.

There are, of course, problems with top-down provision. There may be a class or race agenda. In Britain in the 1930s birth control campaigners like Marie Stopes was a supporter of eugenics. But poor women especially came to her clinics because they offered access to contraception. In Cairo in 1994 at a UN conference on Population and Development, women were split over programmes to limit birthrates in the poor South. But here too, provision was and is often welcomed, as long as it is neither coercive nor damaging to women's health. As with other reforms and aid, women have always had to negotiate our way around what is offered, trying to gain what we want by maximising our own input and control.

So, we need not ignore the issue of population growth or see it as irrelevant or uncomfortable.

Instead, women's real needs, interests, wisdom and empowerment need to be brought to the fore. Human numbers then tend to take care of themselves, coinciding with the interests of our planet.