

Why Population Control Undermines Reproductive Rights



by Betsy Hartmann

Many well-meaning people believe that there is no fundamental contradiction between supporting population control policies and women's reproductive rights. A closer look at the impact of these policies on women's lives reveals otherwise.

The philosophy of population control rests on the basic assumption that rapid population growth is a primary cause of poverty, ill health, environmental degradation and political instability and that reducing women's fertility is key to solving these serious social problems. In the service of population control, family planning programs are designed to drive down birth rates as fast as possible. They typically limit contraceptive choice to a few 'effective' methods such as sterilization and Depo Provera, neglect counseling, medical screening and informed consent, and in some cases employ high pressure tactics to coerce women into using long-term methods.

Population control programs are found the world over. China and India's population programs have the worst human rights record, but in the U.S., too, many poor women and women of color have suffered sterilization abuse. Today, as the result of 'family caps' imposed by welfare reform, poor women are being pressured to use Depo Provera and Norplant to prevent pregnancy even though these methods pose significant health risks. 'Family caps' are based on the false myth of the "overbreeding welfare mom;" in reality, women on welfare have one or two children on average.

Reproductive rights advocates challenge both the philosophy and practice of population control. The root causes of poverty, environmental degradation and political instability lie in unjust and inequitable social and economic systems – not in women's fertility.

Reproductive rights advocates support family planning programs that offer:

- A wide choice of male and female contraceptive methods, including safe abortion, with full information on benefits and risks, and supportive counseling on how to use them.
- Good medical screening and back-up.
- A full range of reproductive health services, including prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases and pre-natal and post-natal care.
- Freedom from pressure and coercion.

Reproductive rights include the right to have children, as well as to prevent or terminate a pregnancy.

In recent years, pressure from reproductive rights movements around the world have led to some reforms of international population policy. But population control still remains the priority in many countries, often receiving more support than basic health care. At the same time, fundamentalist and anti-abortion forces are trying to restrict women's access to any kind of birth control. Ensuring that all women can exercise their full reproductive rights remains one of the most important political challenges women's movements face.

-- Betsy Hartmann is Director of the Population and Development Program at Hampshire College and a core committee member of CWPE. For more information on population control, see her book *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Politics of Population Control* (Boston: South End Press, 1995).