

Urging a Human Rights and Justice-Based Approach to Environmental Protection

COLOR

Editor's note: PopDev is proud to reprint this strong statement from the Colorado Organization for Latina Opportunity and Reproductive Rights (COLOR), a reproductive justice organization based in Denver, Colorado. The statement takes a stand against population reduction, or decreasing the number of births, as a strategy for environmental sustainability. COLOR's critical stance is needed at this time, when "reproductive justice" is being used and too often abused by population groups and environmentalists to defend population reduction agendas. For instance, Population Connection (formerly Zero Population Growth, the group started by author Paul Ehrlich, who wrote *The Population Bomb*) features reproductive justice advocates and ideals on its web pages, alongside calls for population reduction as an environmental imperative. This is not new: in *DifferenTakes* #72, feminist scholar Jade Sasser exposed how environmental groups rebranded population alarmist approaches as "justice-based" interventions. COLOR's statement explains why the two are inherently incompatible and contributes to this important discussion.

— Anne Hendrixson

Dear Comunidad,

COLOR is often approached to do collaborative work with other organizations. In recent months and years, we have had several instances where we were asked to partner with groups that utilize population control or stabilization as part of their values or direction for the work that they do. While we have great respect for many of the programs that are conducted by these groups, we are troubled by the idea that reproductive rights or environmental protection would be approached from a place of controlling reproduction of any group of people.

We felt it was important to develop a statement on this topic to help advance understanding around this complex area and to make our values clear. Our official statement is below. We welcome the opportunity to discuss this further. Thank you for all that you do.

Sincerely,

Karla Gonzales Garcia, Policy Director
and the rest of the team at COLOR

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Statement from the Colorado Organization for Latina Opportunity and Reproductive Rights (COLOR) on the importance of centering individual rights not only in organizational missions, but also in the day-to-day work to advance programs and policies related to reproductive rights and environmental protection:

COLOR is committed to ensuring access to contraception and decreasing the number of people who face unintended pregnancy. We work to remove systemic barriers that make it more difficult for the Latinx community to get the information, supplies and services we need to be able to plan our families. We know that if we can each become parents or add to our families when we are ready, that it is better for our health and for our financial stability. We believe that each person should be able to decide for themselves if and when to have a child. We also believe that we have the right to build our families as we see fit and to parent our children in a safe and healthy environment.

As a reproductive justice organization, we move this work at the intersections — the place where issues and communities connect. We endeavor to dig in to the complexities and to develop thoughtful responses to the challenges we face. We look at not just the goal of a policy or program, but also how it plays out in real people's lives, especially those who too often are pushed to the margins. One area where it is important that we see the ends do not justify the means is the topic of population control, or "population stabilization."

For us, these phrases are loaded with troubling assumptions. They come up largely in programs run by U.S.-based, white-led organizations who are working to increase access to family planning for people of color in other countries. The idea is that having fewer people in the world will put less of a drain on resources or reduce the impact on climate change, but this is inherently problematic as it seems to pin the larger social and environmental problems on marginalized people. It also reeks of policies that are really about who gets to have kids.¹ White women in the United States are not being told to have fewer kids. Brown and Black women are.

Programs and organizations that use population control as their framework typically talk about voluntary use of contraception; however, once we begin problematizing a specific group of women for having children or put ourselves in the position to judge if we think someone is having too many children, we are going down a road that leads to things like family caps or incentives for certain women to be sterilized.

Programs and organizations that use population control as their framework typically talk about voluntary use of contraception; however, once we begin problematizing a specific group of women for having children or put ourselves in the position to judge if we think someone is having too many children, we are going down a road that leads to things like family caps or incentives for certain women to be sterilized. That slippery slope is a history we are all too familiar with of forced sterilization of Black women in prison, or sterilization without informed consent of Latinx women after giving birth.^{2,3} This is not just a historic issue for our communities: it is seen very recently in Tennessee where a judge offered to give lighter sentences to women arrested on drug-related crimes if they used a certain long acting contraceptive.⁴

We understand the desire to look at ways we can sustain wilderness and promote clean air and water. It is low income and other marginalized communities who end up being disparately impacted by environmental degradation.⁵ Polluting power plants are in our communities, and the low wage jobs that expose you to toxic

chemicals that take years off your life and impact your fertility are more likely to be held by people of color. We get the need to get real about the impact that people are having on the planet and therefore on each other. But this very complex problem demands a complex solution that does not point fingers at women in countries where they may struggle to access contraception. This is terribly problematic not only because it is a huge oversimplification of the issues of resource depletion and climate change, but also because it takes away the critical need to organize access to family planning from a place of human rights and bodily autonomy, not control of the reproduction of any particular group of people.⁶

Boiling climate change, water rights and access, and general resources down to the number of people is not sufficient. It is also about who is utilizing the resources and in what way. The average American consumes ten times more water than a person in Africa, and so-called developed nations account for only 20% of the world's population, but control and use 80% of the wealth.⁷ We must acknowledge the over-consumption of resources by the richest countries in the world.

Poverty and financial stability is often framed as another reason that population should be a focus of advocacy and service efforts. The suggestion is that by having fewer children per family or less people in a community that more people will have enough. But we know that poverty and whether or not people and communities are able to seek and obtain the most basic necessities to sustain themselves is influenced largely on race, class and gender inequalities. The ability to earn a living wage in Minneapolis or Mumbai or Mozambique has a huge impact on if they can care for themselves and their families. Having access to the capital to purchase products or the ability to get to a clean water source or a community being able to hold a large company accountable that is polluting their water is as much an issue of poverty and environmental justice as how many people the local resources must be apportioned to for day to day needs.

The scarcity concept has also been employed to advance anti-immigrant sentiments and policies around the world and right here in the United States. There is a sort of greening of xenophobia where migration is being attacked as a way to hoard and maintain resources.⁸

Former Colorado governor, Dick Lamm, wrote in an editorial earlier this year that we needed to look at limiting immigration as a way to create an "ecologically sustainable society."⁹ He talked about not having enough jobs and space and overcrowding. This kind of rhetoric has come up time and again, often from policymakers who have not been terribly supportive of any other type of environmental effort, and who want to go after immigration as a way to address everything from traffic jams and smog to water scarcity and stagnant wages.

We must think about the human rights implications of any policy and also be mindful of legislators who try to project the blame of environmental challenges onto undocumented people. This is an insulting claim and one that oversimplifies much larger issues of resource consumption, economic concerns, and our broken and harmful immigration system. Further, it is worth noting that many immigrants are barred from using public health programs to access the care they would need to plan a pregnancy or decide when to add to their families. This is a simple fix that would not only help with the idea of voluntary and empowered family planning, but also ensure access to a range of important preventative care services, which improves community health and reduces overall spending by allowing people to manage chronic conditions and avoid more costly and catastrophic health complications and crises.

The fact is that family sizes are already getting smaller. The average number of children per family has gone down around the world.¹⁰ Many people have better access to healthcare, or may have improved access to education and make the decision to delay starting a family. We should continue to look at ways to build upon and improve these initiatives from a place of support and empowerment of individuals.¹¹

We must look at how we can shake up the systems around the use, abuse and consumption of resources and the impacts of current systems on the environment while also supporting immigrants and refugees and ensuring that reproductive healthcare is advanced through a rights-based lens rather than a pseudo-eugenic population control approach.

Focusing on population growth as a major cause of climate change or environmental degradation has too often resulted in blaming the world's poorest people who are the least responsible for consumption of resources.¹² It allows the countries and companies who are doing the most destruction to avoid any accountability. It is built on and, we fear, continues to fuel the idea that some people's reproduction should be interfered with, limited and controlled. And we have seen whose backs these kinds of policies fall on.

For us, talk of controlling a population sounds like deciding who gets to have a family and who gets to keep their kids. It is President Trump saying that thousands of children who were taken from

their parents will not be reunited because they are unfit.¹³ It is millions of people of color in cages due to mass incarceration who either struggle to see their children or who are outright denied their rights as parents.¹⁴ It is a medical system that does not respect or meet the needs of Black women who are dying in the United States at as much as four times the rate of white women as a result of pregnancy and postpartum complications.¹⁵

We must look at how we can shake up the systems around the use, abuse and consumption of resources and the impacts of current systems on the environment while also supporting immigrants and refugees and ensuring that reproductive healthcare is advanced through a rights-based lens rather than a pseudo-eugenic population control approach.¹⁶ Reproductive justice is a framework and way of thinking and organizing that demands complexity. We are well positioned to model how to look at the many difficult challenges we are facing globally in a more holistic way.

We recognize that there are groups who are doing very powerful work around the world who continue to use population stabilization as a central theme in their efforts. We appreciate the contribution they are making to the rights of women and girls and the health of communities across the globe and we challenge them to dig in to what it means to employ a core concept that has such a harmful history and continues to be tied to and leveraged for dangerous aims by others with less lofty goals or concern for individual rights. The vision for our work and how it will make a difference in the lives and experiences of women and families is so important, but so is the way that we do our work. COLOR will always urge and challenge our partners and the people that we work with to center the needs and the voices of those most impacted and to advance our endeavors in a way that holds true to our values.

The Colorado Organization for Latina Opportunity and Reproductive Rights (COLOR) is a sisterhood of Latinas dedicated to building a movement of Latinas, their families and allies through leadership development, organizing and advocacy to create opportunity and achieve reproductive justice.

Endnotes

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