

Population, Women's "Unmet Needs", Climate Change and the Issue of Empowerment

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the fact that while population is the mother of cross-cutting issues related to climate change and how it impacts the environment and human well-being, other contributory factors exist. The linkages between population dynamics and climate change as well as the gender-differentiated impacts of this phenomenon – climate change - are analysed. The concept of women's unmet needs in reproductive health and how empowering poor women is essential to tackling the negative impacts of climate change are also discussed.

Key words: population, climate change, reproductive health and empowerment

Introduction

Environmental debates are often framed by such extremes as the population explosion and depletion of resources'. In addition to other major societal upheavals, there have also been warnings concerning the state of earth's available resources by the end of the 20th century. In his 1968 best-selling book titled *Population Bomb*, Stanford University Professor, Paul R. Ehrlich warned of the impending negative consequences of overpopulation, chiefly mass starvation, in the 1970s and 1980s, due to overpopulation and advocated immediate action to stem population growth. Yet, the world's population keeps growing as corroborated by United Nation's announcement on 31st October, 2011 that the world's population hit 7 billion. Quite interestingly however, fertility is declining globally and it is only at the replacement level that only 18% of the very poor countries still have high fertility (table 1 below).

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Top Ten Countries Where Future Population Increase Will Occur 2010-2100

Country	Contribution as % of World Population Growth
1. Nigeria	19%
2. India	9%
3. Tanzania	6%
4. Ethiopia	6%
5. DRC	5%
6. Niger	5%
7. Uganda	4%
8. USA	4%
9. Kenya	3%
10. Zambia	3%
Total	64%

Table1. Source: Kaja Jurczynska, Blog, populationaction.org, 13 September 2013. Accessed at http://www.populationaction.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/blog_table-01.png

Despite this fact, United Nations (UN) estimates show that the world's population will grow by 3 billion or more by the end of this century and balloon from 7 billion in October 2011 to 9.3 billion in 2050 and hit 10.1 billion by 2100. Demographers have already pointed out that the new projections point to the unsolved problem of population explosion that helped define global politics in the 20th century. Indeed, the 20th century experienced advances in medical science and public sanitation and these resulted in the fall in death rates (increased life expectancy). These advances and the introduction of vaccines and other public health measures resulted in improvements in the standard of living and worldwide population explosion. Yet, the irony is that longevity is one of the positive consequences of scientific advances, coupled with moderate habits and possibly, regular exercise. At the same time, as global population increases by 7 billion, it poses a serious challenge since every billion more people puts instant pressures on the use of goods and services while demands for more resources will increase.

Overpopulation means over consumption in, for example, the scarcity of freshwater, the lack of food security, and the lack of space. Then, there is the problem associated with urbanisation as people, ideas and commodities are intensively mobilizing from peripheries to economic centres, where architectural wonders tower over skylines while slums continue to grow in their shadows. The estimate is, for example, that by 2050, more people will live in cities than the number of people living in the entire world today. Though the fact is that the earth lacks enough resources to sustain such enormous population growth, but at the same time, many factors determine population growth. These include contraceptive use. Yet, millions of women in developing countries are still unable to determine the size of their families because they lack access to contraception (Women's Environment & Development Organisation [WEDO], 22 March 2011).

These recent population projections by the UN are therefore a wake-up call for governments to fulfil the global demand for contraception. Currently, the combined problems of population, environment, development and sustainability are on the agenda of global agencies, governments, scientists, business, Non-Governmental Agencies (NGOs) and activists in a wide range of fields.

In 2005, the World Summit set out three mutually reinforcing pillars of sustainable development: economic development, sustainable development and environmental protection. Also, the 2012 Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development generated fierce debate that included *inter alia*, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) advocates. Ensuring that women have access to the family planning they want is the first step towards creating healthier lives for the world's 7 billion people and protecting our planet for those yet to come. This paper therefore focuses on the relationship between women's "unmet needs" in reproductive health and climate change. It also discusses the disproportionate burden of climate change on women and highlights how empowering women can make them become a key partner in reducing the negative effects of this phenomenon – climate change – as well as reduce excessive population growth.

Fertility and the Concept of "Unmet Needs"

Access to contraception is critical to a woman's ability to prevent unintended pregnancy and make some of the most basic decisions about her health and life. Yet, there remains the issue of the lack of access to family planning methods for many poor women. These are the "unmet needs" of women in reproductive health estimated, at more than 200 million in number. According to Reproductive Justice [RESURJ] and the Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights [YCSRR] (2014), "more than 215 million married women do not want to be pregnant but lack access to modern contraception, and many more millions who are unmarried lack this vital service." Consequently, most pregnancies are unplanned and risky (Population Action International [PAI], *BM Magazine*, Volume 339, 21, November 2009). Unlike most European Union countries, however, costs deter many women in the developing countries from using contraception. Furthermore, there is the problem of unsafe abortion, which is one of the leading causes of maternal mortality.

The statement by the Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights (WGNRR 2014) estimates that "47,000 women die each year due to unsafe abortion which

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accounts for an estimated 13% of maternal deaths worldwide. Five million women are hospitalised each year for treatment of abortion-related complications, such as haemorrhage and sepsis. Almost all abortion-related deaths occur in developing countries, with the highest number in Africa followed by Asia and Latin America.” Moreover, “the largest group of young people in history is entering their reproductive years – globally. The decisions and policies made today, and the options available to these young people, will ultimately determine whether the world’s population will climb to anywhere from 8 billion to 11 billion by 2050” (PAI, Fact Sheet 2011).

The RESURJ and the YCSRR further point out that “8.5 million women, including adolescent girls, experience complications from unsafe abortion annually; 3 million women do not receive necessary abortion care; and almost 50,000 women die due to unsafe abortion.” There have also been other international agreements that recognise SRHR as human rights and promote their inclusion as part of national, regional and international policy frameworks. Yet, despite calls for the comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services and comprehensive sexuality education needed to leading safe, healthy and enjoyable lives, these services remain inaccessible to far too many.

The WGNRR (8 February 2014) further adds that even though progress has been made towards the achievement of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) - from halving extreme poverty rates to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and providing universal primary education, all by the target date of 2015 through the implementation of International Conference on Population and Development Program of Action (ICPD PoA), this achievement has not been universal. In addition, many countries are yet to meet the targets that are set out in the original ICPD PoA. Gaps in implementation remain and for women and young people, this often translates into their inability to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights. This, therefore, diminishes their opportunities, impacts their health, and infringes on their right to a just and healthy life. Twenty years after the ICPD was held in 1994 in Cairo, Egypt where 179 governments signed the ICPD PoA, the world has witnessed no significant progress in its implementation.

For example, the MDGs - the blueprint agreed to by the global community and the world’s leading development institutions - have galvanized unprecedented efforts to meet the needs of the world’s poorest people – mostly women estimated at 70% of the world’s poor. Overall, the outcomes of the ICPD Regional Conferences in 2013, as well as the expert meetings of the ICPD: the Global Youth Forum, Human Rights Conference, and Women’s Health Conference, all highlight the progress

made and the challenges that remain to achieve the Cairo Goal of universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights of all people. Currently, the world is seriously discussing what should happen to the eight MDG. In line with what happened in Rio, the 2011 Population Footprints conference held in London also focused on achieving equitable and sustainable development.

Along with what happened in Rio, the overarching goal put forward at that conference was the need to achieve equitable and sustainable development. The all-embracing conclusions were that too high levels of consumption are having a far greater impact on the environment than overall numbers of people, with a myriad of other contributory problems. This is in contrast with the assertion that reducing population growth will solve all the problems. Instead, the conference called for many different actions on major issues such as:

a. Climate Change

Today, climate change is one of the frustrating and recurring (or worsening) issues to deal with. Others include the global financial meltdown, violent political revolutions and natural disasters. This phenomenon (climate change) is associated with regional or global temperature changes and the increased prevalence of extreme weather conditions. Natural events and human activities also contribute to an increase in this phenomenon caused primarily by increases in “greenhouse” gases. Some of the consequences of this phenomenon include melting glaciers and permafrost, elevated water levels in oceans, fatal heat waves, forest fires, prolonged droughts, water shortages, desertification, soil erosion, and erratic rainfall. Furthermore, exposures to negative environmental-related changes not only cause genetic and hormonal damage in fish and other wildlife but in humans as well. Recent “severe drought in the Horn of Africa, which has caused the death of at least 30,000 children and is affecting some 12 million people, especially in Somalia, is considered a direct consequence of weather phenomena associated with climate change and global warming” (Julio Godoy, *IPS*, 26 August 2011). Added to this process is accelerated economic development, brought about by globalisation that produces negative environmental impacts in many parts of the world such as the global reach of pollution. This is highly related to high levels of consumption that are having a far greater impact on the environment than overall numbers of people, with a myriad of other contributory factors.

b. Lifestyle and Consumption Patterns

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The negative consequences of climate change have been associated with human activities. One only needs to look at development based on the generation of extreme amounts of pollution related to lifestyle and consumption patterns. These contribute to wide disparities in per capita greenhouse gas emissions. However, both developed (industrialised) and developing countries have environmental problems but these problems tend to stem from different issues (Mooney, Knox and Schacht 2009). In this regard, three elements come to mind - consumption, poverty and population growth. Developed countries have become so dependent on fossil fuels that they account for the largest part of mineral and fossil fuel consumption. This dependence has caused a supposedly dangerous level of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere that are contributing to (accelerating) the global warming problem from too many vehicles being driven and factories pumping hazardous gases into the atmosphere - pollution. The military can also be the biggest polluters of the environment. Less developed countries' environmental problems are also largely the result of poverty, the priority of economic survival over environmental concerns and lack of proper sanitation. Some developing countries, while growing economically do not have enough to afford the luxury of using cleaner energy resources (Mooney 422-423).

While most of the world's environmental problems arise from industrialisation and economic growth, developed countries are developing techniques that ease the impact of environmental problems. These techniques include green energy such as hydrogen, biofuel, solar and wind power. Companies are getting more responsible with their efforts to go green and even consumers are becoming more responsible by drinking tap water instead of bottled water, buying fuel-efficient cars and downsizing their homes. The reality is that the effect of climate change is global and severely felt by the poor, especially in the developing countries who are more vulnerable because of their high dependence on natural resources and limited capacity to cope with climate variability and extremes (UN 2010).

East Africa and Bangladesh are clear examples of how the hardest hit is the world's poor (Masum Momaya, *AWID*, 18 September 2009), mostly women, hence, climate change has gender-differentiated impacts as the negative fallout from this phenomenon has a devastatingly lopsided impact on women compared to men (UNFPA, 2009).

Specific Gender Impacts of Climate Change

The negative effects of climate change are not gender neutral. Specific gender impacts of climate change include women's livelihoods/food insecurity (the Editor, *IPS*, 12 December 2009); famine marriage (UNICEF, 2006); (Thalif Deen, *IPS*, 9 March 2010); water insecurity (Thalif Deen, *IPS*, 9 March 2010, 18 March 2011); UN News Centre, 18 November 2009); tourism industry (Masum Momaya, *AWID*, 18 September 2009); natural disasters (Masum Momaya, *AWID*, 18 September 2009); (Amy Lieberman, *Women's eNews*, 26 January 2010); (Thalif Deen, *IPS*, 9 March 2010); PAI (April 2011); and diseases outbreaks. The relatively low status of women in many societies and their lack of economic and cultural power may help to explain why gender-related climate change issues do not enjoy the global profile that they deserve.

The 2011 publication by Heinrich Böll Foundation, the Green European Foundation and the Greens (EFA, September 2011) shows that women are a vulnerable group in climate change policies that are often silent on gender. In climate discussions, women's roles in challenging the negative effects of climate change and their needs are also often neglected.

In a situation where the growth of population is a major factor behind climate change, the debate on this phenomenon continues to focus mostly on the role of human technologies and their economic foundations rather than on critical human numbers and behaviours as well as the ways to empower women who are most negatively impacted. This is because women can also be agents of change.

Women as Agents of Change: Resilience Moving Forward

Women are often responsible for agriculture, food and water supply, as well as first education of the next generation. They are also long-time leaders on poverty eradication and sustainability, even as gender equality remains a key issue in the climate change debate. Already, the world has seen many women spearheading the efforts to solve climate change and other environmental crises as well as jumpstart the clean energy economy. For example, small-scale farmers are now in the business of managing carbon (Stanley Kwenda, *IPS*, 7 July 2010). Through *Manos de Mujer* (Women's Hands), indigenous and rural women from southern Tolima, a province located in the heart of Colombia, are simultaneously recovering the ecosystem and regaining their own dignity in a community effort that is changing

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their environment and their lives (Helda Martínez, *IPS*, 2 January 2010). Another widespread measure in tackling climate change-related problems is planting trees in accordance with the number of inhabitants of a community or city. In this regard, one stalwart comes to mind - Wangari Maathai of Kenya, the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner recognised for her environmental activism. In 1977, she founded the Green Belt Movement in Kenya to rejuvenate the environment by planting approximately tens of millions of trees.

In addition, history was made at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP15) held at the Bella Centre in Copenhagen, Denmark (7-18 December 2009) as women comprised about 30 percent of registered country delegates. This constituted the largest percentage of women attending a climate change meeting on record (Thalif Deen, *IPS*, 9 March 2010). The international community is also making efforts to allocate funds for climate-related initiatives. A good example is the Copenhagen Green Climate Fund considered as a big step forward since talks on climate change in Bali, Indonesia, in 2007, where countries committed to controlling emissions but offered no financial support mechanisms. As pointed out by Valentino Piana (economicswebinstitute.org, December 2009 - February 2010), the hope is that more funds will be allocated to gender-sensitive projects for public infrastructure such as water. She pointed out the gender CC projects in adaptation and low carbon development in Bangladesh and the Pacific as good examples of gender-sensitive projects. There is the need to link women's low-carbon initiatives with sustainable development policies. Until women are seen as active agents of change, these efforts mean nothing.

Though women are at the frontlines of climate change, they continue with the fight for their voices to be heard and their very diverse perspectives to shape effective national policies and actions recognised. In the fight against climate change, if gender-sensitive policies are not implemented it will have disastrous consequences on climate change-related gender balance. In this regard, the first step in helping them (women) deal with the challenges of climate change starts with women empowerment.

Empowering Women

Empowerment is the exact answer women need to help cope and stand up to the challenges posed by climate change. There is the need to include initiatives that support women and girls especially in rural areas, focusing on education, training on farming and livestock-raising techniques while prioritising and providing adequate information on family planning; local involvement in constructing water

wells, the provision of dependable solar energy cookers, and the ability of women to have strong voices on issues of climate change. By empowering women with a voice and knowledge, the world can help remedy the negative effects of climate change that continues to create environmental crisis.

Women organisations can also push their governments further and hold them accountable. They must be recognised and given a formal place at decision-making tables, that is, from global policy-making spheres, including at UN Women and in Rio+20 debates, to national and sub-national planning on forests and finance, where women remain incredibly marginalised. The launching of the Women and the Green Economy (WAGE) campaign at the 16th United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Cancun, Mexico (December 2010) is a step in the right direction. WAGE is aimed at promoting leadership amongst women in order to create a sustainable green economy and alleviate climate change (Aline Cunico, *IPS*, 22 April 2011).

Furthermore, women's rights stand in the future of sustainable development framework. There is the need to address the systemic issues behind the causes of climate change, that is, by touching on themes with a local context with the aim of putting political pressure on governments at the local, national, regional and international levels. Achieving this requires that women constantly organize in order to empower themselves so as to reverse the negative impacts of climate change on women. With the direct effect that climate change has on women, the lack of women's voices in the environmental debate is a missed opportunity because women have accumulated a vast wealth of knowledge about food, water management, weather patterns and their effect on the community. Empowering poor women is essential to tackling the challenges posed by climate change. Progress for women is progress for all!

Conclusion

There is the need to find ways to reduce inequities and ensure the well-being of people alive today, for the following generations. New ways of thinking and unprecedented global co-operation should also emerge. The focus starts with empowering women as decision-makers for a healthy peaceful planet, economic and social justice, and human rights for all. If women are included and empowered, the world will do a better job in addressing climate change and its consequences. Women's special vulnerabilities caused by climate change should be acknowledged. They are also managers and primary caretakers of natural

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resources, and thus have a critical role to play in ensuring a safe, sustainable, secure future for planet Earth. As the world population zeroes in on the United Nation's numerical milestone, it is important to think about the impacts of increasing population growth on women's health, educational opportunities, and their ability to provide for their families.

Some environmentalists still believe that population growth remains the biggest problem facing the world therefore; reducing fertility is all that matters. However, fertility has actually dropped so far below replacement level in a growing number of countries that the dearth of children is, perceived to be a source of serious economic and social problem, creating an opening for anti-sexual rights and human rights (anti-SRHR) forces to encourage governments to restrict the right to contraception and abortion. In China, for example, rolling back the one-child policy has scaled through. All said and done, while Ehrlich's book generated the great sustainability debate in the 1960s, current studies show that much has changed over the past 20 years, therefore, his book can be considered alarmist in tone. Overall, climate change is a problem of human numbers, lifestyle and consumption; therefore, the problem is about population control and the wise distribution of natural resources. Women can, therefore, be agents of change in this regards.

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