

Real Climate Solutions Must Include Human Rights

The authors of “The Conceivable Future” argue that we should focus less on whether or not to have babies and more on stopping the extraction and burning of fossil fuels.

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The authors of “The Conceivable Future” argue that we should focus less on whether or not to have babies and more on stopping the extraction and burning of fossil fuels.

There are so many ways that the climate crisis is making it riskier, more toxic, and less equitable for people planning families. It's surprising, then, that these findings haven't been at the heart of the climate-and-babies conversation. But even more surprising is how thoroughly the public conversation is devoted to the false climate driver, and the false climate solution, of population.

In 2014 when we started [Conceivable Future](#), on the rare occasions that climate and reproduction were discussed together, they were always framed the wrong way around: focusing on childbearing's impact on the climate. As we began talking with people about their reproductive lives in a changing climate, we found that populationist rhetoric was a major obstacle to *just having this conversation*. In early media coverage we were often wrongly assumed to be populationists. The deeply ingrained population myth has been pervasive in the Global North for so long that it is now largely understood as common sense.

Those of us in the United States are living in a dangerous confusion of policies that both push and pull at all our rights to reproductive self-determination. The narrative is not as simple as “have more babies” or “have fewer babies.” Rather, it is: “Your body is not your own.” Today more than ever, beware of population “solutions,” which are at best ineffective, instrumentalizing, and freighted by white supremacy and classism. Whatever problem it names, the population “solution” punches down, enabling powerful players to evade responsibility while continuing to harm.

As we have learned from justice movements—and faith traditions—the path is the goal. The values we hold dear, of self and community sovereignty, anti-fascism, and human rights, are what we enact to find our way to the world we want to live in. There are no shortcuts through gray areas.

Someone Else’s Babies

Look in the Conceivable Future inbox and you'll see a folder that Josephine, in a moment of inspiration, labeled "barf." In it you'll find some of the worst emails we've gotten over the years; trolls and bullies, mostly. But one notable genre of unsolicited communication is a kind of amateur policy paper from aspiring authoritarians about how to control the global population. The authors tend to be from the United States, Canada, or Western Europe, mostly (but not exclusively) men, and although they don't always share their demographic information, they tend to be white and of retirement age. Their 10-point plans will propose some combination of carrot-and-stick strategies for reducing births, and they typically want us to elevate their plan. Maybe we could send it on to the UN, or share it through our socials?

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Some other features these strange missives have in common: The authors think they've arrived at an ignored—or unjustly repressed—solution; they think it's the silver bullet; they think we are an anti-natalist group and therefore simpatico to their program; they're touting the *affordability* of this vs. other more popular climate initiatives.

We put these and other letters in the barf box for a few reasons. First, because these individuals fundamentally misunderstand what we're trying to accomplish, but we save them because they tell us about what we're dealing with. Second, as should be clear by now, we find these letters deeply disturbing. And third, we have to make some horrors into a joke or we'd never get out of our beds, let alone open the inbox.

We will never achieve a more just world by curtailing people's reproduction. We don't get there by control, coercion, or force. The future we are struggling for stands on a foundation of human rights, in which we share and defend full self-sovereignty.

The argument for population control is based on three interwoven and equally toxic assumptions: first, that rapid population growth is the cause of “underdevelopment” in the Global South; second, that policy should persuade (or if necessary, force) people to have fewer children rather than improving the conditions in which they live, and; third, that some combination of finance, managerial, technological, and Western intervention techniques can “deliver” birth control to the Global South in a top-down fashion *in the absence of comprehensive health care*. In the priority promotion of contraceptives, the premise is clearly that pregnancy prevention matters most.

These strange bedfellows combined to give the birth control movement its unique character: It carried within it the seeds of birth control as a liberating force, as well as a means of coercive population control.”

These days population-focused international aid work isn't synonymous with human rights violations. The ongoing problem is

in the priorities. Jade Sasser, a professor in the Department of Gender and Sexuality at the University of California, Riverside, learned this firsthand as a Peace Corps volunteer in Madagascar, and later as an NGO worker focused on family planning. “It’s not like I am suggesting that these institutions are sending people into poor countries to coercively round people up and sterilize them or anything like that,” she says. “It’s a narrative. But that narrative makes it possible to fund particular kinds of work. And where that work is problematic is, for example, in places where, let’s say, girls and women have all sorts of reproductive challenges and health issues and health concerns. But when they go to the clinic, the only kind of reproductive services they can access are family planning services and maybe STI prevention.”

Population scholar and author Betsy Hartmann describes how contradictory political views have converged on this singular issue: “The early Neo-Malthusians supported birth control as a means of improving the condition of the poor by limiting population growth; feminists and socialists believed it was a

fundamental woman's right; eugenicists embraced it as a way of influencing genetic quality. These strange bedfellows combined to give the birth control movement its unique character: It carried within it the seeds of birth control as a liberating force, as well as a means of coercive population control.”

Unwelcome Interventions

Although this thinking developed as part of an international development agenda, countries have engaged this ideology domestically, plenty. In the United States alone, the government, as well as NGOs, have repressed the reproductive rights of Indigenous women and women of color by implicit and explicit policies for hundreds of years, from the foundational policies of genocide, slavery, and abuse to the present day. Between 1909 and 1979 approximately 20,000 people were forcibly sterilized in California, a practice that continues to this day in Canada and elsewhere. In the United States, the idea of the IUD as a “cure” for poverty has a disturbing hold on public discourse, and as

recently as 2017, judges have shaved off sentence time for people who agree to undergo sterilization procedures. Black women are still disproportionately targeted for violent reproductive interventions, including abortion, sterilization, and contraception.

When powerful people make moves to determine who is ‘fit’ to be bearing and raising children, these determinations target marginalized people.”

These practices are rooted in a lethal trifecta of sexism, racism, and classism. Cultural attitudes about population amplify beliefs about who is a “fit” mother. And the concept of “fitness,” in turn, derives from ideas about who is or is not a valuable human being or (in the eugenicist tradition) what are “valuable” traits and genes. Around the world we find legacies of reproductive violence and oppression.

The Magdalene Laundries of Ireland are one notorious example. The Laundries were part of an interlocking system of orphanages, industrial schools, “mother and baby homes” for unwed mothers, and church-run institutions in which thousands of Irish citizens were once confined. Roman Catholic orders of nuns ran the (for-profit) laundries, and women and girls were made to work there, nominally as a form of penance for their sins. The laundries were filled not only with “fallen women”—prostitutes, women who became pregnant without being married or as a result of sexual abuse—but also those who simply failed to conform to the expectations of their society. Children born to women in the laundries had their names changed and were adopted out without their mothers’ consent.

As another example: During the early years of the Salvadoran Civil War, which lasted from 1979 to 1992, the military, which had led a coup, took thousands of children from their (anti-coup) families. The children’s identities were changed and they were sent abroad for adoption, primarily to the United States and Europe. In other

words, El Salvador also “disappeared” children of people who were identified as insurgents, *as a way of controlling adults*. These operations were carried out by lawyers with military contacts and foreign adoption centers that watchdogs have since flagged as part of the international human trafficking black market.

As recently as May 2017, a Tennessee judge issued a standing order allowing inmates to receive 30 days’ jail credit in exchange for undergoing a voluntary—for the dubious value of voluntarism while incarcerated—sterilization procedure. The message here was unmistakable: that people who wind up in prison should be bribed to rescind their human right to have children.

As all three of these examples show, when powerful people make moves to determine who is “fit” to be bearing and raising children, these determinations target marginalized people, and women specifically, marginalized communities more broadly, and often reward families from the dominant group, *sometimes even*

with the children of those marginalized groups. Even when those biases are not an explicit policy, wealthy people are more apt to be considered fit parents. These practices have been a weapon used by the powerful to control the less powerful. This is the history of population movements—a history we must learn, and whose wounds are still open.

Populationism and Climate

This kind of paternalistic repression is having a renaissance in the context of the climate crisis. Our movement's recent history shows us that when our societal focus shifts to policing the behavior of private citizens, we can be handily distracted from the crimes being committed right over our heads. Confronted with an urgent need for change, whom do we pressure for that change: those with the most or the least power? One of those projects is certainly *easier* than the other.

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people—mostly women, and often poor women—for reproducing.”

And since its early days, the mainstream environmental movement has recruited these strategies in service of “conservation” goals. For instance, the best-selling book *The Population Bomb*, written by Paul and Anne Ehrlich and published in 1968 at the suggestion of then-director of the Sierra Club David Brewer, predicted worldwide famine in the 1970s and 1980s due to overpopulation. It also prophesied other major upheavals and advocated immediate action to limit population growth (suggestions in the book included the idea of adding birth control to the food or water supplies). The Sierra Club—one of the best-known environmental organizations then, and now—actually sponsored publication of the book, and during the 1980s some members (including Anne Ehrlich) steered the group into the field of U.S. immigration, arguing that overpopulation was a significant factor in environmental degradation and advocating halting and reducing U.S. and world populations. In 1988, the organization’s

Population Committee and Conservation Coordinating Committee argued publicly that immigration to the United States should be limited so as to achieve population stabilization.

When population control and border control efforts converge, it's easy to see that both programs are built to uphold the inequality of the status quo. And even when the tactics are not explicitly violent, the paternalistic disregard for people's rights is plainly evident. Overpopulation is an ideology; it diverts criticisms of capitalist consumption and unequal distribution by blaming devalued people—mostly women, and often poor women—for reproducing. It serves to justify a system (capitalism) that creates needs among many while satisfying them only for the very few.

Turns out that human rights abuses aren't the key to decarbonization, after all.”

The most notorious and widespread campaign to control population size was China's One Child policy, which began in

1979 and continued for more than three decades. In some environmental corners this policy is even quietly admired; by the Chinese government's projections, its population would have been 1.8 billion without it, instead of today's 1.435 billion. Some scholars dispute this claim, arguing that "as much as three-quarters of the decline in fertility since 1970 occurred before the launching of the one-child policy" and that "most of the further decline in fertility since 1980 can be attributed to economic development, not coercive enforcement of birth limits." Aside from the policy's matter-of-fact disregard for citizens' human rights, it also caused major societal problems, including the proliferation of sex-selective abortions and the resulting scarcity of adult women, and the emotional scars that people continue to carry after forced abortions, sterilizations, and massive fines and jail sentences for violating the law.

And while this was happening, China's emissions rose to surpass those of the United States. Turns out that human rights abuses aren't the key to decarbonization, after all.

To its credit, the Sierra Club has reversed many of its organizational positions on population and done so quite publicly (although there are still groups within the Sierra Club advocating for a return to a population orientation, and the controversy resurfaced when three anti-immigration proponents ran in the 2004 Sierra Club Board of Directors election). But these harmful ideas about population are still firmly lodged in the public consciousness; ideas that logically manifest in racist, xenophobic, and violent ways. The men who perpetrated mass shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand, and El Paso, Texas, cited “overpopulation” as a reason they targeted immigrants, many of whom are fleeing the devastating effects of climate change in their home countries. It is a short step from viewing “overpopulation” as a problem to any number of violent “solutions.”

The Struggle of Parenting in the U.S.

One of the most painful ironies of these ambitions to control women's reproduction is that they're functionally unnecessary when the U.S. government offers so little support to women when they *actually become* mothers. In other words, what all of the emails in the barf box overlook is that the United States is already perfecting anti-natalist policies in all but name. As we explored in more detail in the last chapter, the United States is the least welcoming place out of all the wealthy countries for new parents. Asthma and other diseases are on the rise from deregulated air pollution, fracking chemicals, and other industry contaminants. Health care costs are staggering. An uncomplicated hospital birth costs \$32,093 on average. Maternal mortality is higher in the States than it is among peer countries, criminally so for women of color. Food deserts abound in our cities; public schools are shuttering or starving for funds; daycare costs more than college in many places, never mind the costs of college itself.

Even bracketing the climate crisis, anyone considering a family in this place, at this point in time, is already assuming a burden of medical and financial risk. And each of these factors that weigh against people's reproductive lives are doubly weighted against people of color.

As Sasser found when she interviewed American women aged 20 to 40 about their feelings toward climate and reproduction, her subjects' emotional experiences were strongly conditioned by race. She spoke with women from across the racial spectrum, and she found a high concordance among all participants' concerns. But for women of color, "the concerns about climate change, the concerns about mental health issues were heavily compounded by experiences of racism and perceptions, and experiences of racial vulnerability. Meaning: The women of color interviewed strongly perceived that their children would already be saddled by issues of inequality just for existing as Black or Brown, or Indigenous. So that they would have to fight to ensure that they had quality education in school. That their children would at

some point potentially have to face the criminal justice system or deal with police, police brutality, police violence, or just being treated differently by police. They knew that their children at some point would have to deal with some kind of racial discrimination that would be very hurtful to them.”

Young people in the United States don't need any more disincentives to have families—we already live in a country that is outright hostile to parents and children.”

As we mentioned before, most of the population-control epistles in our barf box have come from older white men who usually have a child or two, maybe grandchildren of their own. They tend toward the egalitarian edge of a broader trend because they include white, middle-class American women in the population they intend to control. But the trend is this: They find it easier to imagine reshaping young people's reproductive lives than to even imagine reshaping parts of the economy. They have had children, but they are here to tell us that *we* shouldn't, for our own good;

they made no sacrifice themselves, but they are writing to demand it of their young, while blithely ignoring the toxicity, injustice, and lack of support that already inhibits American reproductive freedoms.

In other words, young people in the United States don't need any more disincentives to have families—we already live in a country that is outright hostile to parents and children. And indeed, the U.S. birthrate hit a 32-year low in 2018, with Millennials reporting that they are having 1.5 fewer children than they'd like to have, on average. And the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated what was already there; birth rates plummeted in wealthy countries, including in the United States.

This shows us two things: First, many climate-minded people badly need to learn about the reproductive realities in this country. And second, that even people with a wrongheaded but sincere concern about climate change (the writers of these proposals, for instance) seem to think it's easier to tell a whole

generation what to do with our bodies than to put the fossil fuel industry on notice.

A Flawed Climate “Fix”

Present-day population advocates are eager to put distance between the “dark past” and present day “empowerment”-focused family planning programs. And indeed, voluntary access to birth control is a marked improvement from crimes of coercion and violence. But even in its most empowering form there are, to us, three major and connected flaws in the arguments for smaller populations as a “climate fix.”

The first is that these arguments provide cover for eugenicist dogma, whether we consciously espouse it or not. *Women in India are having too many babies. New Hampshire trailer trash doesn't know how to use birth control.* These accusations—real-life examples both—are both racist and classist; how many times have you heard a middle-class white woman accused of having “too many babies”? In fact, in the early days of Conceivable

Future organizing, we—two white women—were frequently told by white observers, “but you’re the people who *should* be having children.” (This was a particular irony because Meghan was not always a middle-class person and is from a relatively large family herself. She moved from being told she *shouldn’t* have babies to being told that she *should*, as she moved into the middle class.)

We encountered another manifestation of this bias when at several house parties we met white middle-class women, confident they never wanted to become pregnant, who couldn’t find a doctor that would perform a voluntary sterilization on them. The difficulties some women face in getting a sterilization procedure as a form of contraception are longstanding and well-documented. In this country’s context of involuntary sterilizations for BIPOC women and incarcerated people, the irony is ghoulish. It’s important to note that “overpopulation” is a term used overwhelmingly to describe the demographics of poor areas and/or nations. In punditry about rich countries, we’re much more

likely to hear about “underpopulation” and its purported negative effects on the capitalist economy.

The argument’s second flaw is that it offers convenient scapegoats for systemic overconsumption in the rich parts of the world. *Population relates to climate harm only to the degree that populations exploit resources and emit carbon.* No one has emitted more than Americans. It’s not the number of people alone; arguments about “optimum population” (such as those that Ehrlich is still making) ignore or minimize the systemic nature of resource consumption. Waste is a feature, not a bug in our industrialized systems: look to planned obsolescence, low-gas-mileage vehicles, and the excesses of conventional agriculture. A recent study claimed that every other bite of food in the United States is waste. Nothing about being a human requires this, nor does it correlate with happiness or a high quality of life.

We need policies that balance a global standard for quality of life with rapid decarbonization and with a progressive focus on dematerialization for the West. No valid policy involves repressing human rights or outsourcing responsibility.”

To bring this home we’ve often said that if everyone on earth consumed the way the American upper and middle classes consume, we would need an additional 4.5 to 6 Earths’ worth of resources to sustain ourselves—a fact absent from much populationist rhetoric. But in early 2023 a study published in *Ecological Economics* broke the population argument down even more finely along consumption inequality lines. We asked the authors of this study to help us put it in plain terms, and Jared Starr obliged in an email:

“The Global Footprint Network estimates that if everyone consumed like the average American we would need 5.1 Earths (in 2018—the latest year I found data for). Carbon emissions alone account for 3.65 Earths. We find that average top 0.1% U.S.

households have emissions 23x higher (954 tons) than the U.S. average. Multiplying how many Earths are needed for average Americans' carbon emissions (3.65) times 23 I estimate that *if everyone on the planet emitted carbon like an average top 0.1% U.S. household we would need 84 planet Earths.*"

The data gets richer. Starr pointed us to a study about carbon emissions from 20 billionaires, which found that average emissions of those people were 194 times higher than an average American household. Using these numbers, Starr told us, "If everyone on the planet emitted carbon like a billionaire, we would need something like 700 planet Earths."

These numbers certainly put a fine point on where the culpability for carbon emissions lies. (Spoiler: It *isn't* on the shoulders of women seeking affordable health care from international aid organizations.)

So let us be perfectly clear: We need policies that balance a global standard for quality of life with rapid decarbonization and with a progressive focus on dematerialization for the West. No valid policy involves repressing human rights or outsourcing responsibility.

The other big problem with the population climate “fix” is that it instrumentalizes women’s bodies and our health care, especially in the Global South. In other words, this perspective assumes that women should be able to access health care, contraception, and education *because* those things support the goals of decarbonization. And it’s worse than that: The real point is that if the goal of family planning services is to reduce population growth—rather than to support the freedom of people to determine the number and spacing of their own children—women can expect inferior care. Earlier Sasser described how the narrow overfocus on contraception she witnessed as a Peace Corps volunteer in Madagascar was not serving the sexual and reproductive health of the people she intended to help.

Why would your environmental agenda be the agenda that organizes and determines the population reproductive health and family planning agenda?”

When she returned to Madagascar years later on a research trip for her dissertation, she had conversations with friends working in USAID, who were overseeing the funding of clinics throughout the entire country, that illuminated the central conflict of interest. She asked her friends how USAID was serving reproductive health clinics that might be helpful to the community she served: “What are you doing that I could maybe bring back to this town that I had lived in to better help girls avoid pregnancy?’ And I discovered that there was a strategic plan as to where these services would be prioritized, the reproductive health services that were funded by USAID. And it was all around national parks and conservation sites.”

The implicit priority here was to keep population numbers low to preserve pristine landscapes and rare animals, and, presumably,

the revenue that these places generate as tourist destinations. In this view, more pregnancies would lead to more demand for land, water, firewood, and so forth, and perhaps eventually more poachers. Sasser continues, “I was like, *What is going on here?!?* There are not more girls getting pregnant near parks and conservation sites. Why would your environmental agenda be the agenda that organizes and determines the population reproductive health and family planning agenda? Honestly, if there is one moment that I can point to where a light switch flipped on for me, that was it.”

And this was not an isolated situation of conservation policy determining the kind of care women received. In 2019, Sasser and a colleague co-published an article “about the services that are offered to people in health clinics [and] reproductive clinics in Madagascar, in areas that are near marine conservation sites.” Her colleague who did the fieldwork discovered “over, and over again that even when women came into clinics for other concerns, with other needs, wanting other services, they were

consistently steered toward contraceptives.” That is: First, these clinics essentially defined “women’s health” as their capacity to get pregnant, and second, they used birth control for their own conservation goals, rather than any health goals belonging to the women themselves.

Educating Boys and Detoxifying Masculinity

In the popular climate solutions handbook *Drawdown*, “Educating Girls” and “Family Planning” are ranked as #6 and #7, valued at a combined 51.48 gigaton reduction of CO₂. The author clarifies that “when family planning focuses on health care provision and meeting women’s expressed needs, empowerment, equality, and well-being are the result; the benefits to the planet are side effects.” Even so, those side effects are the whole point of the book. Access to education and family planning are human rights, and they are rights that women deserve because we are human beings. By treating access to those rights as a means to carbon reduction—or habitat protection—rather than an end unto itself,

climate groups continue to behave toward women as though we are second-class citizens, or simply valves to be turned.

In fact, a recent study shows that conformity to masculine stereotypes correlates with environmentally harmful behaviors. “Caring about the environment” is widely seen as a feminine set of behaviors, so a person concerned with appearing masculine is measurably less likely to recycle, value fuel efficiency when purchasing a car, and so on. And it’s not just men upholding a bizarrely fossil-fueled masculine ideal: Georgia Representative Marjorie Taylor-Green claimed that “Democrats like Pete Buttigieg want to emasculate the way we drive and force all of you to rely on electric vehicles.”

We are eager for the debut of the Drawdown program’s “Educating Boys and Detoxifying Masculinity” targets.

The current discourse of women’s-health-qua-climate-solution fits neatly within a long-standing patriarchal tendency to view

women as simply “reproductive bodies with hysterical tendencies” and to treat us accordingly.”

This kind of discourse—the “let’s support women’s health care only as a means to carbon-reduction” discourse—exists in the context of a culture that’s generally only interested in women’s health insofar as it serves some other purpose. The medical establishment has a well-documented male bias and a tragically consistent history of ignoring women’s health care needs. Dr. Kate Young, a public health researcher at Monash University in Australia, has found that women are often viewed by their doctors as “reproductive bodies with hysterical tendencies”—an orientation from which flow any number of distorted outcomes. Medical experts routinely dismiss women’s health care complaints as invented or psychological, making comments like “There’s a lot of psychology, just as much as there is pathology [in gynecology].” One doctor claimed that he’d never met a fibromyalgia patient who wasn’t “batshit crazy.”

And these experiences—while present for many women all over the world—are especially present for Black women in the United States. In a now well-known story, tennis superstar Serena Williams had to bring the full force of her stardom to bear before her postpartum blood clot was taken seriously by medical staff. “When you are a Black woman, having a body is already complicated for workplace politics,” writes Tressie McMillan Cottom in *Time* magazine. “Having a bleeding, distended body is especially egregious.” The medical establishment filters Black women through assumptions of incompetence. “When the medical profession systematically denies the existence of Black women’s pain, underdiagnoses our pain, refuses to alleviate or treat our pain, health care marks us as incompetent bureaucratic subjects. Then it serves us accordingly,” she concludes.

The point here is that alternately ignoring and instrumentalizing female bodies is a long tradition that is shaped and torqued by race, class, and geography. The current discourse of women’s-health-climate-solution fits neatly within a long-standing

patriarchal tendency to view women as simply “reproductive bodies with hysterical tendencies” and to treat us accordingly. That is: Women, and our experience of our health, are routinely dismissed and ignored, *except* when someone gets the idea that managing our fertility in some way would be good—and let’s be clear, *cost effective*—for some other social agenda. Other such agendas have included: populating the Fatherland, producing more people to enslave, and preventing the reproduction of those deemed less worthy.

At this moment in time, the desired outcome is cheap and “easy” carbon reduction.

Here is the bedrock belief from which we challenge these views: Women are human beings, and we deserve health care, which includes full-spectrum reproductive care, *because* we are human beings. Not because many of us have uteruses, or because those uteruses could be requisitioned to produce more—or fewer—people.

This excerpt from The Conceivable Future: Planning Families and Taking Action in the Age of Climate Change by Meghan Elizabeth Kallman and Josephine Ferorelli (Rowman & Littlefield, 2024) appears by permission of the publisher.



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