

**Sustainability and Population Growth in the Context of Globalization:
A Postcolonial Feminist Social Work Perspective**

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Feminist social work, including both women's activism and feminist analysis, has been practiced since the beginning of the profession in the 19th century, informed by the historical trajectories of feminism in the United States (Kemp & Brandwein, 2010). Feminist social work has contributed to significant political, cultural and economic successes for women; however, mirroring the history of U.S. feminism, the history of feminist social work also contains painful exclusions of women of color and poor and working class women, and a lack of attention to the global context (Kemp & Brandwein, 2010).

These exclusions are the result of a lack of critical analysis of the multiple dimensions of identity and power in women's lives. *Afflia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, the only social work journal devoted to examining feminist social work, published a special issue on critical feminisms to which they had defined as a vital concern for the profession. In the guest editorial, Gringeri & Roche (2010) charge that feminist social work research, practice and education focuses on "women's issues" without a critical analysis of the impact of structural issues and forces as they inform people's lives. Other scholars call for "feminist frameworks that are capable of sustaining a dynamic commitment to solidarity and shared action in concert with deeply attentive recognition of difference" (Kemp & Brandwein, 2010, p. 358). A postcolonial feminist social work perspective is offered in this article as a perspective that can fill this gap in feminist social work. Postcolonial feminist theory is just beginning to be recognized in the field of social work as a crucial tool for feminist theorizing and action (Deepak, 2011; Gray & Boddy,

2010). This lag in recognition of the theory within social work may be due to the profession's focus on professional status and private practice (Gringeri & Roche, 2010) and, in social work practiced in the West, a preference for micro-practice frameworks, rather than the macro-level models used in developing countries (Elliott & Mayadas, 1996; Midgley, 1995). These issues interfere with the adoption of theories that incorporate a global and historical perspective.

Postcolonial feminist theory is grounded in two of social work core values, self-determination and social justice, and is used in this article to analyze the problems of population growth and environmental sustainability within the context of globalization.

This new theoretical perspective offers attention to the historical complexity of gendered and racialized power relations within and between systems, honors the agency of all women and reflects core values of social work, social justice and self-determination. This perspective can shape policies that ethically promote both reproductive justice and environmental sustainability.

Postcolonial feminist theory emphasizes the agency of third world women who have been characterized in discourses of colonialism and development as passive victims of timeless, oppressive religious and cultural traditions in need of being rescued (Chatterjee, 1993; Mohanty, 1991; Spivak, 1995). Postcolonial feminist theory challenges these discourses as well as those of nationalism that characterize women as willing participants in oppressive patriarchal practices (Spivak, 1995). In essence:

This theoretical position affirms women's agency while recognizing women's oppression in multiple sites, through colonialism, nationalism, fundamentalism, patriarchies and global economic structures. Agency is recognized as partial and limited by a variety of historical and structural constraints. From this theoretical perspective, Western women's

agency is also partial and limited, although from a different set of historical and structural constraints depending on their location in the West. (Deepak, 2011, p. 7)

A postcolonial feminist social work perspective incorporates the idea of historicizing and contextualizing power relations, as well as two core values of social work embedded in the history, mission and ethical standards of social work, self-determination and social justice (NASW, 2008). It facilitates an understanding that population growth and sustainability are not simply about population control or reproductive rights, but about the safe and sustainable physical and social environments in which women can have and raise healthy children if they choose to.

Women of color in the US involved in the reproductive justice movement articulate a postcolonial feminist social work perspective. The term, reproductive justice, was first conceptualized by a Black women's caucus, who had participated in the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo. The term has been embraced by women of color in the US who are organizing to achieve the goal of reproductive rights within the context of social justice (Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, 2005). Di Chiro (2008) summarizes the key ideas of the reproductive justice movement:

Woman's reproductive rights and freedom of choice requires attention to and the realization of many other social, economic, civic and environmental goals, including good jobs and economic security, freedom from domestic violence, sexual coercion, and forced sterilization, affordable healthcare, educational opportunities for women and good schools for children, decent housing and transportation, and a clean, healthy environment. (p. 284)

Reproductive justice incorporates reproductive rights within the contexts of global, national and local justice and environmental sustainability and captures a postcolonial feminist social work perspective.

A postcolonial feminist social work perspective is crucial in facilitating an analysis of current and historical discourse and policy approaches to population growth and environmental sustainability leading towards re-envisioning policies and practices that address reproductive justice and sustainability.

World Population Growth

In May 2011, the UN revised its previous projection of world population stabilization at 9 billion by 2050, to a new projection of 10.1 billion in 2100, with continued growth (UN, 2011). This recent change in projected world population increase is attributed to falling rates of infant and child mortality, a declining death rate from AIDS, a demographic momentum caused by earlier high fertility rates, and fertility patterns in South Central South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Due to these combined factors, even if the fertility of every country reached replacement level in 2010-2015, the world population would continue to climb, reaching 9.1 billion in 2050 and 9.9 billion in 2100 (UN, 2011).

Global population growth has historically been identified as a barrier to environmental sustainability and a primary cause of poverty, resource scarcity, social unrest, migration, illiteracy, and impending environmental disaster (Aguirre & Hadley, 2005; Campbell, 2007; Redding, 2007). It is argued that environmental sustainability is compromised by world population growth, which burdens finite natural resources, and inevitably leads to a significant

increase of greenhouse gas emissions thus contributing to climate change and global warming (Bryant, Carver, Butler & Anage, 2009).

Policy solutions to this identified problem have been aimed at poor women and women of color in the Global North and South to reduce the number of children women give birth to (Nair, Sexton & Kirbat, 2006). Some of these solutions include population control via sterilization, public campaigns to promote smaller families, national target population goals, aid incentives tied to population targets, financial incentives to have fewer children, and access to contraceptives and family planning services (Connelly, 2008).

The 1994 UN International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo marked a major shift in discourses about population and development, from a focus on population control to a focus on women's reproductive rights and health in the context of population stabilization. The result of the conference was the Programme of Action, the "first and most comprehensive international policy document to promote the concepts of reproductive rights and reproductive health" (Nair et al., 2006, p. 171). The major recommendation of the document was "that population programs should provide comprehensive reproductive health services that were integrated and coordinated with each other and with other health services" (p. 172). It rejected the idea of population control and the use of targets or incentives in family planning services and called for the provision of reproductive health services within the context of primary medical care (Sexton & Nair, 2010). The plan provided a 20-year blueprint for action that required actions from both rich and poor countries (UNFPAa, 2009).

Fifteen years after the Programme of Action, some gains have been made and others have

not yet been realized (UNFPAa, 2009). The gains include a decrease of the average number of children born per woman in every major region since 1990 and a decrease in infant mortality in every region in the past 15 years. The use of modern contraceptives has increased from 47% of women of reproductive age in 1990, to 56% in 2007, but the rate varies widely by region, and wealthier women within low-income countries have much higher rates of modern contraceptive usage (UNFPAa, 2009).

The gains that have not been realized since the Programme of Action are related to maternal and infant mortality and an unmet need for contraception. A reduction in maternal mortality in poor countries has not been achieved; women are almost as likely to die as a result of pregnancy or childbirth in 2009 as they were in 1990. Wealthier women within low-income countries are much more likely to have a lower infant and maternal mortality rate than poor women due to their access to skilled medical care at childbirth, one of the factors that can prevent maternal and child and infant mortality. Other factors that can prevent maternal, infant, and child mortality include access to clean water, proper sanitation, childhood immunizations, adequate nutrition and spacing births by two or more years. Unsafe abortion is another cause of maternal mortality; 13 per cent of maternal deaths are due to unsafe abortion, but in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, unsafe abortion is responsible for 30 to 40 per cent of maternal deaths (UNFPA, 2009a, p. 2). Finally, there is still an enormous unmet need for contraception: more than 200 million women globally want to either delay their next pregnancy by at least two years or stop having children, but are not using a modern method of contraception (UNFPAa, 2009, p. 9).

The 2009 report concludes with listing what is needed to meet the goals of Cairo; 1) a commitment to ensuring public health as a priority for national political leaders, 2) making

health services for women and children easily accessible for all, 3) skilled and motivated health workers at the right place at the right time, 4) universal education, 5) accountability for results with robust monitoring and evaluation, 6) adequate financing and effective delivery, 7) streamlined and harmonized aid operations (UNFPAa, 2009).

The Context: Globalization

In order to fully examine the intersections between population and environmental sustainability it is necessary to place the discussion within the context of globalization. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) defines globalization as “the process by which all people and communities around the world come to experience an increasingly common economic, social and cultural environment” (IFSW, 2005). Although there are many positive consequences associated with the process of globalization, it also results in “a negative impact on the balance of economic, political and cultural power between individuals and communities” (IFSW, 2005).

The negative impact on the balance of power between individuals and communities can be attributed to the global economic environment. From 1945—1970’s, the dominant paradigm for understanding the determination of economic activity was Keynesianism. This economic theory of capitalism encompasses the idea that some government interventions in the market and economy, including social protections such as social security and unemployment insurance, are necessary in order to promote and maintain social stability, order, peace and prosperity (IFSW, 2005; Palley, 2005).

From the 1980’s to the present, a different economic theory of capitalism was embraced called neoliberalism. This theory asserts the value of the free market with no governmental

intervention (IFSW, 2005; Palley, 2005). Proponents believe “that private enterprise and individual initiative are the keys to the creation of wealth, the elimination of poverty, and the improvement in human welfare” (Finn et al., 2010, p. 247). Neoliberal policies include free trade, privatization of public enterprises including natural resources such as water, deregulation, cuts to social programs, and the weakening of unions (Kreitzer & Wilson, 2010).

Proponents acknowledge that neoliberal policies cause painful dislocations and disadvantages to some populations, but argue that this pain is a temporary necessity on the pathway to economic growth that will benefit all segments of society (Wilson, 2004). Opponents argue that the evidence is mounting that increased economic and social inequality within and between countries is not temporary, but a permanent consequence of neoliberal policies (IFSW, 2005).

Neoliberal policies are created and enforced by international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) the World Bank, and World Trade Organization (WTO) (Stiglitz, 2002). For example, the IMF and World Bank give loans to, and create debt repayment programs for, developing countries based upon their agreement to structural adjustment policies (SAPs). SAPs require strict adherence to the principles of neoliberalism through requirements that include economic liberalization, privatization, and cutting public expenditures on social services, such as education and healthcare (Abouharb & Cingranelli, 2007).

The goals of reproductive justice and environmental sustainability are compromised by these neoliberal economic policies, which produce negative affects in developed and developing countries, most negatively impacting the poor. These adverse affects include “loss of jobs, low-paid work that is insufficient to provide a decent standard of living, health hazards, rising food

and energy prices, environmental degradation, armed conflict, and resource depletion”

(Dominelli, 2010, p.60).

Applying a Postcolonial Feminist Social Work Perspective

Population Policies: History, Power, Race and Gender

A postcolonial feminist social work perspective is crucial in examining the history of U.S. and international policies created to address population growth. Historically and currently, policies and initiatives that have population stabilization as the goal are not targeted at white, first world women. There is an unspoken understanding in this discourse that white first world women will not be asked or expected to have fewer children. Instead, this population is targeted for assisted reproductive technology to create more children, and national policies in many European countries encourage women to have more children through financial incentives or time off work (Grant, Hoorens, Sivadasan, van het Loo, DaVanzo, Hale, Gibson, & Butz, 2004).

Third world women and women of color in developing countries have been the targets of population control policies are racialized and gendered, and deny their agency. Policies are gendered because population stabilization or control is aimed at women rather than men; women are the recipients of contraceptives or sterilization while men are not usually the targets of these interventions.

In the U.S., the policy of forced sterilization, through manipulation and deceit, was targeted towards women across racial/ethnic groups: African-Americans, American Indians, Puerto Ricans, Mexican-American, Japanese-Americans, poor, disabled and mentally ill of all racial backgrounds (Western States Center, n.d.). For example, due to a campaign by the Puerto

Rican government and private agencies, one-third of Puerto Rican women of childbearing age were sterilized by 1968, the results of a population control campaign. A similar campaign resulted in the sterilization of 25 percent of Indian women living on reservations in the 1970's (Chamberlain & Hardisty, 2000; Roberts, 1997).

Contraceptives have been abused in similar ways. Poor women of color of the global North and South have been persuaded and/or offered incentives to use inadequately researched and unsafe contraceptives such as long-acting hormonal injectables and sub-dermal implants (Gupta, 1991; Volscho, 2010). In countries as diverse as Bangladesh, Brazil, India, Peru, and Thailand reports show that women given these contraceptives are rarely informed that they are participating in a clinical trial or informed that the contraceptives can cause serious short-term and long-term adverse effects on health (Nair, 1989, cited in Gupta, 1991).

Population Growth and the Environment in the Context of Globalization

A postcolonial feminist social work perspective enables a historical, gendered and racialized analysis of global inequality in re-thinking the intersections between population and the environment in the context of globalization. Neoliberal economic policies that countries must agree to in order to participate in the global economy are overlaid on pre-existing global inequalities created by colonization (Gonzalez, 2004) and on pre-existing inequalities within countries of gender, class, religion, caste and ethnicity (Deepak, 2011).

The debt repayments that developing countries struggle to make can be traced, in part, to the legacies of colonialism. After independence, newly emerging countries turned to the IMF and World Bank for loans to build their infrastructure, economies and

military (Polack, 2004). When the U.S. increased interest rates in the 1980's, the debt burden doubled in many countries, reducing countries to only making interest payments on their loans. The World Bank and the IMF stepped in to ensure that developing countries could pay their debts by offering new loans to countries that accepted SAPs as a way to restructure their economies (Jauch, 1999).

These policies include the requirement that developing countries participate in “free trade” by opening their markets to international competition and doing away with market protections and subsidies. At the same time, developed countries maintain protectionism and subsidies, thus institutionalizing and perpetuating economic inequalities (Gonzalez, 2004, p. 412).

SAPs also require cutbacks in government spending on health care, wages, education and other social services, and the privatization of government-owned functions such as utilities and water (Polack, 2004). Cuts in social programs, the privatization of healthcare, and the promotion of user fees for health care services (Schrecker, Chapman, Labonte, & De Vogli, 2010) have resulted in health systems that are on the verge of collapse, accessible only to particular groups of the population (World Health Organization, 2007).

The consequences of these policies for poor women and communities are severe, threatening both reproductive justice and environmental sustainability. Many of the factors that can prevent child and maternal mortality are compromised through the impact of these policies on poor communities; lack of access to healthcare, adequate nutrition, clean water, proper sanitation, and childhood immunizations. Cutbacks in public services result in a greater workload for women as they struggle to pay extra fees to secure healthcare and education for the

family (Abouharb & Cingranelli, 2007). Cuts in social services and health result in a greater burden on women as they are often expected to take on the responsibilities of caring for the sick or needy in the family. Cuts in education services leads to an increase in illiteracy among women and girls (Jauch, 1999).

A critique of the Programme for Action is that it compromised its rights agenda in agreeing to the World Bank's neoliberal market-based approach to health-care, including user fees for health services and social marketing schemes be used to distribute contraceptives, thus creating barriers for poor women to access healthcare and family planning services or safe contraceptives (Nair et al, 2006). The impact of this compromise can be seen in the uneven progress of the Programme within countries, where wealthier women are making progress that poor women are not.

Environmental sustainability and the associated topic of climate change are gendered and racialized in the sense that poor women of color face greater barriers to environmentally safe living conditions, greater burdens from climate change, and are disproportionately impacted by disasters and environmental degradation caused by global warming (UNFPA, 2009). Women make up 60 per cent of the world's poorest, and two thirds of the world's illiterate (UNFPA, 2009). The differential impact of climate change on poor women as opposed to men is profound:

Women—particularly those in poor countries—will be affected differently than men.

They are among the most vulnerable to climate change, partly because in many countries they make up the larger share of the agricultural work force and partly because they tend to have access to fewer income-earning opportunities. Women manage households and care for family members, which often limits their mobility and increases their

vulnerability to sudden weather-related natural disasters. Drought and erratic rainfall force women to work harder to secure food, water and energy for their homes. Girls drop out of school to help their mothers with these tasks. This cycle of deprivation, poverty and inequality undermines the social capital needed to deal effectively with climate change.

(UNFPAb, 2009, p. 4)

Women's ability to cope with the challenges of climate change are limited by social, economic and political barriers (WomanWatch, n.d.). These barriers are crucially important to address for women's empowerment as well as for the purposes of addressing the consequences of climate change. A focus on women's agency despite these multiple challenges is urgent because women's local knowledge and expertise can be used in climate change mitigation, disaster reduction and adaptation strategies (WomenWatch, n.d.).

Environmental sustainability is also compromised by the requirements of SAPs, which call for increased exports to generate foreign exchange to service debt. For developing countries, their most valuable exports include timber, oil and natural gas, minerals, cash crops, and fishery products. The long-term environmental impact of exporting these goods are deforestation, land degradation, desertification, soil erosion and salinization, biodiversity loss, increased production of greenhouse gases and air and water pollution SAPs (Abouharb & Cingranelli, 2007).

In addition, the pressure to increase the production of export-oriented crops has a gendered effect. Export-oriented crops tend to be grown by men, and the pressure to increase the production of these crops marginalizes women who grow food crops to feed their families,

leaving women with little support, marginal land, and fewer resources to grow food (Abouharb & Cingranelli, 2007).

Re-thinking Population and Environment Policy

The profession of social work is uniquely positioned to advocate for and create policies and programs that ethically address environmental sustainability and reproductive justice at multiple system levels. A postcolonial feminist social work perspective facilitates a new way of analyzing the social problems of reproductive injustice and sustainability grounded in social work values.

Policies must be reframed to embrace the goal of reproductive justice rather than reproductive health, and at the center of these policies must be self-determination and social justice. Women, rich and poor, who want safe contraceptives, pregnancies and childbirth must be able to access these services, and this can only be achieved in the context of healthy, sustainable environments. To achieve these goals, policies aimed towards environmental sustainability and reproductive justice must address global justice as well as women's self-determination.

At a macro level, the economic philosophy of neoliberalism as applied to the policies and practices of the World Bank and the IMF must be examined closely and re-imagined and reformed in ways that will maximize the health and well-being of all people and their environments in both developing and developed nations. This can be accomplished through multiple strategies including activism, education, advocacy, and research.

At a mezzo level, women must join together with global and local allies to demand access to reproductive health services and environmentally sustainable communities. Organizations

such Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (ACRJ) are actively organizing to find ways to confront the causes of climate change and protect the health and well being of historically marginalized communities (ACRJ, 2009).

At a micro level, women must have access to reproductive and general health services within the context of healthy communities. There are many calls for universal access to voluntary family planning services as one component of the range of policy responses to climate change (Bryant et al, 2009) with assurances that low income is no barrier (UNFPA, 2009b). Substantial demographic research has demonstrated that when women and their partners can take advantage of client-focused family planning services, fertility falls (UNFPA, 2009b). These voluntary family planning services must be available within the context of health services for all people.

Women's local knowledge, expertise and strategies to address climate change mitigation and disaster reduction (WomenWatch, n.d.) must be integrated into local, national and international planning efforts. Women's desire for healthy communities can be mobilized through campaigns that address the intersections between reproductive and climate justice. ACRJ Asian Communities has begun to explore the ways that empowering women in their homes, workplaces and communities can contribute to climate justice (ACRJ, 2009).

A postcolonial feminist social work perspective can be used in multiple areas for future research. There are many compelling issues facing women globally and locally, issues such as poverty and hunger, homelessness, HIV/AIDS, sex trafficking, child labor, and women's rights. Research using this perspective can illuminate the historical and global backdrop from which these social problems occur, highlighting the agency of all women, and questioning the notion of

choice in a landscape with no options. In the area of sex trafficking, this perspective could be used to examine the historical global conditions that contribute to this problem, examining closely the gendered and racialized power dimensions with a focus on growing global and local inequalities and lack of social safety nets and options that play a role in the escalation of the problem.

Conclusion

In order to move towards the goals of environmental sustainability and reproductive justice, it is crucial that there is an awareness of historical and current injustices that shape the current status of the world population and the environment. It is within this context that local and national social, economic and political barriers to women's participation in decision-making can be best understood. A postcolonial feminist social work perspective facilitates this task. This paper focused on the economic and political barriers rather than the social barriers on, as these are well addressed in policy documents and the literature (UNFPA, 2009a; UNFPA, 2009b).

In this paper, a postcolonial feminist social work perspective was used to reframe the discussion of population growth and sustainability to one that represents social work values of social justice and self-determination, promoting both reproductive justice and sustainability. This perspective draws attention to the context of global inequality, produced historically by colonialism and currently by the economic dimensions of globalization, through international financial policies that threaten environmental sustainability and reproductive justice. This perspective enabled an analysis of the intersections between population and environmental sustainability within the context of globalization that can lead to international, national and local solutions that are grounded in the principles of social justice and self-determination.

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