

# People's Perspectives

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Published from UBINIG; 5/3 Barabo Mahanpur . Ring Road. Shaymoli,  
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## **THE POPULATION ISSUE: A THIRD WORLD WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVE**

For us in the Third World, the population issue must take into account firstly, the historical roots of the population control in Third World. For more than three decades the Third World has been the target of population control. In the cold war era, Third World populations had to be curtailed because the so-called 'population crisis' is said to be a threat. Today the so called population crisis has become a threat to the survival of the planet.

An emerging view actively pursued by certain powerful quarters of the North is that to protect the health of the planet, the weak and the poor should be left to die - thus lowering the birth rate. It advocates the withdrawal of oral rehydration and

immunisation for Third World children as a merciful method to be implemented to attain health in a sustainable ecosystem for the year 2000.

The basis for this triage -like thinking is the belief that Third World people are less than human and therefore expendable. This view of Third World people has been perpetuated for the last 500 years when the first genocidal practices were perpetrated on Third World people.

Bilateral and multilateral aid agencies have made population control a major condition of development assistance and an Instrument of structural adjustment policies.

Given the eugenic and racist background of the birth control movement in the West, population control policies foisted on the Third World was the most arrogant aspect of post-war development strategy formulated by the West for the Third World.

Since UNCED there has been an intensification of a trend in the North to promote the belief that population growth in the South is the main cause of global environmental degradation.

Underlying this is the notion that Third World populations need to be controlled because they pose a threat to Western industrial civilisation. In the age of scarce resources, if every citizen in India and China wants to own two cars, a fridge, and a flush toilet, the North will not be able to continue to maintain its way of life. When at UNCED many NGOs and delegates from the South (and some from the North too) pointed out that wasteful consumption and lifestyles in the North were more to blame for the environmental crisis, former US President Bush made it clear that "our life-styles are not up for negotiation."

Secondly, the existing inequities between the North and the South have not been merely a continuous historical process but have further intensified and entrenched in the post colonial era.

The unequal and exploitative transfer of resources has resulted in the rich North with some 25% of the world's population consuming 75% of the world's resources (most of which are located in the South). For e.g. the North consumes some 75% of the world's energy; 80% of all commercial fuels; 85% of all wood products and 72% of all production. This enormous consumption has generated wanton waste. Whereas a Swiss consumes 40 times more than one Somali (who currently is starving to death), of the world's

resources and each Bangladeshi consumes energy equivalent to only 3 barrels of oil a year, an average American uses 55 barrels. It must be noted that this lifestyle is also found among the economic elite in the Third World.

Thus the overdevelopment of the North has been primarily responsible for global environmental deterioration.

Apart from the transfer of natural resources, the Third World has suffered declining terms of trade for their commodities. The low commodity prices has meant a net transfer of financial resources to the rich North at the expense of the South. Between US\$60 -100 billion were lost to Third World countries annually in 1985 and 1986 alone. This has led to drastic cuts in government spending, withdrawal of social services and fall in living standards and unemployment in many Third World countries.

Finally, massive borrowing by Third World nations for development has led to crippling debts. Debt repayment has led to greater impoverishment and misery.

Rendered powerless by unjust economic structures and their international instruments, Third World countries have all but in name abdicated their economic sovereignty. In the name of SAP the World Bank - IMF are dictating prescriptions in which the Third World nations have to sacrifice health and welfare and food subsidies - all of which have taken a heavy toll on the health, nutrition and family well being and security of T. W. people.

Northern proposals in the Uruguay Round would further

prize open Southern country markets and facilitate easier entry of transnational corporations, whilst the favourable treatment given to developing countries under present GATT rules would be eroded or eliminated.

The deteriorating socio-economic conditions in the South have led to increasing migration and brain drain of TW societies further exacerbating the socio-economic situation in TW nations.

Thirdly, the western model of development espoused and adopted by TW elites has locked TW nations deeper economically, financially, technologically and culturally into the world economic system. In the process, indigenous, self-reliant models of development have been destroyed leading to increasing immiseration of farmers, fisherfolk, forest dwellers, indigenous communities and the urban poor.

The unequal socio-economic structures within nations have contributed to poverty and hunger. In many TW societies ownership of resources like land, capital, and credit are concentrated in the hands of a few. People are poor and hungry because they have no land to grow food or no money to buy it. Land and resources are controlled by the rich and powerful. It is the unjust economic structures that deny people a right to livelihood and security.

In such situations, children are the most important economic and social assets in many TW societies. The resulting high birth rates are due to the fact that high infant and child mortality rates are the norm. High infant mortality is the result of poverty and poor health and nutrition.

Thus the population issue should be linked to the international and national structures that determine people's access to life sustaining resources that are becoming increasingly scarce be the land, forests, waters, healthcare and food, employment, shelter etc. The global and national forces that generate poverty and insecurity in the TW have to be identified.

Fourthly, the subordinate position of women has meant that the implementation of population control policies has often led to further oppression of women, particularly of their health.

Just as colonialism and the development process have discriminated against TW women leading to their increasing economic and social marginalisation reducing their status even further, population control introduced by the North has its share of bias against women.

That population control is sexist and racist can be seen from the fact that in the First World it is the poor and the black women who are the target. In North America poor blacks, native Americans and Hispanic women have been forcibly sterilised. In the UK, immigrants of colour are given Depo Provera without their consent. In Australia, aboriginal women and Maori women in NZ are also injected. In recent times contraception has been used as a tool to punish women again poor and black, as the use of Norplant by the US courts has shown.

In many Third World countries where population control has primarily focused on women, they have tended to be looked upon as

objects of contraception. Women are assessed in terms of "achievement targets", "voluntary acceptors", "success rates", "incentives" and the like. Women in these circumstances seem to be reduced merely to wombs whose fertility must be controlled and rendered infertile. This dehumanisation of the woman has made population control and family planning as separate from women's health and welfare.

When women are objectified, it is easier to violate their persons and bodies. By exploiting the poverty of TW women (and men) in offering incentives to contraception, coercion becomes part and parcel of population control. When poverty is the common lot of the majority, any form of aid or money is readily accepted even if it means a woman allows herself to be mutilated. When one is poor, free choice becomes meaningless.

Thus international, national and sociocultural factors determine reproductive choices as they decide whether nations and people can shape their lives and exercise their rights to self determination fully both in the family of nations and within the family system.

Thus a sustainable world can only come about when there is a more just world order where wealth and power among nations are equally distributed, so that unsustainable consumption in the North and also among the elites in the South can be curtailed and lifestyles will change and where the sovereignty of nations is respected.

This socioeconomic transformation at the international (and national levels) will lead to

the enhancement of the socio-economic status of TW women, their empowerment and the protection of their rights. Only in such circumstances can population growth rates stabilise or decline in a way that does not need coercion, and environmentally sustainable and socially just development be attained.

In this regard, we propose that the following points be adopted in any global agreement on the population issue:

1. The population issue cannot be considered in isolation, but should be related to the issue of resource use and wastage as a whole. The North, with 20% of the world's population, uses up to 80% of global resources and is responsible for 80% of pollution that causes the Greenhouse Effect, ozone loss, etc. The North with one billion people consumes 16 units of global resources (since Northern per capita GNP is 16 times more than the South's). The South with 4 billion people consume only 4 units of global resources. Thus, the important equation is not so much that "4 out of every 5 people live in the South" but that "4 out of every 5 units of resources consumed are consumed in the North". Even if population growth went to zero in the South, only 20% of the environment problem would be solved because the North (and the Southern elite) would still be using up 80% of global resources.

Therefore we propose that the issue of unsustainable consumption, wasteful use of resources and lifestyles be put as a top priority on the global environmental agenda. The

question of population growth should be considered in this context and not separate from it. Indeed we propose that there should be a global conference on Unsustainable Consumption Patterns and Lifestyle Change , just as we are having a Population Conference. There is in other words an urgent need to restore a fair balance between the population issue and the consumption-lifestyles issue on the global agenda.

2. It is true that the size and growth rate of a country's population is one of the factors that are important in the planning for development, for eg. employment, food supply, health, education, etc. However it is not true that population growth is the main cause of poverty. The reverse is more accurate, that poverty is a major reason why families choose to have more children. In order to reduce population growth, the first condition is to reduce poverty and

bring about a more equitable socioeconomic structure.

3. We oppose top down 'population control' policies that have caused so much problems such as the forced sterilisation programmes imposed on poor families, the distribution of dangerous contraceptive methods as aid to the South, and monetary or material incentives provided to women in exchange for unsafe contraception. Instead we call for democratic and safe family planning, in which firstly, women and their families make their own decision about family size and method of planning the family; secondly, women should be given greater access to information on the merits-demerits (including safety) of different contraceptive methods, as well as access to these methods; thirdly, unsafe and unsuitable contraceptive methods should not be included in national family programmes or in aid programmes; eg methods that are banned or withdrawn in one

country should not be exported to other countries; fourthly, given the seriousness of the AIDS pandemic, committed programmes must be implemented to include men and the use of condoms.

4. The educational and income status of women should be upgraded. This will enable women to take more control over their lives and health and thus facilitate conditions for making choices over the future of their families.

5. Population policies should fall under the domain of a national government and decided by the people of the country. It should not be dictated by a global institution or by powerful nations. Coercion by some big powers, or by global institutions should not be accepted. For Instance, reducing population growth should not become a conditionality for loans or aid.

Drafted by THIRD WORLD NET-WORK, Malaysia.