If You **Really** Care about Environmental Justice, 
You **Should** Care about Reproductive Justice!

**What is Reproductive Justice?**

The Reproductive Justice (RJ) movement places reproductive health and rights within a social justice framework.¹ The movement supports the right of individuals to have the children they want, raise the children they have, and plan their families through safe, legal access to abortion and contraception. In order to make these rights a reality, the movement recognizes that RJ will be achieved only when all people have the economic, social, and political power to make healthy decisions about their bodies, sexuality, and reproduction.²

Environmental Justice (EJ), like RJ, incorporates a social justice framework.³ It seeks to reduce the inequitable environmental burdens born by People of Color, women, indigenous communities and those living in economically disadvantaged areas or developing nations.⁴ Reproductive justice also demands that the decision of whether or not to have a child and the right to raise that child not be impeded by the inequitable distribution of environmental burdens. In advancing Reproductive Justice, you are demanding that individuals in marginalized communities not be forced to make reproductive decisions based on the fact that their communities suffer disparate exposure to environmental hazards.

**Why is Reproductive Justice an Environmental Justice Issue?**

*By endorsing the principles of Reproductive Justice—including the right to bear and raise children in healthy environments—you are advancing Environmental Justice.*

Both EJ and RJ seek to improve socioeconomic conditions for those living in poverty and to provide a forum for traditionally marginalized communities to advocate on their own behalf. Both frameworks and their corresponding movements developed because their mainstream counterparts failed to address the underlying social injustices giving rise to the problems EJ and RJ seek to address.

The EJ movement distinguishes itself, in part, from the mainstream environmental movement by rejecting immigration or overpopulation as the cause of environmental problems.⁵ EJ recognizes that pervasive racism has contributed to the common misperception that there are not enough resources to sustain population growth in poor countries populated by People of Color.⁶ In fact, lack of resources often can be directly attributed to the exploitation of these nations’ resources by richer, more powerful countries.⁷
The Reproductive Justice movement recognizes that healthy decisions about sexuality, relationships, childbearing and childrearing are facilitated by conditions of social, political, economic and spiritual power. RJ moves beyond the traditional “choice” movement, with its primary focus on abortion access, and works equally hard to advance the right of individuals to bear and raise children. RJ also acknowledges that the “choice” movement unfortunately may have historically shared common goals, if not common motives, with those who wished to oppress, rather than empower, People of Color. Racism, classism and sexism give rise to poverty “solutions” intended to restrict childbearing by poor women, especially those who are young and unmarried. These policies are based on the belief that childbearing causes poverty. In fact, refraining from childbearing does not in and of itself improve the circumstances of young women in economically depressed communities.

Both EJ and RJ reject any “solution” to the problems of poverty and environmental degradation that focus solely on individual choices rather than remedying the underlying causes. Improved socioeconomic and environmental conditions result in reduced infant and maternal mortality. Women voluntarily choose to limit their childbearing when they are granted access to education and when their socioeconomic circumstances improve. Studies also show that birth rates decrease when women are confident that their children will survive infancy. Use of contraceptives allows for longer spacing between births, greatly improving both maternal and fetal health, and allowing families to devote more resources to each child. RJ supports solutions promoted by the EJ movement that go beyond mere efforts to limit childbearing and that actually empower women to make their own decisions about how their families can thrive.

People who oppose contraception have distorted the facts about estrogens recently found in drinking water supplies, deceitfully exaggerating the role of oral contraceptives. They are blaming women who practice family planning when 90% of hormones in the water supply can be traced to industrial farming practices and when contraceptives contribute only 1% to the total amount of estrogens excreted by humans. While agribusinesses and other corporations ought to be required to properly dispose of their waste and limit unintended exposure to all industrial byproducts, such concerns must not be abused as an excuse to limit access to effective contraception.

RJ demands that individuals have the resources, including a healthy environment, needed to bear and raise the children they want.

Women have been at the forefront of the EJ movement. Both women and children suffer more serious health effects and social consequences from environmental hazards. As primary caretakers, women bear the burden of caring for children with health conditions caused by air pollution, such as asthma. The right of all women to have healthy pregnancies and to raise children in a healthy environment is a core principle that RJ shares with EJ.

As low-wage workers, women and People of Color are disproportionately exposed to many hazardous chemicals, including agricultural pesticides, home cleaning products, industrial cleaning products, and chemicals used in hair and nail salons. Studies suggest that exposure of either men or women to certain chemicals can cause a host of reproductive health problems such as infertility and reproductive cancers. Disparities in pregnancy outcomes among People of Color, including birth defects, low-birth weight, still-birth and miscarriage, may result from chemical exposure. Evidence suggests that exposure to certain toxic chemicals in both fetuses and young children also cause developmental delays. By working to limit exposure to
hazardous chemicals, you are working to improve pregnancy outcomes for low-income people and People of Color and, in turn, advancing both EJ and RJ.

**How You Can Support Environmental Justice and Reproductive Justice**

- Recognize women and children suffer unique effects of environmental hazards and advocate for policies that improve reproductive health and pregnancy outcomes.

- Support the right of all parents to raise their children in healthy environments by advocating for the equitable distribution of green space, walking and biking trails, and playgrounds in low-income communities.

- Urge regulatory protections and safer labor practices for those exposed to toxic chemicals in industries dominated by low-income workers and Women of Color. Protections ought to increase awareness of potential harms and inform workers of their rights without promoting employment discrimination against pregnant, potentially pregnant, or nursing women.24

- Support programs that promote gender equality and improve women’s economic conditions. Increase access to safe and affordable contraceptives and abortion and oppose coercive solutions to environmental problems that limit reproductive autonomy, such as employment policies that require workers to prove they are infertile in order to work with substances that cause birth defects.25

- Encourage agencies, such as the EPA, FDA, and OSHA, to pass and enforce regulations requiring industries using or producing chemicals to regularly test, report on, and reduce the toxicity of their products. Dismantle or repeal existing regulations that place the burden of harmful environmental exposures on poor communities and Communities of Color.

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3 According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which in 1992 developed what became the Office of Environmental Justice, “[t]he environmental justice movement was started by individuals, primarily people of color, who sought to address the inequity of environmental protection in their communities.” Office of Environmental Justice, EPA, Frequently Asked Questions, http://www.epa.gov/compliance/resources/faqs/ej/index.html#faq (last visited Feb. 12, 2010).


6 Bhatia & Reisz, supra note 5.


8 One commentator, while noting the shared interests between the movements, notes that mainstream reproductive rights organizations “have had little involvement in the environmental justice movement.” Chinue Turner Richardson, Environmental Justice Campaigns Provide Fertile Ground for Joint Efforts with Reproductive Rights Advocates, GUTTMACHER POL’Y REV., Winter 2006, at 14.


Contraceptive use also increases the length and quality of life, as well as the economy of developing nations. *Id.*

CARE, *WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT*, *supra* note 12.


*Id.*
