

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,⁸ 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”⁹ intended to restrict childbearing by poor women, especially those who are young and unmarried.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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.¹² Studies also show that birth rates decrease when women are confident that their children will survive infancy.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

People who oppose contraception have distorted the facts about estrogens recently found in drinking water supplies, deceitfully exaggerating the role of oral contraceptives.¹⁶ They are blaming women who practice family planning when 90% of hormones in the water supply can be traced to industrial farming practices¹⁷ and when contraceptives contribute only 1% to the total amount of estrogens excreted by humans.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ Disparities in pregnancy outcomes among People of Color, including birth defects, low-birth weight, still-birth and miscarriage, may result from chemical exposure.²² Evidence suggests that exposure to certain toxic chemicals in both fetuses and young children also cause developmental delays.²³ 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 women²⁴
- 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.

¹ Sistersong, What is Reproductive Justice?, http://www.sistersong.net/reproductive_justice.html (last visited June 25, 2009).

² Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, Mission and Vision, <http://www.reproductivejustice.org/mission-vision.html> (last visited June 25, 2009).

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).

⁴ MARTHA MATSUOKA, BUILDING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES FROM THE GROUND UP: ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN CALIFORNIA 29 (2003), available at http://www.environmentalhealth.org/PDFs/PDFs_Archive/EJReport.pdf.

⁵ Rajani Bhatia & Tom Reisz, *Environmentalism and Population Control*, COMM. ON WOMEN, POPULATION AND THE ENV'T, July 15, 2006, <http://www.cwpe.org/resources/popcontrol/envpopcontrol>; Betsy Hartmann, *Conserving Racism: The Greening of Hate at Home and Abroad*, DIFFERENTAKES (Population and Dev. Program, Hampshire Coll., Amherst, MA), Winter 2008, available at <http://popdev.hampshire.edu/projects/dt/27>.

⁶ Bhatia & Reisz, *supra* note 5.

⁷ “The richest fifth of the world’s people consume 66 times as many resources as the poorest fifth.” *10 Reasons to Rethink Overpopulation*, DIFFERENTAKES (Population and Dev. Program, Hampshire Coll., Amherst, MA), Fall 2006, at 2, available at <http://popdev.hampshire.edu/projects/dt/40>

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.

⁹ For example, state “family caps” or “child exclusion” policies discourage child bearing by women receiving public assistance by denying them additional assistance for the birth of another child. The states most likely to implement the family cap are states with higher percentages of African-Americans and Latinos receiving assistance. Jodie Levin-Epstein, *Lifting the Lid Off the Family Cap: States Revising Problematic Policy for Welfare Mothers* CHILDBEARING AND REPROD. HEALTH SERIES (Ctr. for Law and Social Policy, Washington, D.C.), Dec. 2003, at 2, available at http://www.clasp.org/publications/family_cap_brf.pdf. For information on state family cap policies, see Office of Family Assistance, Dept. of Health and Human Services, *TANF Eighth Annual Report to Congress* ch. 12, available at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/data-reports/annualreport8/chapter12/chap12.htm#15>.

¹⁰ Parvin R. Huda, *Singled Out: A Critique of the Representation of Single Motherhood in Welfare Discourse*, 7 WM. & MARY J. WOMEN & L. 341 (2001) (citing H.R. Rep. No. 104-651, at 3 (1996), reprinted in 1996 U.S.C.C.A.N. 2183, 2184); see, OFFICE OF FAMILY ASSISTANCE, U.S. DEP’T OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVS., WORKING TOWARD INDEPENDENCE, EXECUTIVE SUMMARY (Feb. 2002). In the federal government’s own words, “The new policy aimed to encourage personal responsibility by promoting work, reducing nonmarital births, and strengthening and supporting marriage. No longer could able-bodied adults remain on welfare year after year without working.” *Id.*

¹¹ Teens living in poverty are more likely to get pregnant, but for teens in economically depressed communities, not giving birth does not substantially change their economic opportunities. FRANK F. FURSTENBERG, COUNCIL ON CONTEMPORARY FAMILIES, TEEN PREGNANCY AND POVERTY: 30-YEAR-STUDY CONFIRMS THAT LIVING IN ECONOMICALLY-DEPRESSED NEIGHBORHOODS, NOT TEEN MOTHERHOOD, PERPETUATES POVERTY (2008), available at <http://www.contemporaryfamilies.org/subtemplate.php?ext=pregnancyandpoverty&t=briefingPapers>.

¹² CARE, for example, provides women with job training or micro-loans to start business. CARE, WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT, http://www.care.org/newsroom/publications/whitepapers/woman_and_empowerment.pdf (last visited Feb. 12, 2010).

¹³ World Health Org., *Investing in Maternal, Newborn and Child Health: The Case for Asia and The Pacific 2* (2009), available at <http://www.who.int/pmnch/topics/investinginhealth.pdf>.

¹⁴ Contraceptive use also increases the length and quality of life, as well as the economy of developing nations. *Id.*

¹⁵ CARE, WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT, *supra* note 12.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Joel Brind, *Consuming Secondhand Steroids: The Contraceptive Pollution of Nature*, 34 ETHICS AND MEDICS 1 (2009).

¹⁷ Maier RM et al., *Terrestrial Environment*, in ENVIRONMENTAL MICROBIOLOGY 61 (2000).

¹⁸ Program on Reprod. Health and the Environment, Univ. of Cal., San Francisco, *Endocrine Disrupting Compounds and Intersex Fish*, http://www.prhe.ucsf.edu/prhe/learn/kristof_edcs.html (last visited March 26, 2010).

¹⁹ For an in-depth review of how women were affected by Hurricane Katrina, brought on by climate change, see EXPANDING THE MOVEMENT FOR EMPOWERMENT AND REPROD. JUSTICE, ASIAN CMTYS. FOR REPROD. JUSTICE, LOOKING BOTH WAYS: WOMEN’S LIVES AT THE CROSSROADS OF REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE AND CLIMATE JUSTICE (2009), available at http://www.reproductivejustice.org/ACRJ_Looking_Both_Ways.pdf; see also, Why a Women’s Environmental Organization?-- Women’s Voices for the Earth, <http://www.womenandenvironment.org/aboutwve/whyawomensorganization> (last visited Feb. 12, 2010).

²⁰ MATSUOKA, *supra* note 4; see also, Women’s Voices for the Earth, Issue Reports, <http://www.womenandenvironment.org/newsreports/issuereports/> (last visited Feb. 12, 2010).

²¹ REECE RUSHING, CTR. FOR AM. PROGRESS, REPRODUCTIVE ROULETTE: DECLINING REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH, DANGEROUS CHEMICALS, AND A NEW WAY FORWARD (July 2009), available at http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/07/pdf/reproductive_roulette.pdf.

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ Such discrimination is in violation of the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, 42 U.S.C. § 2000e(k) (2008).

²⁵ See, e.g., *Automobile Workers v. Johnson Controls, Inc.*, 499 U.S. 187, 197-211 (1991).