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**Power of the Womb:
The Relationship between Population Strategies
and the Status of Women**

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**Kennedy Memorial National Policy and Planning Institute
in Charge of Preparing for the Twenty-First Century**

To: Senior Researcher Giertz

From: J. Smith, Director

Where are you? I expected that report a week ago. As I recall looking at my files of 26 August, you were asked to answer a question: What is the link among fertility levels, population politics, and the status of women?

This is a topic that we at the Institute are very anxious to get a handle on, as you well know, Giertz; Paul Kennedy, in *Preparing for the Twenty-First Century*, describes a coming population explosion that in the next few decades could make the dire eighteenth-century predictions of Malthus seem like pleasant musings. We both know population means births, which means mothers—which means women are going to be the mechanism behind and the key to slowing this population explosion. We also know a woman's status as the childbearer is usually made the foundation for her status overall. Kennedy insists that entrenched structures keeping women in an inferior and restricted societal position must be changed in order to encourage a reduction in the birth rate. Improving education, income levels, access to birth control, and overall quality of life for women, he suggests, are the most effective weapons against population growth. To Kennedy, this is a matter not only of human rights but also of international security.

Some of us at the Institute—and I know it was you, Giertz, actually—agreed with Kennedy overall, but criticized his focus on women as well-intentioned but misplaced. I quote your project proposal: “Kennedy writes in a highly abstract language that perpetuates in words the powerlessness of women he attacks in theory; the language only addresses women's status as human beings in the context of childbirth, instead of placing childbirth properly in the context of women's status as human beings.” Accordingly, I assigned you to investigate how the struggle to control fertility rates affects women. What influences fertility rates? What control do women (and men) exercise over these strategies, and how does that affect women's status?

I look forward to reading your conclusions soon.

Giertz replies, as soon as possible:

Power of the Womb: The Relationship between Population Strategies and the Status of Women

Paul Kennedy is not the first writer to identify women's function of reproduction as a threat to international security and civilization, but he is certainly one of the most recent and respected. His 1993 book, *Preparing for the Twenty-First Century*, identifies several trends developing for the next decade and beyond that could endanger world security; the first and most important of these is a demographics explosion in the developing world. Matching scarce resources to the size of a needy population is always a central dilemma of governments, but now Kennedy foresees it mushrooming into a dangerous crisis because of a growing mismatch between the location of most resources and the location of most of the world population. Kennedy stresses the interconnectedness of this new "Malthusian trap" to other trends toward commercial, environmental, and technological upheaval. Although Malthus' eighteenth century prophecies were diluted by the power of technology, a blind faith in science will not lead us out of this new crisis, Kennedy suggests. Instead, he writes, worldwide policies must discourage women directly and indirectly from bearing children in order to counter this population growth. In his analysis, women's bodies will be ground zero in the battle against the power of population.

Kennedy is frightened by the kind of world that results from letting these trends go unchecked. I am frightened by the world that has already resulted from the methods and methodology used as population strategies.

To the last page, Kennedy distances himself from the philosophical and ethical implications of his analysis—especially for women—and instead "whistles past the graveyard," in one reviewer's words.¹ Kennedy is no bomb-thrower. He offers no argument based on any higher spiritual, cultural, moral, or humanistic value to persuade people in power why they should change the ship of state's course, even though he himself admits that technical theories in dispute will not be enough to move the gears of governments.² Beyond offering the "up" solution of increasing women's education and work participation, he seems afraid of raising the specter of his analysis' implications under the status quo for women and other groups.

Other people in other times and places have frequently addressed a similar population problem, but in the process created a much more brutal and unjust world, and not only for women. Genocide, famine, and warfare are often the methods of choice, not just of result. Moreover, some research has suggested that Kennedy's cursory prescription may not be enough: women's fertility choices might be influenced by the total cultural environment women live in, rather than specific, isolated alterations of status. In short, preparing for the twenty-first century may of necessity involve radical changes in societies.

In our century there are several old ideas cohabitating in the enclave of their privileged status: the superiority of the European and Christian peoples; the claim of force as superior to the claim of relation; and the ascription of a higher intrinsic human value to men than to women.³

All of these ideas need to be resisted if we are going to meet the next decade's challenges while creating a world worth living in. Resisting the last idea is the focus of this paper.

From a Woman's Standpoint, Education Does Work

There is little disputing Kennedy's assertion that, in general, improvements in women's education and roles in

1. Robert Heilbroner, "The Worst is Yet to Come," *The New York Times Book Review*, sec. 7, 14 February 1993, 1; Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, "Peering into a Dismal 21st Century," *The New York Times*, 11 February 1993.

2. Kennedy, Paul, *Preparing for the Twenty-First Century* (New York, N. Y.: Random House, Inc., 1993), p. 345.

3. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. 10th anniv. ed., (New York, N. Y.: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1976, 1986), p. ix.

society correlates with a drop in fertility rates. But the picture is a little more complex than he paints it. Women's status is a function of many interrelated processes.

The social mobility of different groups correlates, in most research over the past few decades, with a change in fertility rates. Sociologists John D. Kasarda, John O. G. Billy, and Kirsten West identify four possible causal links between social mobility and fertility.⁴ The relationship could be spurious: either mobility is not being measured accurately or effects that spur social mobility, such as improved education, are independently causing a change in fertility. If a relationship does exist, fertility may affect mobility by determining the resources available for a rise or fall on the social scale; or mobility may affect fertility by causing social isolation, stress and disorientation, status enhancement, and economic status; or most likely, both may affect each other.⁵ The three eventually conclude, however, that if the two affect each other it might only be in the context of the broadest mechanisms driving both. "Researchers have only scratched the surface in trying to relate all that the term *social mobility* implies to reproductive behavior."⁶

Most studies of fertility are oddly male-oriented, concerning themselves with indicators of men's status such as head of household's income; they assume a woman's status derives from that of a husband or father, although that does seem somewhat legitimate because in many cultures the status of a male relative is the only determinant of a woman's. Kasarda, Billy, and West examine what influences a woman's fertility from the perspective of the woman's independent status. They note,

For developing countries, women's transition from traditional to more modern attitudes and behavior is generally regarded as . . . a necessary prerequisite for reduced fertility levels. Research on this transition is a most important avenue. . . . Missing from much of this research, however, is a specific focus on *women* and the factors bringing about their transition.⁷

Education, in their view and in the view of other researchers, is the single most important factor in this transition. Rising levels of education among women leads to an increase in a woman's knowledge and competence in dealing with her life, broadens her access to information via broadcast and print media, develops her critical thinking skills and gives her experience in competition and achievement, and provides skills that can be used to develop an identity outside children and family.⁸ Perhaps the most important effect of education on fertility rates is its impact on the effectiveness of family planning programs: education gives a woman "a sense of efficacy and trust in modern science and technology that encourages her to control her fate and body."⁹ Education influences fertility rates both directly by influencing attitudes about smaller family size and indirectly by influencing social, economic, and demographic factors such as contraceptive practices, employment, the value of children, and age at marriage; and by interacting jointly with other factors that mitigate the effects of education.¹⁰

For many years a woman's level of education and resulting social status has been associated with her fertility rates. The Commission on Population Growth and the American Future reported in 1972 that the smallest families in America belonged to women with the highest levels of education.¹¹ But Kasarda and colleagues note that simply providing more education to women does not always seem to reduce family size. They report that a study done in five northern European countries found the most children were born to women with the least and most education.¹² And data provided by the World Fertility Survey shows some deviation

4. John D. Kasarda, et al., *Status Enhancement and Fertility: Reproductive Responses to Social Mobility and Educational Opportunity*. Studies in Population series, (London, England: Academic Press Inc., 1986), p. 47.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 45-54.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

11. *Population and the American Future: The Report of the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future* (New York, N. Y.: New American Library, Inc., 1972).

12. Kasarda, p. 89.

from the stereotypical education-fertility relationship; although the United States and other countries continue to show fewer children born to more educated women, six European countries exhibit a U- or L-shaped relationship between the fertility indicator and educational levels.¹³ Very high levels of education may allow women so inclined to have many children, because they have the income and means to take care of them.

Developing countries also exhibit overall an inverse relationship between fertility and education, but once again there are variations. Krasada, et al. write that women with small amounts of education report more children born alive than those with no schooling in Kenya, Senegal, the Dominican Republic, Guyana, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Peru.¹⁴ In their view, a weakening of traditional breast-feeding practices accounts for much of the variation in non-industrialized cultures. This method of birth control common to preliterate societies can work because women may not ovulate for more than a year if they are continuously breast feeding, which spaces out children naturally.¹⁵ On the other hand, women with no education may report fewer births because poor nutrition and overall health reduces their ability to conceive and bear children.¹⁶

One of the best known exceptions to the fertility-education hypothesis in developed countries occurred in the United States starting almost fifty years ago: the Baby Boom. Fertility rates from 1940 to 1960 zoomed upward despite women's greater levels of education and work force participation.¹⁷ The case provides support for the fact that not only women's roles but also society's perceptions of women's roles need to change to encourage less childbearing. An increase in fertility occurred in all social classes during this period despite and perhaps because of all groups' greater inclusion in public education of women, work participation, and urbanization. There was an emphasis on social homogeneity and conformity during this period, and American culture emphasized the importance of women's roles as wives and childbearers.¹⁸ Two groups with less education than most, blacks and rural citizens of both races, increased their fertility particularly dramatically, but the greatest increases occurred among the more educated and higher income portions of the white urban middle class.¹⁹ College women in their twenties during the 1950s bore significantly more children than the college women of older generations. This group consciously chose to marry earlier, bear children sooner, and space their children more closely together; parents used birth control extensively and could avoid accidents.²⁰

In sum, education may be the strongest indicator in the total cultural environment that influences a woman's overall fertility, but by itself will not always reduce the number of children born. Kennedy notes that in Sweden the rising birth rate might be attributable to social provisions for children's care together with an overall atmosphere in which women can develop their talents.

However, in most cases, if fertility is to be reduced voluntarily, a woman must not perceive her status as deriving in large part or solely from her role as a sexual partner and mother.

Other Population Strategies that Work

From the perspective of many patriarchal cultures and governments, elevating women's rights as a method of controlling population is often not even a consideration. Brutal methods can be just as effective. But the absence of the "Pill" does not automatically mean that women become breeding machines. Despite the pro-natalist or anti-growth policies of world nations (that often alternate within a generation given a shift in power politics), women themselves have found ways to control fertility, which is also one way they can exert power.

Infanticide was practiced of necessity in many pre-industrial cultures. Among the !Kung San women of

13. Ibid., p. 89–90.

14. Ibid., p. 92.

15. Ibid., p. 93.

16. Ibid., p. 94.

17. Susan Householder Van Horn, *Women, Work and Fertility, 1900–1986* (New York, N. Y.: New York University Press, 1988), p. 5.

18. Ibid., p. 82–83.

19. Ibid., p. 95.

20. Ibid., p. 96.

southern Africa, the killing of newborns occurs if the child has a birth defect or if infants are born too close together for the mother to provide for them both adequately, although seldom because of sex preferences. Infanticide is not common and the decision to kill can be difficult, but it is the mother's decision and responsibility, because childbirth is "women's business."²¹

In more developed countries, where women generally have much less responsibility and control over their sexuality and motherhood, infanticide can also be practiced because of the undesirability of daughters, the shame of an illegitimate child, or economic stress on a family. In the People's Republic of China and Taiwan, where women traditionally are valued among peasants only for their procreative functions, female infanticide was highest in areas where women were considered economic liabilities, but lowest in the mainland Canton delta, where women are indispensable to the main industry of silk production.²² Today many more women are allowed to live. Formerly, a daughter avoided slipping into a bucket of water only if she happened to be the mother's first child or first girl, or if she could be exchanged for a marriage partner for a son. But even if she survives birth, a daughter is often less likely to receive breast milk in times of economic hardship or to receive medical treatment.²³

Although women have borne the brunt of most population-reduction campaigns in this manner, sickly children of either sex are often left exposed to the elements or drowned if there are no means to care for them. Twins have also been perceived as a "birth defect" and one or both gotten rid of. Men have also been the victims in a patriarchal culture emphasizing the value of aggression. Adrienne Rich describes how, in the ancient Viking society, a newborn male child was only spared from death if he grasped a spear extended to him.²⁴

If population is going to be controlled by increasingly stressed societies in the next century, infanticide may be on the upswing in the "civilized" world for reasons of sex preferences as well as general birth control. In 1983 the Chinese government reported—and publicly deplored—an increase in female infanticide after the implementation of its one-couple, one-child policy—parents were killing a firstborn daughter to avoid the traditional shame involved in not bearing a son.²⁵ Because Chinese women are still assumed to be responsible for the gender of a child, giving birth to a daughter as the only child has resulted in suicide by the mother.²⁶ (China also has a record of forced sterilization and abortion in general for couples violating government population policy.) When more humane methods of birth control are not available, other industrialized societies have also reverted to killing infants. After the repeal of Japan's liberal abortion laws and new limits on contraception made in 1973, the country suffered an epidemic of infanticide; a newborn infant was found stuffed in a subway locker every ten days on average in Tokyo, sometimes with a note of contrition, according to *The New York Times*.²⁷

Today, many of the world's women are deliberately "missing," in Rhona Mahony's euphemism. In comparison to gender ratios in Europe and North America, the Chinese population is missing 50 million women alone who should have been born in the last few generations. Adding that figure to those for Southwest Asia and North Africa, the number of missing women tops 100 million worldwide.²⁸ This is quite a bite out of worldwide population growth, although still a drop in the bucket.

While normative populations in the 1990 census figures show slightly more women than men, China reports only 93.8 women for every 100 men, and in India only 92.9. In the latter case, it seems female genocide is responsible for the imbalance rather than a simple ration of resources to men. In Punjab, the richest state in

21. Sharon W. Tiffany, *Women, Work and Motherhood: The Power of Female Sexuality in the Workplace*. (Englewood, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1982), p. 32–33.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

24. Rich, p. 259.

25. Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood is Global*. (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984), p. 21.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

27. Rich, p. 262.

28. Mahony, Rhona, "On the Trail of the World's 'Missing Women'," *Ms.* March/April 1992, 12.

India, there are only 86 women for every 100 men born, and the mortality rate for girls is twice as high as the rate for boys between the ages of one month and two years. But in the poorer Kerala state to the south, the gender balance is equal to those in America and Europe. "In Kerala, as opposed to Punjab, many women are literate, can own and inherit property, and are important family decision makers—and this means the difference between life and death."²⁹

There is an attitude floating around many quarters of the world that "some women are excessively—one is tempted to say, pathologically—fertile," as Adrienne Rich quotes Wolfgang Lederer in his 1968 book, *The Fear of Women*. "What man really fears is not woman, but an overcrowded planet in which *she* is determined to go on breeding," she comments.³⁰ However, women, like men, are prepared to go to not only murderous but also bizarre lengths in an effort to control their reproduction. Although the birth rate in pre-industrial and early modern America was higher than today, women were practicing such contraceptive measures as genital baths, vaginal plugs, herbal brews, and *coitus interruptus*.³¹ Only one-third of the world's women have access to legitimate contraceptive information or devices,³² but many more are drinking, pricking, stuffing, inhaling, gargling, chanting, and poking in an effort to stop conception. "You can't imagine how many things I tried to swallow to prevent myself from having more children," one Bedouin woman says. "I even used to eat mothballs, thinking that would help."³³

Mary Elmendorf reports in *Studies in Family Planning* the story of a Mayan peasant named Anita who was desperately interested in controlling her fertility, with limited success. By the age of 38, Anita had had ten pregnancies and seven children survived. After two frightful pregnancies she and her husband were practicing contraception by *coitus interruptus* and the rhythm method, but were looking around for a more reliable method. Demetrios, her husband, tried using a condom and spoke to a doctor about vasectomy but was not sure that the procedure would not take away his strength and vitality. Anita described this male feeling of responsibility for parenting with pride: "He takes care of me." Yet he was still not as adamant as she about ending their childbearing, and said she should go on the birth control pill despite her doctor's advice because it was the cheapest method. She was too afraid of the pill to take it, and superstitious of sterilization because of the fictional *tipte*—a small mythical organ behind the umbilicus that makes its owner feel awful if it is out of place. In the end she became pregnant four more times.³⁴

The Politics and Power of Fertility

Women, such as the slave in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, have also practiced and controlled infanticide, abortion, and other crude methods of birth control as an act of resistance to societies that only valued women as baby makers and children as chattel. "Caribbean women never accepted their lot. There are numerous examples of women who committed suicide or infanticide, underwent abortion, or simply ran away," writes Sonia M. Cuales in *Sisterhood is Global*.³⁵ The indigenous women in what is now Venezuela killed their babies born under the Spanish Conquest rather than have them live out the same wretched lives as their mothers.³⁶ Similar reports are not confined to Latin America; today they flow out of Bosnia-Herzegovina sporadically via Western media, where women are regularly raped and impregnated by their conquerors.

Catharine A. MacKinnon, Laura Pittner, Alexandra Stiglmayer, and numerous journalists from the former Yugoslavia have documented the systematic policy of genocide, rape, torture, mutilation, and enforced pregnancy

29. Ibid., p. 12.

30. Rich, p. 114.

31. Tiffany, p. 5.

32. Morgan, p. 2.

33. Perdita Huston, "Life is More Difficult Than Before: Positive and Negative Perceptions of Change," *Third World Women Speak Out* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1975), pp. 19–30.

34. Mary Elmendorf, "Anita: A Mayan Peasant Woman Copes," *Studies in Family Planning*, 10, no. 11–12, (November/December 1979): 418–420.

35. Morgan, p. 115.

36. Ibid., p. 716.

in that war, carried out predominantly by, but by no means limited to, the Bosnian Serbs and their sympathizers. Even UN Protection Forces have been reported participating in the rape camps of the Serbian army they are supposedly protecting Croatians and Muslims against.³⁷

As it does in this war, ethnic rape happens every day. As it is in this war, prostitution is forced on women every day. . . . Forced pregnancy is familiar too, beginning in rape and proceeding through the denial of abortions; this occurred during slavery and still happens to women who cannot afford abortions—who in the United States are disproportionately African-American or Latina. . . .

Yet the world has not seen sex used this consciously, this cynically, this systematically, with this degree of technology and psychological sophistication, as a means of destroying a whole people.³⁸

It is estimated by the European Community that twenty thousand Bosnian Muslim women have been raped by Serbian soldiers, considered a vast underrepresentation of the total number of women on all sides of the conflict sexually tortured and impregnated in the Serbian campaign for ethnic purity.³⁹ Serbian captors often hold their victims prisoner so that it is impossible for mothers to abort the fetus or kill a newborn, but even if the women escape their concentration camps, abortion is not easily available in Catholic Croatia or in the overstressed clinics in the Muslim war zone.⁴⁰

Because children are valued by men as a continuance of patrilineage and for an increase in wealth, women can locate political control in patriarchal societies through exercise of birth control. Among the Hagen people of New Guinea abortion is more frequent than infanticide, but the two are both practiced for several reasons, commonly as revenge out of anger at a husband. Women often try to hide abortions from their husbands, because if they are discovered a man can divorce his wife or demand compensation from her relatives for the lost child.⁴¹

Despite the crudeness and guilt involved in such murder, the acceptance of infanticide and abortion in pre-industrial societies usually went along, for better or worse, with an acceptance of women's primary responsibility for and control of procreation. As a woman's power base in a given society narrowed, this avenue of control was almost always legally and systematically forbidden by patriarchal authorities. The institutionalization of religion, especially Christianity and Islam, meant the branding of such methods, and the branding of the preceding "illegitimate" pregnancies, as a crime.⁴² Women were often caught in a desperate double bind: first supposedly guilty of encouraging a rape or freely consenting seduction, when a woman tried out of fear and self loathing to rid herself of that first sin's product, she was secondly guilty of another crime.⁴³ A woman caught in the act of killing her child was put through a cruel death as a witch: either buried alive, impaled through the heart, or burnt at the stake.⁴⁴ "Because, in the minds of the clergy, women who followed the old pagan religion were believed to have intercourse with the devil, an unmarried mother was often assumed to be a witch." Maternal infanticide became the most common crime in Europe from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century,⁴⁵ when leaders such as Catherine the Great and Frederick the Great established foundling homes and maternity clinics and attempted to make laws regulating infanticide more consistent and humane.⁴⁶

But it has to be emphasized that, historically, to bear a child out of wedlock has been to violate the property laws that say a woman must legally belong to some man, and that, if they do not, they are at best marginal people. . . . The rape victim has paid the cost at every level. And within wedlock, women have been legally powerless to prevent their husbands' use of their bodies, resulting in year-in,

37. Laura Pittner and Alexandra Stiglmeier, "Will the World Remember? Can the Women Forget?" *Ms.* March/April 1993, p. 22.

38. Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Turning Rape into Pornography: Postmodern Genocide," *Ms.* July/August 1993, p. 26–27.

39. Pittner and Stiglmeier, p. 20.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

41. Tiffany, p. 58–60.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 259.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 259.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 260.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 259.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 260.

year-out pregnancies.⁴⁷

Relative access and acceptability of fertility control methods is often dependent not on a government's regard for women's rights but on the power politics currently in play. "Modern history is replete with examples of governments 'giving' women the right to contraceptive use and abortion access when male authority felt the nation had an overpopulation problem, then abolishing that right when male authority felt the population was dropping too low or for other political reasons 'in the national interest.'"⁴⁸ The repeal of legal abortion and most contraception in Japan in 1973, previously noted, was in response to low population replacement rates. The history of Spain's access to birth control is telling. Spain was one of the first countries to legalize abortion in modern times (1937) in the midst of the Civil War, due to the efforts of Federica Montseny, the first female Minister of the Department of Health.⁴⁹ After the war the Franco government outlawed abortion, contraception, and divorce and resurrected such "liberated" policies as jail terms for female adulterers. As a result, the population of Spain increased from 20 million at the end of the war to 37 million in 1980. In 1978, long after the death of Franco, contraceptives were again made legal, but only through the few consenting private physicians and urban counseling centers.⁵⁰ Abortion is still illegal under the penal code and punishable with six years imprisonment.⁵¹

Many birth control programs founded and funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) are not expressions of support for women's right to choose but instead instruments of *realpolitik*. In 1990 USAID was the source of 40 percent of all family planning funds provided by developed nations to the rest of the world.⁵² Since USAID's founding in 1961 population planning programs in poor countries have been a mainstay of development policy, because of a 1958 report on the U.S. Military Assistance Program that identified a danger of political instability and "international class warfare" resulting from a population explosion in developing countries. Kissinger refined this familiar thesis in his National Security Study Memorandum 200 on "Implications of Population Growth for U.S. Security and Overseas Interests;" the paper urged the United States to spur population reduction in the poorest and least-developed countries of the world, where the United States depended on access to indigenous natural resources.⁵³

In the 1980s, USAID policy on birth control twisted and turned in an effort to appease religious and political conservatives. Agencies such as the UN Population Fund received a blow in 1984 when USAID decided to defund all private and UN organizations that refused to oppose abortion. In 1991, however, USAID urged the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) to relax its guidelines intended to shield women from the risks of certain contraceptives, such as regular checkups for women on the birth control pill. One critic remarked of USAID policy that "women become the means, rather than the end."⁵⁴

Perdita Huston, a former IPPF official, said that USAID also completely ignores AIDS as a factor in development, and she stressed the need to respond to the overwhelming demand around the world for contraception. Many successful population programs are run by non-medical personnel, she says, because non-medical personnel are usually women and "a woman knows women's lives and what will make a difference."⁵⁵ When birth control is considered a treatment for a condition in USAID programs, rather than properly as an aid to regulating a natural process, the male-dominated medical profession has bureaucratized and overcomplicated programs.⁵⁶

47. Ibid., p. 261.

48. Morgan, p. 6.

49. Ibid., p. 627.

50. Ibid., p. 623.

51. Ibid., p. 623.

52. Carole J. L. Collins, "Women as Hidden Casualties of the Cold War," *Ms.* November/December 1992, p. 14.

53. Ibid., p. 14.

54. Ibid., p. 15.

55. Ibid., p. 15.

56. Ibid., p. 15.

Brazil: A Case Study of Population Politics

Despite the presence in Brazil of heavily patriarchal government and religious authorities, the country has been inching toward strategies for reducing its population. Peter McDonough and Amaury DeSouza identify four principal influences on the population policy debate. The shifts in position of the Catholic Church have been important, as have shifts in the nature of debate among elites across the political spectrum. Additionally, the Brazilian government has a strong tradition of authoritarianism, taking a paternalistic and conservative view of policy. Fourth and most important, “it is women who bear the most immediate and tangible effects of population policy in Brazil and who, at the same time, are almost wholly without a voice at the elite level.”⁵⁷

The Church has always taken a pro-natalist view of the debate in theory, but there has been some inconsistency among its ranks over the years on the question.⁵⁸ Also, sides in the population debate do not correlate with sides taken in other political disputes, and a pro-natalist is as likely to be found among the Left as the Right “so that it is tenuous to identify presumed Neo-Malthusianism with social and economic reaction.”⁵⁹ In other words, population politics are not considered important enough to directly spark class warfare. Although the discussion has created great cleavages among some sectors of society, the population debate is perceived as an issue on the political back burner, always brewing, yet never the main course of national debate.⁶⁰ McDonough and DeSouza perceive the nature of the debate changing in the country when it is viewed as a local or even personal issue, rather than from a national or global perspective: ordinary Brazilians consider birth control a pressing issue in their own lives and for their own families, yet are not that interested in population control as an abstract political concern.⁶¹

“Among Brazilian women, however, family planning is particularly central as a concrete, pressing issue,” because the risks of contraceptive methods falls almost always on women instead of men and it is usually only women’s control of their own lives at stake in family planning, instead of men’s personal autonomy.⁶²

Women have increasingly stepped up the pressure on the anti-natalist front at the national level, but organized groups can do little more than pressure, given their exclusion from policymaking. Brazilian feminist political activists have been coming out of the woodwork in that country and in exile for some decades, organizing both radical feminists groups and groups with ties to existing political parties.⁶³ In the 1970s women’s groups began waging a campaign for the decriminalization of abortion but were undermined and blatantly ignored by the government and media, reports activist Danda Prado. Since then, she says, there have been sporadic actions in support of punished abortion offenders but no consistent, continuous action on this front, and she offers two main reasons for this. The Church is responsible for conditioning public opinion against abortion; and because leftist groups count on the support of the Church’s progressive elements, they choose to support the church’s efforts against sterilization and family planning programs and not to support legalized abortion. As a result of this religious influence, even feminist candidates for office have supported only programs to allow women to have as many children as they want, instead of policies allowing women to choose “to *stop* having children they *don't* want.”⁶⁴ Also, women’s activists are ambivalent about the politics of population control and its Orwellian implications:

There is undeniable pressure from the World Bank, which has made loans to the government conditional on family planning. The experience of other countries has shown clearly that a change in the rate of population growth is closely tied to a change in women’s attitudes, not just to economic stimuli, penalties for those who have many children, etc. Funding for women’s studies courses, women’s centers, films, and publications are thus linked to this international politics that wants

57. Peter McDonough, et al., *The Politics of Population in Brazil*. (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 6–7.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 7–9.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

61. *Ibid.*

62. *Ibid.*

63. Morgan, p. 63.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

population growth slowed. But this linkage is often for manipulative power-politics reasons, not out of any idealistic or genuinely feminist motivation.⁶⁵

Despite the profound opposition of the Church, the traditional right, and leftist groups, Prado is certain that birth control issues have the tacit support of the highest levels of government and financial circles because of those groups' economic interests in controlling population.⁶⁶

Not all women in Brazil are aligned with the political feminists on issues of population control. Brazilian women tend to be more religious and less educated than men and consequently are more reluctant to practice scientific measures limiting fertility.⁶⁷ Not as if it matters; although elites take public opinion and sentiment into account informally when making policy decisions, the male dominance of authority and power structures makes it unlikely that the views of either activists or more conservative women will be heeded.⁶⁸

The range of political implications involved in population politics can make ideological or ethnic disputes seem blissfully uncomplicated. While it is unlikely, given Brazil's entrenched patriarchal structures, that fundamental changes will be made in population strategies, political and religious authorities are inclined to look the other way on some policies, as long as their power is not at risk of being diluted.⁶⁹ Also, more than with straightforward ideological issues, population planning tends to provoke strong opinions from public and private frames of reference that are often at odds with each other.⁷⁰ The public at large relates its position on population issues to other areas such as religion, but the linkage among elites of the issue to other fundamentals such as income redistribution and agrarian reform is far more elaborate and ironclad.⁷¹ Because of the authoritarian nature of government, elites often have no direct mechanism by which to gauge true public and elite opinion on the matter, which can lead to false perceptions of the problem and misled policy.⁷²

The Brazilian elites do not have the political leadership, support, and insight necessary to carry forward any effective, comprehensive population strategies. More than one-fifth do not believe overpopulation is a problem at all in Brazil or a problem on which the government should act, and the reasons given range from a reliance on economic development to a belief in population as the source of economic strength and underpopulation as a threat to national security. As one labor leader expressed it: "In Brazil birth control would be a crime. We require a minimum of fifty inhabitants per square kilometer. If we don't populate our land, others might want to 'take care of it' for us."⁷³ Some people expressed a preference of family planning for one sector, such as migrants to urban areas or the underclass, while remaining ambivalent about an overall program.⁷⁴ The issue is characterized mostly by its invisibility on the national agenda. Even strongly anti-natalist men ranked birth control as dead last in importance among fifteen national issues in an 1974 survey.⁷⁵

Among the male elites there is a wide array of opinion on what mechanisms of population planning are desirable, if planning itself is desirable. Professionals are in favor of most mechanisms from sex education to legalized abortion, while ecclesiastic authorities favor almost none. Labor leaders are timid in their support for family planning because of strong patriotism, yet favor methods like education and population dispersion that are not automatically anti-natalist. Sex education and allowing contraceptive information to the public were the most popular, with the exception of politicians and bishops, who do not like any of the options (that also

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid., p. 87.

67. McDonough, p. 12.

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid., p. 14.

70. Ibid., p. 17.

71. Ibid., p. 19.

72. Ibid., p. 21.

73. Ibid., p. 27-28.

74. Ibid., p. 29.

75. Ibid., p. 30.

included birth control for poor families, supply of contraceptives, and tax incentives).⁷⁶

By contrast, birth control was a matter of extreme importance to the general public, second only to agrarian reform in a ranking of seven issues.⁷⁷ Family planning is perceived so important because it is a bread and butter issue for the population, and it is seen as a welfare issue useful for addressing immediate inequities among classes. Most citizens are anti-natalist but ambivalent about the government's role—especially as coercive—in any such scheme. Younger women support government-based family planning, while older, more religious men do not; women want control over their lives in their childbearing years, while older men have a stake in enforcing the status quo and “an image of the good life” that involves subservient women and a large, attendant family.⁷⁸

Education, in the view of McDonough and DeSouza, does not necessarily influence family size. Family size is the same among more educated women and men as among their lower-educated fellow citizens, although the more educated a couple, the more successfully they control the pattern of their childbearing.⁷⁹ Rather, they see the most important functions of receptivity to government-sponsored family planning—even more important than religiosity—as age and gender roles.⁸⁰

McDonough and DeSouza see three implications for policymaking in Brazil from their data. First, that the government will be able to take bigger steps toward population planning and facilitating access to birth control services. Elites became more aware in the 1980s of the dark side of economic planning along the theme of *Brasil grande* and now are more favorable to birth control, plus the Catholic Church would lose too much political capital to effectively block moderate measures. Second, the two researchers see population strategies being worked out because of practical budgetary concerns and not because of high-minded philosophical concerns—bad news for any insurgent feminist movement. The third aspect of the debate they note is the profound political implications of population strategies in Brazil. The government's laissez-faire policies favor those already in a favorable economic position, while serving to keep the lower classes and women in their place.⁸¹

Conclusions

I am reluctant to argue for raising the status of women in the context of population-reduction strategies, as Kennedy does, because such an argument implicitly tolerates women's rights but does not expressly recognize them first and foremost. This non-recognition of women's rights as human beings first and foremost throughout history has led to a much more horrible and depressing world than most of us would like to believe exists. Without such an express recognition, the link between population and women's status can just as easily be turned against women as used to defend their rights.

However, I would be lying if I denied that a link between population and women's status does exist, as Kennedy posits, and it is strong. Although societies should not selectively award women increased status only as a method of controlling population growth, raising the status of women may be the only mechanism by which to effectively control population growth.

Methods of population growth such as infanticide and abortion that do not rely on Kennedy's prescriptions of better education and a welcoming environment for women may work in small ways in the short term, but in the long term are clearly not the answer to slowing global birth rates. China and India, for all their notorious women's rights abuses, will still burst with people by 2050.

A much more effective solution would be to allow women, with their natural rights as full citizens and

⁷⁶. Ibid., p. 47–48.

⁷⁷. Ibid., p. 64.

⁷⁸. Ibid., p. 96–98.

⁷⁹. Ibid., p. 117.

⁸⁰. Ibid.

⁸¹. Ibid., p. 120–121.

members of society, full power to help control population growth. If world governments got out of women's way, population levels worldwide would drop faster than under the best, well-intentioned program of the United Nations today in countries where women are not free. Women have a direct stake in population strategies; global interests are letting key human resources and powerful motivations go unused in this fight by putting all sorts of other political issues ahead of women's emancipation and development. Furthermore, there is no other political, ideological, or ethnic constituency that possibly stands a chance of coordinating and cooperating with such a massive global effort as Kennedy envisions being necessary. As a Turkish proverb states, "Woman has no nation."

Male-dominated societies do not have the same, unified interest across borders in limiting population growth and that will inhibit any cohesive action against population into the next few decades at the very least. As the example of Brazil's government shows, men who do not have their personal futures on the line with regards to birth control are likely to factionalize along many divergent perceptions and twists on the problem. Men *are* important in family planning programs, and some men are as equally affected as women by the availability of birth control. The men with a stake similar to women's in the matter, however, cannot be relied on as a base of political support; these men may be a small constituency (single fathers?) or an economically disenfranchised group (poor rural peasants).

Women must be in positions to make population policy to avoid having such policy turned against them and used to reinforce the status quo. At this late date in history, a woman's reproductive powers are still being used everywhere to enslave her and rob her of a say in her destiny. It is vital for women that birth not be compulsory. It is also vital that birth control be available but not compulsory. The kind of world that results from using population as a weapon is a truly frightening vision of the twenty-first century—one that is already seen this century in many areas of the globe.

The United States should first and foremost support women's rights globally, if our country truly supports human rights and world development in less industrialized countries. First, the government should enforce and follow the UN Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which is an international treaty and bill of rights for women adopted during the UN Decade for Women. The convention details principles and standards for achieving equal rights for women and was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979. In effect at the end of 1981, the treaty's ratification or accession obligates governments to try to eliminate discrimination against women and to report these activities to a UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination one year after ratification and every four years thereafter. Governments cannot contravene any of the principles set forth in the document after signing. One hundred and five governments had ratified the treaty by 1991.⁸²

Among other things, its thirty articles define discrimination as any distinction, restriction, or exclusion made on the basis of sex; ensures that family education teaches both men and women to share responsibility for child-rearing; provides equal rights in education, including access to health and family planning information; provides for employment rights, including maternity leave and health protection; declares the right to equal access to health care services and family planning measures; recognizes the particular problems of rural women; and recognizes rights to equality and freedom in marriage and motherhood, including freedom to choose number and spacing of children and equal rights and responsibilities with men in marriage and child-rearing.⁸³

It almost goes without saying that the U.S. is the only industrialized nation that has signed the convention but not yet ratified it.⁸⁴ CEDAW has been "under review" by the State Department for eleven years.

Which brings me to my second recommendation: Americans should foremost support women's rights everywhere if they are still interested in human rights anywhere. In places from Bosnia-Herzegovina to Brazil, the health of women's rights are often inextricably linked to the overall health of human rights in a country.

⁸². Gayle Kirshenbaum, "Why Aren't Human Rights Women's Rights?" *Ms.* July/August 1991.

⁸³. "The United Nations Convention On the Elimination Of All Forms Of Discrimination Against Women," International Women's Rights Action Watch (Minneapolis, Minn.: Humphrey Institute, 1986), p. 1-3.

⁸⁴. Kirshenbaum, p. 14.

Also, given the historical record, it will only be intense pressure from Americans that makes women's rights a matter of national interest to the U.S. government. "Until U.S. women put the pressure on Congress, ratification (of CEDAW) is not going to happen," says activist Arvonne Fraser. "Mainstream women's organizations in this country must develop an international consciousness."⁸⁵

Changes to the status quo will not be easy. But, as Kennedy says, there is a greater threat in not changing than in courting the risks resulting from meddling with the existing structures. After realizing all that women are subjected to around the globe, how much worse do we really think the world could get? Americans, and women in particular must be prepared to take a strong stand in defense of what they believe in, instead of standing for nothing, if we as a nation and a people do not want to fall for anything. Political instability is far preferable to ethical instability.

And if this Institute does not support the kinds of policies favoring women's rights and women's control of their own bodies, then I quit.

Giertz concludes her report.

85. Ibid.

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