

Population Control and Reproductive Rights: Mutual Coercion, Decreased Consumption, Women's Empowerment, or Human Extinction?

Imagine it is the year 2050. The human population has continued to grow at its current rate, and there are 10.6 billion people on the planet. Although population growth in developed countries has been stable for the last 40 years, it has escalated exponentially in developing countries, and they now contain 88% of the total world population (Kates, 52). Consumption levels have not decreased in developed countries and have dramatically increased in the developing world. Natural resources are scarce; there is limited arable land for agriculture, and species of plants and animals are rapidly becoming extinct. The Earth is unable to provide sufficient subsistence to all its human inhabitants, and it is unclear how the human race will continue its existence on a

withering planet completely overcome with the destructive lifestyles of an increasing number of human beings. Is there any way to solve this problem and save the endangered human species? Or are humans destined to join their fellow biotic community members and face extinction?



Human population increase is a significant contributing factor to the environmental problems currently plaguing the Earth: climate change, resource scarcity, decreased arable land, clean air, and fresh water. The Earth is reaching its carrying capacity, but humans are continuing to reproduce at a considerable, seemingly uncontrollable rate. The human species needs to find a way to inhibit population growth

before we reach the year 2050 when it will be too late. We need a way to prevent the aforementioned scenario from becoming a reality; but how?

Many environmental philosophers, including Carol Kates, author of “Reproductive Liberty and Overpopulation,” stress the importance of reducing the human population in future generations, or at least keeping it constant, if we hope to prevent imminent ecological disaster that will threaten the very ability of human beings (as well as all other life forms) to continue life on planet Earth. They argue that the environmental damage associated with population growth cannot be solved by technology and economic development alone; even with accelerated economic growth, population levels will cause an “impossibly large ecological deficit” (Kates, 53). As an alternative, Kates proposes a solution involving an “enforceable rational agreement” to use “mutual coercion mutually agreed upon” in order to limit reproduction (Kates, 56).

Stanley Warner disagrees with Kates’s proposal in his appraisal of her article, “Reproductive Liberty and Overpopulation: A Response,” claiming that rather than focusing on population reduction, we need to focus on decreasing consumption: “Until unending economic growth is confronted directly, any gains from slowing world population in the next 50 years will soon be washed away” (Warner, 399). While each of these proposed solutions to overpopulation focuses on a critical aspect of the problem, neither will sufficiently solve the crisis on its own. Human population must be controlled, though without sacrificing human rights through coercion, and human consumption must be reduced while promoting sustainable development, simultaneously increasing women’s family planning resources and level of reproductive empowerment. If such a

solution is not capable of curbing population growth and resulting in sustainable human life, perhaps the ultimate resolution will come from the extinction of the human species.

Enforced mutual coercion as a means of preventing overpopulation

According to Kates, the only way to solve the problem of human overpopulation is to enforce strict reproductive restrictions as well as limits on consumption in all countries. She disagrees with liberal feminist arguments that reproduction is a necessary human right that must be preserved, and rather sees it as a right that must be sacrificed in order to preserve other personal liberties, such as continued life on a planet with sufficient resources equally available to all (Kates, 59). Essentially, she is arguing for the sovereignty of the good over the right, claiming that we must look at the human species as a whole, each sacrificing our own human right to reproduce for the promotion of the common good: “Rights and freedoms are subject to limitations to protect the rights and freedoms of others and to ensure the ‘general welfare’” (Kates, 60).

Kates’s proposed solution holds each country responsible for enforcing its own sustainable living practices; all countries must make an agreement to eliminate their own ecological deficit, finding a sustainable balance between consumption and population size (Kates, 71). She endorses forced population control, using coercion when necessary, putting the power in the hands of the state to control people’s reproductive behavior. In addition, she denies the practicality of decreasing reproductive rates through women’s empowerment alone, claiming that while it may be a functional solution, it proves too time-consuming and inefficient to solve the crisis of overpopulation before the problem becomes unfixable and the Earth loses its ability to sustain the human species.

Preventing the effects of overpopulation by decreasing human consumption

Stanley Warner disagrees with Kates, asserting that a practical and effective solution must be focused on sustainable development and a reduction in human consumption. He declares the implausibility of Kates's solution, restating the liberal feminist argument that reproduction is an inherent human right that must be preserved. While he agrees with the moral necessity of choosing the sovereignty of the good over the right, he does not foresee coercive measures to restrict reproduction as capable of gaining worldwide support. Instead, he claims, we should focus on promoting more sustainable lifestyles and achieving a significantly lower consumption rate; not only is this solution more feasible and more likely to be accepted by the international community, it will also decrease human damage to the environment regardless of human population size (Warner, 396).



Warner emphasizes the significant effect economic growth can have on people's reproductive choices; in his view, we need "policies that redistribute income both within and across countries, reaping the gain that raising the income of the poor often leads to voluntary decisions to have fewer children" (Warner, 399). He stresses the correlation between economic growth and access to universal family planning, free contraceptives, and voluntary abortions, articulating the fact that when birth control is readily available and affordable, reproduction rates decrease (Warner, 399). Promoting sustainable development, increasing women's access to contraceptives and effective family planning

resources while reducing human consumption to a sustainable level is a solution Warner claims will be both practical and effective.

Choosing the sovereignty of the good over the right or facing human extinction

The environmental crisis requires a decrease in the rate of human reproduction, staying within the limits of the Earth's carrying capacity, if the human species hopes to continue life on this planet. Humans are morally obligated as members of the biotic community to choose the sovereignty of the good over the right and limit their reproduction to prevent overpopulation and immense ecological destruction. Sustainable development and a decrease in consumption are not enough to hinder negative human



effects on the environment. For this reason, a combination of both population reduction and decreased consumption are necessary; however, the human right to reproduce is not one that can be controlled through coercive means, as Kates proposes, using incentives and penalties which would compromise voluntary

choice and further inequality caused by economic disparity.

Education about climate change and sustainable lifestyle choices must be increased and improved while simultaneously providing contraceptive resources and empowering women to control their reproduction. If education about environmental issues and sustainable living practices as well as women's empowerment to promote limits on reproduction does not bring about decreases in human reproduction rates and resource use, coercive means are not an alternative solution. If humans cannot adapt to their environment effectively and learn to uphold the well-being of the entire species over their own individual rights, as is necessary for human survival, perhaps the human

species is not capable of successful adaptation and is destined to face extinction.

Continuing reproduction at current rates will explicitly defy the laws of evolution, in that human overpopulation will inhibit human life entirely, and no humans, regardless of their ability to pass on their genes to future generations, will survive. We need to do all we can to promote responsible and limited reproduction as well as sustainable development and decreased consumption, but we need to do so in a way that upholds human rights and places the responsibility on the individual to choose the sovereignty of the good over the right; ultimately, if the human race is incapable of making such a moral sacrifice, perhaps we no longer belong on the Earth as members of the biotic community.

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