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## The Right to Family Planning

Contribution to GTI Forum [The Population Debate Revisited](#)

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I want to remedy the omission in the discussion so far of the human suffering caused by exponential population growth, and of the fact that social justice and stemming population growth actually go together. In short, both are essential from an ecological perspective. Just consider the evidence that human activities are causing the mass extinction of other species, and that this, plus the destruction of wild habitats and their diversity and beauty, are directly related to exponential population growth.

### **Human Suffering**

Women and children have been most directly affected by overpopulation. This is not to say that men do not also suffer as a result of overpopulation in our finite planet, but I am here addressing a glaring blind spot in population discussions.

First of all, women give birth. This is a simple and obvious fact, and denying women the human right to choose how many children they birth goes against report after report documenting that worldwide most women want to limit the number of children they have. From a human rights perspective, a woman's right to decide how many children she has is a basic human right.

Second, including the human rights of children and women under the aegis of human rights theory and action has finally been recognized by the United Nations and human rights activists in general. This was only after a long struggle, to be clear. In 1987, for example, I wrote the first paper published in *The Human Rights Quarterly* on what later became known as "women's rights are human rights," and have similarly advocated for children's human rights.<sup>1</sup>

Third, consider that women and children are, according to the United Nations, worldwide the mass of the poor and the poorest of the poor, which is often a reason given by women for wanting fewer children, i.e., so that they can better take care of those they already have.

Again, men also suffer due to overpopulation, but giving birth to unwanted children who often die young is a terrible price to pay for not providing adequate family planning to women and empowering them to make their own decisions.

### **Who Was Behind the “Taboo”?**

The taboo of including population as key to ecological balance originated at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro when a group of regressive Catholic and Muslim leaders organized by the then even more fiercely anti-family planning Vatican argued that efforts to stem population growth are part of a genocidal plot against the developing world (where population growth was exponentially growing due to medical and other interventions). In reality, the Vatican and the Catholic and Muslim leaders who spread this falsehood shared a different agenda: keeping women in their “traditional” subservient place by opposing family planning and denying women other life options than being wives and mothers in male-controlled families.

Again, during the 1994 UN Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, the Vatican used these same alliances, under the guise of morality, to divert attention from the worldwide suffering of women and children due to inadequate reproductive health care and family planning, as well as to obscure the direct connection between exponential population growth and our growing ecological problems. These ploys were unfortunately successful, and it has become “taboo” to talk about population in relation to the environment, even in liberal circles. Stemming population growth (and hence access to family planning and to life options other than being mothers), however, is not only a key environmental issue but also a fundamental human right that is a prerequisite to social justice.

## Connecting the Dots

I want to close by pointing to a pattern that is vital for building a more ecologically, economically, and technologically sustainable future. This is that a characteristic of violent, repressive, regressive regimes is this ranking of male over female and rigid gender stereotypes. Consider that this is the case for not only such rightist regimes as Hitler's Germany but also for leftist ones like Stalin's former USSR (both Western and secular). It is also the case for religious regimes like ISIS and the Taliban (which are noted for violence) or Western religious fundamentalism (which is actually domination fundamentalism, espousing theocratic male control in both the family and the state or tribe). Consider that it is not coincidental that Putin a few years ago radically reduced the penalty for violence in families such that today in Russia the penalty for hurting or killing a woman or child in a family is substantially lower than for hurting or killing a stranger. Putin, a strongman ruler who exports toxic fuels and launched the war against Ukraine, recognizes the connection between an authoritarian, violent, male-dominated family and an authoritarian, violent, male-dominated state. Surely, we should do the same. These are patterns of major importance for effectively addressing environmental sustainability, social justice, economic inequality, and respect for human rights.

## Endnotes

1. Riane Eisler, "Human Rights: Toward an Integrated Theory of Action," *Human Rights Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (1987): 287-308; "Protecting the Majority of Humanity: Towards an Integrated Approach to Crimes against Present and Future Generations," in *Sustainable Development, International Criminal Justice, and Treaty Implementation*, eds. Sébastien Jodoin and Marie-Claire Cordonier Segger (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 305-326.

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## About the Author



Riane Eisler is President of the Center for Partnership Systems and Editor-in-Chief of the Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies. Internationally known as a systems scientist, conference keynoter, consultant, and attorney working for the human rights of women and children, she is the author of groundbreaking books such as *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future*, *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics*, and *Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives, and Future*. She holds a JD from the University of California, Los Angeles. In recognition of her work for a more equitable, peaceful, and sustainable future, she has received honorary PhDs and peace, humanitarian, and human rights awards.

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