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The Root Cause: Patriarchal Capitalism Contribution to GTI Forum [The Population Debate Revisited](#)

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Thanks to [Ian Lowe](#) and everyone else for a provocative dialogue about population. When Ian Lowe wrote that we will be running up the down escalator on environmental progress until we address “a significant, yet underacknowledged, driver of environmental degradation, namely, the size and growth of the human population,” it got my attention. Drivers are important, and to uncover them requires a fairly rigorous systems analysis. They are also often counterintuitive, which tends to clash with mindsets that rely on old assumptions.

Many comments seem to assume that human population growth is akin to cells dividing in a Petri dish: we will keep expanding up to and beyond the limits. Others recognize the links between population growth and the larger economic, social, and political systems at work. An exponentially growing population is not a foregone conclusion: witness the places in the world where zero or negative population growth has been achieved. If overpopulation is a problem, and I do not deny that it is, then the question needs to be what drives population growth, rather than assuming it is an independent variable that drives environmental problems.

It was interesting to read about the work that certain patriarchal religious groups did to undermine the efforts to raise population as a problem at the Rio Earth Summit. Looking at the current Supreme Court in the US, we can see the same misogynistic religious influence at work. But even with the background noise from people opposed to birth control and reproductive health for women, the main reason it has been a taboo subject in environmental circles has more to do with the embedded racism, classism, and sexism that has dominated the population discussion. It deflects attention from affluence and overconsumption and has been used in

terrible ways on people who are not the problem. Lately in Vermont, for example, people are finally coming to terms with the state's history of eugenics between 1931 and 1957, which entailed the forced sterilization on indigenous, Black, and other people who were deemed genetically inferior.

White patriarchal supremacy is the dominant paradigm that shapes a lot of the powerful institutions in our world—the churches, the monetary system, the governments, academia, the businesses, even the modern “nuclear family.” In this paradigm, women start as the property of men; the fight we have had over centuries now for equal rights has not yet been won. In addition to forcing women into a subservient position, this same system impoverishes millions for profit. The resulting poverty, human suffering, and desperation has been well-documented as a driver of population. The combination of the oppression of women and systemic impoverishment is a toxic mix; these are arguably the drivers of our environmental catastrophe, not population itself. For those familiar with Donella Meadows's ranking of effective leverage points, population would be at the bottom of the list; the mindsets that create the system goals are at the top.

Population growth can therefore be seen as a side effect of predatory capitalism, the economy of white patriarchal supremacy. To fix predatory capitalism requires changing the economic structures of ownership, money, markets, management, and metrics, about which I have written [here](#). To do that, we need to change the dominant, dominator paradigm. Riane Eisler's work toward a [partnership paradigm](#) is instructive in this area, along with the people all over the world who are working on a regenerative future.

About the Author



Gwendolyn Hallsmith is the founder and executive director of Global Community Initiatives. She is the author of six books on sustainable community and economic development and has worked with communities all over the world to foster caring communities, local economies, good governance, efficient services, and healthy ecosystems. She founded Vermonters for a New Economy to work on economic solutions at the state level, and the Headwaters Garden and Learning Center, an ecovillage in Cabot, VT. She has a master's degree in Public Policy from Brown University and did additional graduate work at the University of British Columbia and the Andover Newton Divinity School.

About the Publication

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