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Transforming
Reproductive Choice*

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PREFACE

This book has evolved over a period of 25 years. My interest in domestic and international population policies was first stimulated by Kingsley Davis, Judith Blake, William Petersen, and Calvin Goldscheider during graduate studies in sociology and demography at the University of California, Berkeley in the late 1960s. In 1972 I took a year's leave from the University of California at Davis to work with the Section on the Status of Women at the United Nations in New York. Energized by the emerging feminist movement and eager to put the tools of social demography to good use, I prepared a report on *The Status of Women and Family Planning* for the celebration of World Population Year in 1974 and International Women's Year in 1975. The study illuminated the connections between women's reproductive and productive lives in ways that have defined virtually all of my subsequent work on women's employment, marriage and childbearing, and the impact of development on women.

The international conferences on women sponsored by the United Nations in Mexico City in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980, and Nairobi in 1985, along with their associated nongovernmental forums, inspired women throughout the world to work for the elimination of oppressive gender ideologies and practices and for the equitable development of their own societies. The U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979) is particularly important as an international standard-bearer for women's rights as broadly defined. In addition, the population conferences held by the United Nations in Bucharest in 1974 and Mexico City in 1984, together with their nongovern-

mental forums, pulled together policymakers, social scientists, and other activists in a broad-ranging effort to focus attention on problems of population growth and distribution as experienced in diverse national settings. Because these documents and events have reflected and shaped much of the thinking in the international arena about women's rights and population processes, they form a logical framework for this book.

Many people share responsibility for the ideas and motivation that have resulted in this book. Collectively, they include friends and colleagues at the United Nations, the Department of Sociology at the University of California at Davis, the Departments of Sociology and of Demography at the University of California at Berkeley, the Committee on Population of the National Research Council, the Association for Women in Development, the Population Council, and the International Women's Health Coalition in New York. Individually, for their valued friendship over the years, their inspired intellect, and their commitment to "the cause," I am deeply indebted to Judith Bruce, Joan Dunlop, Karen Paige Ericksen, Judith Helzner, Rounaq Jahan, Judith Justice, Kristin Luker, Judith V. May, Emily C. Moore, Hanna Papanek, Harriet B. Presser, Judith Stacey, Judith Tandler, Irene Tinker, and Norma J. Wikler. I couldn't have done it without them. Others who should be listed here are excluded only for reasons of space. A special note of appreciation goes to Adrienne Germain of the International Women's Health Coalition, coauthor of chapter 4, for persuading me to work with the Coalition's international programs on behalf of women's reproductive rights and health and for contributing many of the ideas in this book. By a long and gradual process of osmosis, I have come to think of them as my own.

INTRODUCTION

One of the major questions addressing the world today is whether the growth of the global population will slow down sufficiently over the next two decades to preserve a sustainable standard of living for all people without resorting to coercive measures of population control. On the one hand, the urgency of the global environmental crisis is eliciting new calls for decisive action on the "population front" in the most populous southern¹ countries, excluding China, along with charges that the world will soon be forced to reckon with the consequences of years of population policy neglect (e.g., Ehrlich and Ehrlich 1990; Brown et al. 1991; "Priority Statement on Population" 1991). On the other hand, feminists and women's health advocates in both southern and northern countries are increasingly outspoken in their criticisms of population control rhetoric that blames Third World women for their "excess fertility" and leads to overzealous recruitment of family planning "acceptors" and other program abuses (e.g., Hartmann 1987; Sen and Grown 1987; Karkal and Pandey 1989). These are not new arguments. They first burst into public consciousness in the 1960s as the U.S. government began its large-scale funding of contraceptive research and domestic and international family planning programs. The arguments are becoming increasingly powerful, however, as calls for stronger antinatalist measures intensify on one side and resistance to the rhetoric hardens on the other. At the same time, rising waves of religious fundamentalism, ethnic nationalism, and an organized international "right-to-life" movement threaten to undermine much of what has been achieved in the fields of family planning, women's rights, and reproductive freedom over the past three decades.

Feminists in many countries have been caught between the antinatalist ideologies of the “controlistas” and the pronatalist ideologies of nationalist and fundamentalist forces, both of which lay claim to the control of women’s bodies and women’s lives. The controlista ideologies have tended to elicit greater resistance from feminists, however, in large part because they are seen as First World programs aimed at limiting the growth of Third World populations by forcing women to use imported and imposed birth control technologies under unsafe conditions. As a consequence, some radical feminist groups insist that family planning programs in most southern countries are by definition coercive and that all artificial methods of fertility control should be rejected. This is an extreme position, of course, but it illustrates the extent to which opposition can go. Indeed, the most radical feminist position on birth control has come dangerously full circle to join that of some anti-choice “right-to-life” organizations. There is also a tendency among some feminist groups to deny the existence of a global population problem. By focusing on pervasive social injustice and inequalities in the distribution of resources across and within nations they do a great service to our understanding of the root causes of poverty. Unfortunately, however, the analysis often leads to the conclusion that family planning programs are unnecessary, or that they must be rejected under certain political circumstances, or that the fundamental problems of poverty and injustice must be solved first. Where does this leave those women who are desperately trying to preserve their health and regulate their fertility by spacing their pregnancies and resorting to unsafe abortion? How does one justify withholding from poor women in southern countries those methods of fertility control that wealthy women in the south and the north take for granted? In what way is the principle of distributive justice or equity—or, indeed, of “sisterhood”—served by these restrictions?

There is an urgent need for a gathering of feminist forces that will (1) recognize that population growth at the global level is a problem that must be solved; (2) articulate a set of feminist principles on which a responsive population (reproductive) policy could be based; (3) build alliances with human rights advocates, development specialists, government planners, legislators, and the population/family planning community in the policy-making process; and (4) work to extend to all women the full range of sexual and reproductive health and rights to which they are, in principle, entitled.

At the same time, population policymakers, researchers, and family planning providers must learn to listen closely to what women’s health advocates and women of all social classes have to say about their fears, concerns, and needs. Population researchers and planners are dealing in fundamental ways with women’s bodies and lives, yet the language of their discourse reveals little awareness of this basic fact. Preoccupations

with the mathematical modeling of population processes, the biotechnology of contraceptive development, and the demographic effectiveness and efficiency of various program interventions have taken precedence. Moreover, the rhetoric of population control that has tainted contraceptive service delivery in so many countries does a disservice to the cause of empowering women to take control over their own lives. It also devalues women's concerns about their reproductive health and their children's survival and security.

How can this chasm be bridged? Through dialogue, through cooperation, through reformulating the goals and methodologies of population policies and programs. It is time for a sea change in our thinking, for a return to the ideas of some of the early feminist crusaders about the liberating capacity of birth control in the context of broader social transformation. The purpose of this book is to take one step in that direction.

The essays presented here, several of which have been published previously in different form, present a particular point of view. They represent the perspective of a feminist demographer (if this is not a contradiction in terms) who is passionately committed to the idea that a woman's ability to decide whether, when, if, and with whom to have sex and have children is a fundamental component of her rights as a woman and of her human dignity. The perspective is undoubtedly a western one in its emphasis on an intellectual tradition that values individual freedom and personal choice. It is liberal in its pragmatic approach and its willingness to work within existing institutions to bring about change. It is radical in its condemnation of male power and privilege and the universal oppression of girls and women. It is optimistic in its hope that reason and good intentions will prevail, and pessimistic in its fears that they will not. Above all, it is an appeal to listen to the voices of the world's women, in all their diversity, of which only a barest hint can be presented here.

The book is organized in four parts. The first part, "Women's Rights as Human Rights," lays the groundwork for the discussion of women's rights and population policies throughout the book. It addresses several broad issues relating to the evolution of concepts of human rights in western thought and the progressive identification of women's rights and, more recently, of sexual and reproductive rights as legitimate human rights concerns. Many of these ideas are reflected in United Nations documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, both of which set international standards for the exercise of individual freedoms and social entitlements.

Part Two includes three chapters about the politics of feminism and birth control/population control as social movements. The intent here is to tell a story about how feminists and advocates of population control have come to have such contradictory views about the nature of women's

reproductive capacities and needs. It is a story of misunderstandings, ideological differences, and divergent political agendas. Part Three, "Women's Rights, Women's Lives," looks more closely at the conditions of women's lives and their sexual and reproductive choices. These chapters draw on findings from surveys and ethnographic research in southern countries, with some comparisons with the north. Part Four, "Toward a Feminist Population Policy," lays out a policy agenda: a set of propositions defining a woman-centered reproductive policy and program based on the concepts of sexual and reproductive health and women's rights. Recognizing that women around the world define and interpret many of their needs quite differently, this chapter draws on a set of minimal but essential components of a feminist perspective. These include building on women's shared and diverse social experiences in program design, and recognizing that girls and women everywhere are subject—although in different ways and degrees—to oppression under patriarchy. Policies and programs must incorporate systematic means of recognizing the risks women face and strengthening alternative bases of survival, security, and empowerment.

The thesis of this book is that the exercise of women's reproductive rights depends in fundamental ways on the exercise of women's rights in other spheres. Policies to reduce fertility can accomplish their objectives by eliminating the "coercive pronatalism" inherent in patriarchal institutions and gender inequalities in the family and society without introducing an equally coercive antinatalist agenda. Indeed, population control policies and programs would probably be unnecessary if women could exercise their basic economic, political, and social rights and genuine reproductive choice. In addition, programs need to address the widespread unmet need in many countries for reproductive health services that would enable women to regulate the timing of their childbearing and, in particular, help women to avoid unwanted and mistimed pregnancies and unsafe abortion.

The "population problem" and its possible solutions need to be redefined. Women's rights advocates throughout the world are increasingly united in their commitment to the protection of women's sexual and reproductive rights, if not in their analysis of the major threats to these rights or in their political agendas. At the same time, population policy-makers are increasingly concerned about the sluggish pace of fertility decline in some countries and the tremendous growth projected for the global population before numbers can be stabilized. Past efforts at population control have triggered resistance from many quarters based on charges of cultural insensitivity, program abuses, and even genocide. The premise of this book is that a policy approach that places the entitlement to high quality, comprehensive reproductive health services at the center of a focused program for promoting women's economic, social, and po-

litical rights could help to (1) legitimize efforts at population regulation; (2) promote their effectiveness, efficiency, and equity; and (3) win the support of advocates of human rights, women's rights, and reproductive freedom, who should be natural allies in a common endeavor.

Note

1. The terms "southern" and "northern" are used in this book as synonyms for "developing" and "industrialized" or "less developed" and "more developed." The line between north and south is drawn along the southern border of the United States and Europe, the former Soviet Union and Japan, and then dips down to include Australia and New Zealand. The more neutral geographical terms are intended to avoid the assumptions that all "developing" countries are indeed developing, or that all "industrialized" countries are industrialized.

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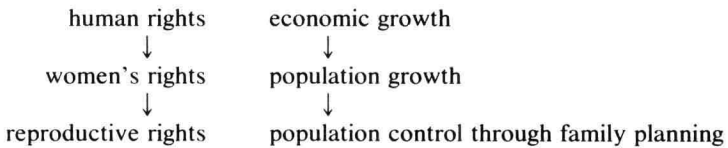
Part One

WOMEN'S RIGHTS AS HUMAN RIGHTS

1

HUMAN RIGHTS, WOMEN'S RIGHTS, AND REPRODUCTIVE FREEDOM: THE EVOLUTION OF IDEAS

Two streams of thought with somewhat parallel histories shape the arguments in this book. In an oversimplified fashion they can be summarized as follows:



The first stream of thought originates in concepts of human rights expressed in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theories about the “natural” or inalienable rights of man. Ideas about individual liberties underlying the French and American revolutions—that is, about civil and political rights—created a fertile ground for later ideas about economic and social rights, or entitlements. In the nineteenth century, a few liberal reformers and radical utopians proposed the startling idea that the rights of man might properly extend to women, too. Thus was born the first movement for female emancipation which, in its second wave in the mid-twentieth century, became a movement for women’s liberation. Ultimately, ideas about reproductive rights and freedoms emerged from both sets of principles. The idea that family planning was a human right—that is, that couples should be free to decide the number and spacing of their children—was first recognized at the 1968 U.N. International Conference

on Human Rights in Teheran, Iran. Feminists since the nineteenth century have elaborated on the idea of reproductive rights by articulating the principle of a woman's right to "control her own body." This idea transcends the narrower U.N. formulations to encompass a broader range of sexual and reproductive rights and freedoms.

The second stream of thought flows through a sequence of theories about the relationship between population size and growth rates and the "wealth of nations." These ideas can be traced from the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European mercantilists who stressed the economic and political advantages of large and growing populations, to the English and French utopians who believed that social reforms and modern science could provide for any size population, to Malthusian thinkers who—taking prevailing social institutions as fixed—believed that unrestrained population growth would perpetuate poverty and quickly outstrip the means of subsistence. The stream flows through a series of post-Malthusian theories of classical and neo-classical economists, socialists and Marxists, demographic transitionists, modern-day Malthusians, and free marketeers, each with their own notions of how population growth affects economic growth and of their policy implications (United Nations 1973b:33–63). Out of Malthus was born the nineteenth-century movement for birth control in Europe and North America. And out of the birth control movement was born the twentieth-century movement for family planning and population control in developing countries.

The two streams of thought incorporate somewhat contradictory ideas. But there are also commonalities in their origins and evolution, how the ideas are represented in laws and policies, what their adherents and opponents believe, and how they are played out in everyday life. Relationships among these ideas and social movements are explored in this book with a special emphasis on women's rights and population policies. This connection can be understood only within the framework of the other linkages, however. How are reproductive rights related to human rights, for example, and to what extent do population policies, laws, and programs infringe on rights that are considered universal (see the discussion in this chapter)? Are family planning programs more properly seen as the means of controlling population growth or the means of enabling women and men to exercise their reproductive rights (chapters 2 to 4)? How are reproductive rights related to the exercise of women's rights in other spheres such as education, employment, the family, and the community (see chapter 5)? How does fertility regulation affect the physical and emotional health of women in diverse circumstances, as women themselves perceive it (chapter 6)? Does the right to family planning articulated in U.N. declarations include a right to abortion as well (chapter 7)? Finally, how can the principles of human rights, women's rights, and reproductive

rights be integrated in population policies that effectively *define* the sexual and reproductive rights of women and *protect* them from violations by agents of the family, the community, and the state (chapter 8)?

This chapter introduces the major themes of the book. It begins with the concept of *human rights*—of individual freedoms and social entitlements—as it has developed historically and is embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations. *Gender inequality* is introduced as a human rights issue in the discussion of the natural and social rights of women and their violation by customary beliefs and practices. The concept of *reproductive rights* draws on human rights principles of freedom and entitlement. It also draws on the feminist principle of a woman's right to control her own body, that is, her right not to be alienated from her sexual and reproductive capacity, and her right to the integrity of her physical person.

The discussion then turns to concepts of population and family planning. As a formal statement by a government of perceived demographic problems and desired policy goals and objectives, a *population policy* generally attempts to alter levels of fertility, mortality, and/or migration in order to bring demographic processes in balance with national development goals. Fertility policies may attempt to raise or lower birth rates, using direct or indirect means, targeting everyone or specific population subgroups. The role of *family planning* programs is to provide individuals and couples with the means to regulate their fertility more safely or effectively than indigenous methods may allow. It is not a means of lowering the birth rate per se, but of enabling people to achieve their own childbearing intentions.

Do population policies that attempt to raise or lower birth rates violate human rights? The discussion of how pronatalist and antinatalist policy interventions by governments may impinge on the exercise of human rights is followed by an analysis of the role of family and community institutions and interest groups that mediate between the individual and the state. These institutions can have powerful pronatalist agendas that may be reflected in, or counteracted by, government policies. Both public policies and kinship/community claims are potential violators of the rights of individuals. This double threat is especially compelling in the case of girls and women. The argument is made that the most fundamental threats to women's rights to sexual and reproductive self-determination can be found within the patriarchal family system. Patriarchal institutions are built on power hierarchies of age and gender in which girls and women have little control over their sexual and marital lives, the number and spacing of their children, and the allocation of and returns to their labor. The chapter concludes that the goal of a "rights-conscious" antinatalist population policy should be twofold: (1) to challenge patriarchal family