

Abortion and the Current Politics of Climate Change

By Rebecca Oas, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

As concern about climate change occupies an increasing amount of space in global policy discussions, and billions of dollars are allocated to climate-related measures, the international abortion advocacy movement is angling to get in on the action—and funding. Meanwhile, some groups seeking ways to mitigate climate change are eyeing fertility reduction, which some would call population control, as part of the solution. Mainstream groups promoting “sexual and reproductive health and rights” (SRHR)—including abortion—have taken pains to distance themselves from the excesses of the population control movement of past decades. However, those groups that have remained steadfastly committed to promoting a small family norm and reduced fertility are being once again emboldened by the current climate-related fears.

This *Definitions* examines how the abortion issue relates to the current global political discussion around climate change. It examines how the lingering memory of the “population bomb” that proved to be a dud informs the current debate, the role of the UN in historically pivoting away from the “population control” narrative, and how the rising concern of a “climate crisis” risks reanimating these old and dangerous ideas.



Pro-abortion groups are looking to piggyback on climate issues

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In November 2021, the United Nations Climate Change Conference, known as COP26, was hosted by the UK and held in Glasgow, Scotland. Prior to the meeting, a group of over 60 organizations sent a letter to COP26 president Alok Sharma demanding that some of the UK government’s allocated £11 billion of climate funding be spent on contraception.¹ If such a decision were made, the money would be used to fund abortion and the organizations that promote it around the world, like MSI Reproductive Choices, one of the signatories to the letter.

In an interview with *Global Citizen*, Angela Baschieri of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) expressed the hope for “more ambition in terms of climate financing. [...] We want to see more commitment and support to sexual and reproductive rights, family planning, and education.”²

While climate activists insist that ever more money is needed, funding for climate policies is immense and growing. In 2019/2020, an estimated USD \$321 billion was committed in public climate finance.³ Unsurprisingly, a wide variety of international organizations are vying for a piece of the pie, including abortion groups.

The leading international advocates for abortion, such as the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) and MSI Reproductive Choices (formerly known as Marie Stopes International), do not campaign for abortion alone, but for “sexual and reproductive health and rights” or SRHR. While this particular term has never been officially adopted nor defined by the UN General Assembly and does not enjoy global consensus, its proponents are unequivocal in asserting that it includes abortion.⁴ They rely heavily on a proposed definition set forth in a 2018 Lancet-Guttman Institute Commission that includes “safe and effective abortion services and care” as one of the services that should be considered as a right.⁵ Therefore, while SRHR may contain other uncontroversial elements, is not acceptable to those who oppose the creation of an international human right to abortion.

One might well ask why SRHR advocacy groups are demanding climate funding, or why those concerned with climate-related emergencies would want to give it to them. In the past, contraception and abortion were heavily promoted—and sometimes forcibly administered—in an effort to ward off the threat of overpopulation and resulting environmental devastation.

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In recent years, the leading mainstream international SRHR groups have taken pains to distance themselves from the toxic legacy of the population control and eugenics movements of the past. Instead, their message consists of two main points: first, that their essential work is being hampered by climate-related crises, and second, that increased support for SRHR will help build communities' resiliency in the face of future upheaval.

The first argument rests on the obvious notion that people in crisis tend to fare worse, whether that crisis is the result of conflict, natural disasters, or some other cause. When natural disruptions that advocates claim can be linked to climate change—such as floods, wildfires, increasingly violent and frequent storms, and prolonged droughts—occur, people affected suffer physical, economic, and other forms of hardship, and are sometimes faced with the choice between rebuilding their lives or migrating to places that are safer or more hospitable. Access to quality health services becomes more difficult. Supply chains are disrupted. These issues are far more widespread than abortion/contraception specifically, but the global SRHR movement has increasingly focused on humanitarian settings, including by attempting to insinuate a right to abortion in international humanitarian law.⁶

The argument that SRHR contributes to resiliency draws on assertions made in various multilateral agreements. In a position paper on SRHR and climate, IPPF states:

Sexual and reproductive health and rights are critical for advancing gender equality, health, and well-being and for overcoming marginalization and thus for strengthening individuals' and communities' resilience and capacity to adapt to the climate crisis.⁷

For support, they cite the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, adopted by the UN General Assembly, which includes the commitment to “strengthen the design and implementation of inclusive policies and social safety-net mechanisms” including access to “sexual and reproductive health.”⁸

The theme of environmental sustainability and climate change is already a mainstream piece of the global development agenda, as is the effort of SRHR groups to inject themselves into it. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), established in 2015, consist of seventeen goals with numerous targets intended to guide international development policy until 2030.⁹ The first of the SDGs is to “end poverty in all its forms everywhere.” Goal 13 calls for governments to “take urgent

action to combat climate change and its impacts by regulating emissions and promoting developments in renewable energy.”

When the SDGs were adopted, Ann Stars, then head of the pro-abortion Guttmacher Institute, triumphantly opined that SRHR had “become central to achieving the SDGs”:

For those in my field, the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals by the United Nations in September represented a critically important but little-noticed milestone: Sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights issues are now recognized explicitly — and from the outset — as integral to achieving those goals.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the groundwork had been laid for SRHR advocates to say that in an interdependent and interrelated network of goals and targets, their priorities were arguably just as important as anyone else’s.

While it is true that those terms were included in the SDGs, specifically the targets related to health and gender equality, the formulation “SRHR” was not. “Sexual and reproductive health” and “reproductive rights” were only included with caveats tying them back to prior UN agreements where abortion was excluded. Nevertheless, the groundwork had been laid for SRHR advocates to say that in an interdependent and interrelated network of goals and targets, their priorities were arguably just as important as anyone else’s.

Similarly, the UN and its agencies have strongly committed to including a “gender perspective” in all areas of their work. The fact that a commitment to being “gender-responsive” in taking action on climate can be found in the Paris Climate Agreement¹¹ was cited by Women Deliver as an example of a linkage between climate change and SRHR.¹²

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The quest to find further linkages is underway: in its climate position paper IPPF called on “donor governments and agencies to increase their funding support to civil society, multilateral agencies, and academic institutions to examine and document interlinkages between sexual and reproductive health and rights and the climate crisis.”¹³

Never waste a crisis or pass up a funding stream

In many ways, the effort to insinuate abortion and contraception into climate policy and gain access to related funding streams is

similar to the approach taken by the same organizations when the COVID-19 pandemic began.

If SRHR, including abortion, is considered essential during the acute stage of a pandemic, as the World Health Organization asserted,¹⁴ then emergency funding allocated to essential health services must support abortion and those who provide it. When the COVID-19 pandemic began, SRHR proponents immediately started calculating its impact on their work. In April 2020, a couple months after the first wave of lockdown policies, the Guttmacher Institute was raising the alarm that in some countries, abortion was not being classified as essential. They warned that abortions that would otherwise be “safe” would now be “unsafe.”¹⁵ Predictably, they concluded with a laundry list of their usual policy prescriptions including public funding for contraceptives, the use of telehealth for abortion, and the labeling of all SRHR services as essential.

Even as they lamented the negative impact of COVID-19 on their work, SRHR organizations were positioning themselves as key to the recovery process. Two representatives of the World Health Organization’s Partnership for Maternal, Newborn, and Child Health, one of whom was its board chair and former New Zealand prime minister Helen Clark, wrote an editorial urging the following:

To “build back better” from COVID-19, we need to put health on the top of global and national agendas, to prioritise [universal health coverage] with an emphasis on reducing inequities and confronting discrimination, and to enshrine SRHR at the centre of these efforts.¹⁶

No matter what the crisis, they argue that SRHR is too important to neglect in the face of disruption and must be central to any crisis response.

The most effective method, the authors argue, is education for girls and contraceptives.

The reemergence of a dangerous idea: rearming the population bomb

Even as SRHR advocacy groups attempt to latch onto the climate issue for their own opportunistic reasons, there are some within the climate policy world who see SRHR as a best-buy solution for averting a climate crisis. Among the most prominent is Project Drawdown, which published a New York Times bestselling book in 2017 listing what it believed to be the most effective ways of reducing greenhouse gases and global warming. The most effective method, the authors argue, is

education for girls and contraceptives. While it lists estimated costs for all the other methods, it refused to do so for family planning, as they argue it is “inappropriate to monetize a human right.” The central argument is that over 200 million women have an “unmet need” for family planning, although *Drawdown* repeats the common falsehood that this equates to “lack[ing] the necessary access to contraception.”¹⁷ In fact, very few women described as having an “unmet need” cite lack of access as the reason they are not using a contraceptive.¹⁸ Indeed, the world is awash in UN-style family planning.

Setting market saturation and the potential for coercion aside, Project Drawdown is careful to make its population arguments using the language of feminism and SRHR.

“The time is ripe to include women’s reproductive rights as part of our climate solutions toolbox,”¹⁹ Drawdown’s Kristen P. Patterson wrote last May in *Ms. Magazine*.

She expresses dismay that SRHR activists are unwilling to join her in making these arguments. “This hesitancy to link reproductive rights and climate dates back a few decades, and relates to a taboo around ‘population.’” She acknowledges that “a few countries” engaged in coercive population control tactics. She believes the shift from population arguments to women’s reproductive health that occurred at the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994) may have gone too far:

To this day, some SRHR advocates believe that any linkages with population or other sectors such as environmental conservation or climate change detract—and distract—from the message of SRHR for all and are tantamount to blaming women in the developing world for climate change.²⁰

In invoking population growth as a threat to the environment, a driver of climate change, and a potential policy target, Drawdown is touching a political third rail. Aware of the controversy, Drawdown published a list of talking points about its education and contraception recommendations. While stressing that education and SRHR “are both important due to the ancillary benefits they have as climate solutions,” Project Drawdown insists that it “does not advocate for ‘small’ or ‘ideal’ family sizes or limiting fertility; such policies can be racist, classist, or coercive.”²¹ Yet once the euphemistic language is reduced down to substance, this is exactly what they are promoting.

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Population arguments remain taboo among mainstream SRHR groups

Despite Drawdown’s efforts to step carefully around the political landmines left behind by the population policies of yesteryear, mainstream SRHR groups remained uneasy. In its position paper on climate and SRHR, IPPF distanced itself from Drawdown’s position, citing the organization by name. “Different stakeholders have pointed to contraception as an important intervention for climate change mitigation,” they wrote, yet such rhetoric and actions “have a long and dangerous history and still manifest today.”²² Of course, IPPF and other abortion groups understand that UN-style family planning programs inevitably lead to the same place as population arguments: smaller family size and reduced fertility rates.

MSI Reproductive Choices likewise stresses the fact that people in the global South are hardest hit by climate-related emergencies and “this is truly unfair given that women in the global south and their communities are by far the smallest contributors to the current climate crisis.”²³

Women Deliver, another group that advocates for SRHR, including abortion, takes a similarly defensive stance:

There are quantifiable linkages between population growth and climate change. However, population growth is not a main contributor to climate change. Any efforts related to reducing the unmet need for family planning for climate change mitigation purposes require a social justice and rights-based approach.²⁴

MSI and IPPF have faced controversy because of their founders’ historical links to the eugenics movement. MSI Reproductive Choices used to be Marie Stopes International, but changed its name to distance itself from its founder’s involvement with eugenics.²⁵ Planned Parenthood has likewise effaced references within its organization to its founder Margaret Sanger, who had similar views.

Women Deliver is a newer organization, but has faced its own reckoning in recent years as accusations of “toxic racism” within its ranks led to an overhaul of its leadership.²⁶ While these organizations and their allies are no strangers to controversy in their advocacy of abortion and gender ideology, they are nevertheless sensitive to the outrage that can arise when they are publicly associated with such things as population control, eugenics, and racism.

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Those who would rearm the population bomb

Notwithstanding the controversy, Drawdown's Patterson is not alone in thinking that the taboo associated with population policy is due for reconsideration. For some organizations, like the UK-based Population Matters, it has been and remains their central focus. When the COP26 meeting was being held in Scotland, Population Matters positioned a giant inflatable baby wearing a shirt emblazoned with the slogan "Smaller Families, Cooler Planet" outside the venue. It was set up as a protest to inform COP26 participants and the public at large that "for Brits who can make the choice, having one fewer child is one of the most effective single actions they can take over the long term to cut the emissions they are responsible for."²⁷

A picture of the giant baby was included in an article discussing a poll conducted by The Sunday Times that found that almost half of voters in Scotland believed that people should have fewer children in order to "help rescue the planet."²⁸ UK government statistics show that the number of births in Scotland in 2019 was the lowest ever recorded, and the Scottish total fertility rate was 1.37 children per woman, well below the replacement level of around 2.1.²⁹

Population Matters had previously created a video arguing that smaller family size is key to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. It included the line, "in rich countries where our impact is so excessively high, we can make a critical difference by having smaller families alongside reducing our runaway consumption."³⁰ The latter half of that recommendation receives curiously little attention in the brief video. Population Matters stresses that it opposes coercive fertility reduction methods such as forced abortions or sterilizations or hard caps on family size. It is also unequivocal that "in regard to abortion, Population Matters is pro-choice."³¹

Another outspoken proponent of policies promoting smaller families is Australian researcher Jane O'Sullivan of the University of Queensland and the organization Sustainable Population Australia (which describes itself as "seeking to protect the environment and our quality of life by ending population growth in Australia and globally, while rejecting racism and involuntary population control.")³²

O'Sullivan strongly criticizes the taboo around direct discussion of population growth perpetuated by mainstream SRHR organizations. "To meet the reproductive rights of women, access to contraception is emphasized, but the promotion of smaller families and direct efforts to change social norms

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around family size are avoided,”³³ she writes. She is similarly critical of approaches like the promotion of the so-called “demographic dividend,” in which it is argued that when birth rates fall, the proportion of working-age people in the population increases, driving up per capita economic production. This rationale was strongly promoted by UNFPA, particularly in high-fertility sub-Saharan Africa, but according to O’Sullivan, “demographic dividend theory provides no incentive to get fertility below replacement level, where it needs to be to end population growth.”

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“It is possible that climate change will provide an additional incentive for couples to limit childbearing,” O’Sullivan ponders, however “to date, such sentiments are too rare to alter national fertility appreciably.”³⁴ Moreover, O’Sullivan is not swayed by the type of arguments made in historian and Columbia University professor Matthew Connelly’s book *Fatal Misconception*, in which he argues that the coercive excesses of the population control movement were not only violations of basic human rights, but were also unnecessary to achieve a reduction in fertility, as countries that did not employ such tactics also saw birth rates fall as they became more developed.³⁵ “Recent history suggests that waiting for the indirect drivers of education, urbanization, and cultural globalization to shift social norms will be too slow,” O’Sullivan insists.

Conclusions: linkages between the politics of climate and the abortion debate

While divisions exist within the SRHR and family planning movements with regard to the framing of population and climate, it is important to note that with regard to abortion as a right, there is no controversy within these movements: they fully endorse it.

While divisions exist within the SRHR and family planning movements with regard to the framing of population and climate, it is important to note that with regard to abortion as a right, there is no controversy within these movements: they fully endorse it as a stand-alone right irrespective of its utility in reducing fertility and population growth as a way of mitigating climate effects. For the pro-life movement, it is important to be aware of how both the population-alarmism wing and the mainstream SRHR wing exemplified by global abortion giants like IPPF and MSI International are attempting to position themselves favorably and receive attention and funding as the global community directs billions of dollars toward climate policy. It is the same well-practiced opportunism these organizations demonstrated when the COVID-19 pandemic struck, and the incentives to vie for a piece of the pie are very real.

The intensifying rhetoric around climate-related issues poses a threat to pro-life interests inasmuch as abortion advocates are able to successfully tap into climate funding streams and use this and similar crises to make the case for their work,

It would be dangerous to ignore the ways in which the population crisis discourse is emboldening those who would promote policies to encourage fertility reduction and small family sizes.

bearing in mind that while SRHR includes more than abortion, its advocates always, inevitably, regard abortion as one of its irreducible parts.

Meanwhile, it would be risky to ignore the ways in which the population crisis discourse is emboldening those who would promote policies to encourage fertility reduction and small family sizes. Given the history of coercion, including in its subtler forms, associated with population control, it would be dangerous to allow the ideas that empowered its excesses to creep back into the political mainstream.

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