

# Environmental Justice /

# Reproductive Justice:

## *History Gives Us the Power to Act*

Reproductive rights have been an integral part of the Environmental Justice Movement since its inception, as well as in our country's history of colonization. Just as race and class play a role in environmental racism and injustice, so too does gender. Sexual harassment, rape and kidnapping of indigenous women are rampant in our history, from the slave experiences of Black women in southern plantations, to Mexican and Indian *criadas* (servants). Women are forced to provide sexual duties as well as hard labor, cleaning, and caring for children with little or no regard for their own health or dignity. The mail-order bride and sex slave trade which has oppressed Asian and Pacific Islander women continues today, affecting other cultures and races. Even population control programs are examples of reproductive racism.

The Environmental Justice Movement has laid bare the legacy of environmental racism and injustice in our country. Poor women of color and their children are more vulnerable to polluting substances, bearing cumulative and disparate risks from pollutants primarily as a result of their race, culture and economic status. Across the country in poor urban areas, children of color report to emergency rooms for asthma attacks in far greater percentages than their white, wealthier counterparts. Children in environmentally vulnerable communities are especially at risk because of their developing bodies, as are women who are the incubators of human life.

### REPRODUCTION AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

This issue of women of color reproductive rights is about opposing regulation of women's bodies and risks to our health, while affirming our human right to procreate. When it comes to procreation, the right to have children, or not, may weigh equally as a result of our lived experiences with colonialism, and now globalization. Social constructions of race, class, gender, over population, immigration, and biotechnological research, including genetic engineering and nanotechnology, play into this discussion, as well as the more traditional themes of environmental justice.

Third World countries and poor communities have been the guinea pigs for testing drugs, contraceptives, social control programs, industry processes, and weapons by the United States and other

industrialized countries. Poor women of color live in communities that are unwilling hosts to dirty and polluting industries and processes. Women are further exposed in their places of work where there is a lack of protection and information.

Although work place conditions have improved with Right-To-Know laws and enhanced protective procedures, there is still poor regulation and enforcement of toxics by our governments. Of the 84,000 chemicals in the federal government's Toxic Substances Control Act inventory, only a few hundred have been tested.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Native, Chicana, Black and Puerto Rican and other Third World women were sterilized without their consent or knowledge. A class action lawsuit filed in federal court in 1973 estimated that 100,000 to 150,000 poor women in the United States had been sterilized annually under federally funded programs. Almost half of these women were Black. The film *La Operación* documents colonial and imperialistic sterilization programs in Puerto Rico.

At the time of its release in 1987, *La Operación* claimed that one third of Puerto Rican woman had been sterilized. Sterilization was an integral part of U.S. policy in Puerto Rico, part of Operation Bootstrap — an ambitious industrialization program subsidized by the U.S. government. Part of this “forced” industrialization of Puerto Rico from 1947-65 was the government promotion of birth control via sterilization. Sterilization and migration were offered as solutions to eliminate

unemployment, inadequate housing, poor nutrition, and substandard healthcare.

Puerto Rican women were hired as cheap labor and offered free family planning at clinics in the work place. Much of this so-called family planning was paid for by US AID grant money. The myth of overpopulation was used to encourage emigration from Puerto Rico to the United States, in particular New York. The film documented the stories of mothers, grandmothers and sisters who were sterilized without their consent, and interviewed others about the myth that sterilization (tubal ligation)

can be “easily reversed.”

As the Environmental Justice Movement has uncovered and challenged environmental racism and injustice in the United States, the intersections of environmental justice and reproductive justice have become obvious. Reproductive rights organizations have become active in researching and identifying environmental and biotechnology risks to reproduction. Foundations are funding women's reproductive rights groups. Sister Song (Atlanta, GA) collaborates with environmental justice

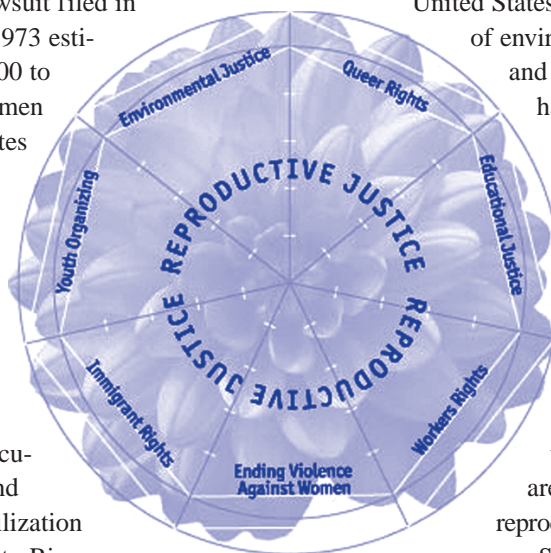
organizations to develop a curriculum on the intersections of environmental justice (EJ) and reproductive justice (RJ), to strengthen the natural alliances of the environmental justice and reproductive justice communities and organizations. Through my affiliation with the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice (SNEEJ), I have represented a rural EJ perspective in Sister Song's collaboration, researching and sharing

knowledge and strategies about the intersections of environmental and reproductive justice. It has been exciting to be able to develop relationships between the environmental and reproductive justice movements. I am optimistic that these alliances will create movement, rather than competition for funding.

### TOXIC CHEMICALS

One of the first cases that I was involved in early in my environmental justice career was the contamination of women workers at the GTE Lenkurt Plant in Albuquerque. The plant hired primarily Chicana and other women of color to work as unskilled workers who used solder, acids, epoxy, and other toxic chemicals to assemble the components inside electrical devices. Many of the women suffered from a variety of health problems, including reproductive problems/cancers, mood swings, loss of color vision, as well as brain cancers. One hundred fifteen of these workers (mostly women) filed a class-action suit which was settled in 1987. Many of these women have since died. Steven Fox, a past SRIC employee, was doing a doctoral dissertation in American Studies at the University of New Mexico in 1986 when he learned about this case. He has since published *Toxic Work: Women Workers at GTE Lenkurt* in 1991 documenting his knowledge and insight into the case.

Once the class-action suit was filed, the plant closed its operations in Albuquerque and moved that part of its production to the Mexican border. This was during the height of *maquiladora* flight to the border and other Third World countries. These plants left the U.S. in droves as class action and individual suits, right-to-know laws, and stronger environmental regulation challenged their practices. Drawn by a cheap and plentiful labor force and lax environmental regulation, hundreds of these operations moved to the Mexican border. I have no doubt that the current violence on the border, and especially the cases of “the disappeared”— the sexually brutalized and murdered women of Juarez — are the result of U.S. unbridled consumption and imperialism. Today these plants are moving further into the interior of Mexico and Latin America, and even poorer Third World regions across the world, leaving a devastating trail of toxic pollution, disease and social decay.



Intersectionality of Reproductive Justice with Social Justice Issues

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The United Farm Workers (UFW), through their organizing and policy efforts, have documented miscarriages, cancers, and infant deformities suffered by farm worker women. UFW produced the video “The Wrath of Grapes” detailing the effects of pesticides on farmworker women and children. In the early 1990s, I also did some documentary radio work regarding farmworkers. It was heartbreaking to interview the families and their children under 10 years of age with cancers and physical deformities. But more heartbreaking was the fact that there was little to no recognition given to this population. There remains this attitude that the most vulnerable of America’s workers — farm workers — need no protection, living wages, or workers compensation. A scientific connection linking toxics to health effects seems to be something western science and its researchers find almost impossible to prove: in the rare cases where there have been studies, that is. Common sense and the precautionary principle are tools that seem out of reach to the scientific community which, for the most part, is allied with industry.

We know from our work here at SRIC that more than 50 years of uranium mining and milling has had devastating environmental and health impacts on indigenous nations, their environment, and their way of life. Other residents of this region are also impacted. These health ailments include miscarriages, birth defects, and a host of other diseases associated with uranium mining and milling. The uranium legacy is one of 50 years of environmental neglect and racism. There have been few studies and, until recently, little effort by the federal or state government to address these issues. One study by Shields, et al, in 1992 looked at birth outcomes in the Shiprock uranium mining area. While this study failed to find a strong connection between birth outcomes and uranium processes, it did note a significant connection between birth outcomes and a woman’s proximity to living near tailings or mine dumps — a reality for many indigenous peoples in the uranium belt. Community-based research carried out by Post ’71, a group active on

expanding compensation for uranium miners and millers who worked after 1971, reported reproductive problems (female and male) by many of the former workers and family members surveyed. This work has previously been featured in *Voices from the Earth* (Winter 2009).

Another example are the Asian women who dominate the nail salon industry. The chemicals used in this industry place women in toxin-filled environments. This is an issue for the worker, as well as for the women who, for beauty’s sake, consume these products and services. This type of intersection may provide for organizing and movement building across a variety of socially constructed barriers to our mutual self interest — health.

Whether documented or not, Mejicanas, Chicanas, Latinas, Native, Black, and Asian women work in cleaning and service industries and plants with many environmental exposures and a lack of protections and services. Today there are even more risks to our health and reproductive rights. We are exposed to many household chemicals that carry risks to our ability to reproduce. Added to this mix are the drugs and chemicals that make their way down our drains and waterways, contributing to an accumulation of toxins in our water systems, whose contamination affects us all, regardless of color or class.

### TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES

Biotechnology research has given us the ability to genetically alter, and “privatize” life, whether it is seeds, female eggs, or new technologies that give humans the possibility to alter life and life forms as we have known them. Who owns this knowledge? Who can buy it? Who benefits and who is put at risk as a result of this knowledge creation? Young college women in need of financial support are targeted by egg companies seeking donor eggs for well-to-do families unable to conceive. The donor women are given drugs in efforts to produce more eggs for more money. However, there is little research on the effects that the harvesting of eggs or the drugs given will have in the long run on these young women who sell their eggs to pay bills and buy material goods.

Some continue to promote the racist myth of overpopulation. However, the real issue is not overpopulation

but rather resource consumption: roughly 20% of the world’s rich still consume 75–80% of the world’s resources (water, electricity, gas, oil, books, clothes, gadgets, prepared foods, cars, information, etc.). Clearly it is not the masses that create resource depletion, but rather overconsumption and squandering of resources by the rich and industrialized countries that is the problem. The myth of overpopulation blurs this reality, as does race, class, and gender stereotypes.

The genetic modification of seeds and the privatization of the food chain — legally secured by corporations that control our governments — is another frontier in terms of corporate control of the masses. Medical trends in rich countries promote risky procedures (i.e. cesarean sections rather than natural birth). The motivation for women is a delivery devoid of pain. The motivation for doctors is to better control their schedules and probably make more money. There is always the tool of social construction — fear. Fear justifies attempts to legislatively mandate vaccines such as the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccines Gardasil and Cervarix that have been introduced across the country. For the most part, legislation mandating vaccination has either died in committee, made vaccination voluntary, or included an “opt-out” clause allowing parents to refuse vaccination of their daughters. Regardless of any potential risks, we must honor the right that one has over one’s own body.

Research has shown that the insistence on abstinence education for our school-age children has proven to be ineffective — it was pushed politically at the expense of comprehensive sex education for our youth. Morality is the justification for why we cannot talk scientifically about procreation with our children. What is immoral is promoting abstinence education only, and then punishing our children when they fail to learn how to prevent pregnancy by refusing to support social service programs and access to education and day care.

I want to mention and honor the work of Tewa Women United and Kalpulli Izkalli for their long history of environmental and reproductive justice organizing, and providing services and models for alternative health practices and *doula* (a provider of support and assistance during pregnancy and labor) programs to remember and pass on the knowledge of our ancestors.

In the last two years that I have represented SNEEJ in the Sister Song EJ/RJ Collaborative. I have shared and learned from midwives, doulas, reproductive rights advocates and organizers, rape crisis folks, health workers, and environmental justice leaders and organizers. We have come together to collectively work around policy issues of importance to communities. This natural collaboration has enhanced our knowledge, revealed and affirmed the intersections, and will hopefully continue to develop relationships, mutual projects, and mutual support. This can only strengthen our work and build the movement for social and political justice and equity. It is important in that it attempts to bring together a traditional heterosexual movement, politically dominated by men, and women reproductive rights organizations, historically dominated by Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Bisexual, Queer (LGBTQB) women. This is hopeful. ✨

— Sofia Martinez

## Common Hazardous Ingredients in Cleaning Products



**ACETONE** — A neurotoxin, acetone may cause liver and kidney damage, and damage to developing babies in the womb. It is a skin and eye irritant. Found in spot treatment cleaners, mark and scuff removers, nail polish removers, and other products.

**AMMONIA** — Undiluted, ammonia is a severe eye and respiratory irritant that can cause severe burning pain, and corrosive damage including chemical burns, cataracts and corneal damage. It can also cause kidney and liver damage. Repeated or prolonged exposure to vapors can result in bronchitis and pneumonia. Found in a wide range of cleaning products. Ammonia will react with bleach to form poisonous chlorine gas that can cause burning and watering of eyes, as well as burning of the nose and mouth.

**D-LIMONENE** — This chemical is produced by cold-pressing orange peels. The extracted oil is 90% d-limonene. It is a sensitizer, a neurotoxin, a moderate eye and skin irritant, and can trigger respiratory distress when vapors are inhaled by some sensitive individuals. There is some evidence of carcinogenicity. D-limonene is the active ingredient in some insecticides. It is used as a solvent in many all-purpose cleaning products, especially ‘citrus’ and ‘orange’ cleaners. Also listed on labels as citrus oil and orange oil.

**ETHOXYLATED NONYL PHENOL** — Nonyl phenols are hormone disruptors and some contain traces of ethylene oxide, a known human carcinogen. They are eye and skin irritants. Used in laundry detergents and other cleaning products.

**FRAGRANCE** — Fragrance on a label can indicate the presence of up to 4,000 separate ingredients, most of which are synthetic. Many compounds in fragrance are human toxins and suspected or proven carcinogens. In 1989, the US National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health evaluated 2,983 fragrance chemicals for health effects. They identified 884 of them as toxic substances. Synthetic fragrances are known to trigger asthma attacks. The US Environmental Protection Agency found that 100% of perfumes contain toluene, which can cause liver, kidney and brain damage as well as damage to a developing baby in the womb. Symptoms reported to the FDA from fragrance exposure have included headaches, dizziness, rashes, skin discoloration, violent coughing and vomiting, and allergic skin irritation. Clinical observations by medical doctors have shown that exposure to fragrances can affect the central nervous system, causing depression, hyperactivity, irritability, inability to cope, and other behavioral changes. Fragrance is a common skin irritant.

**MONOETHANOLAMINE** — This chemical may cause liver, kidney and reproductive damage, as well as depression of the central nervous system. Inhalation of high concentrations — when cleaning an oven for example — can cause dizziness or even coma. The chemical can also be absorbed through the skin. It is a moderate skin irritant, and a severe eye irritant. Found in many cleaning products, including oven cleaners, tub and tile cleaners, laundry pre-soaks, floor strippers and carpet cleaners.

**XYLENE** — Xylene has significant neurotoxic effects, including loss of memory. High exposure can lead to loss of consciousness and even death. It may damage liver, kidneys and the developing fetus. It is a severe eye and moderate skin irritant. Used in some spot removers, floor polishes, ironing aids and other products.

Sources: *The Safe Shoppers Bible*, David Steinman & Samuel Epstein; *Home Safe Home*, Debra Lynn Dadd, Tarcher Inc, 1997.

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