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. Sexual harassment, rape and kidnapping of indigenous women are rampant.

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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 progress with reproductive rights. 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 workplace. 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, or 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 Episcopal 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 continue to create movement, rather than competition for funding.

TOXIC CHEMICALS

One of the first cases that I was involved in was based on my early 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 SRC 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 Word: 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 maquiladoras 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.

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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 wage, or health care. 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. This is one of the many 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 contamination 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 Native American women who dominate the nail salon industry. The chemicals used in this industry place women in toxic-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, M e’jicano, Chicanas, Latinas, Native, Black, and Aisan 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. A dded to this mix are the drugs and chemicals that make their way down our drains and waterways, contributing to an accumulation of toxics in our water systems, whose contamination affects us all, regardless of race 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? Whose benefits and who is 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 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 should not scientifically talk 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 Sisters Song (R) 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 importance to communities. This natural collaboration has enhanced our knowledge, revealed and affirmed the importance to communities. This natural collaboration has enhanced our knowledge, revealed and affirmed the importance to communities. This natural collaboration has enhanced our knowledge, revealed and affirmed the importance to communities. This natural collaboration has enhanced our knowledge, revealed and affirmed the importance to communities.

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—— Sofia Martinez