

POLICY BRIEF



GLOBAL LEADERS COUNCIL FOR REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

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AT THE ASPEN INSTITUTE



What's Good for Women Is Good for the Planet

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Foreword

Disruptive climate change made its presence known in 2010. From record heat waves around the globe to deadly mudslides in China, wildfires in Russia, and floods in Pakistan, millions of lives have been upended by extreme weather events. Recent studies confirm this is only the beginning. Scientists have found that the impacts of climate change are happening much faster than expected even a decade ago. Scientists also report that if we don't act soon to cut carbon emissions dramatically, climate change stands to become the most costly and devastating humanitarian disaster that we have ever known.



In the face of these urgent warnings, the global community must explore all available opportunities to reduce global warming pollution and create more sustainable societies. Much of the focus has been on energy and forests: investing in efficiency, shifting to renewable energy, finding cleaner ways to power our vehicles, and preventing deforestation. According to research done by NRDC, for instance, Americans can reduce U.S. carbon pollution by 15 percent through collective personal actions-in-transportation, food consumption, and home energy use-that require little to no cost. This research confirms that individual choices about family, lifestyle, and consumption add up to major pollution reductions when taken together. More recently, experts have identified a range of development opportunities - such as the provision of cleaner cooking stoves - that would improve human development and health while also reducing pollution.

Two ground breaking studies described in this report identify yet another area to take action. Combined, they demonstrate that simply by meeting women's existing needs to plan the number and spacing of their pregnancies, population growth will slow and global carbon emissions will be reduced by between 8 and 15 percent – the equivalent of stopping all deforestation today. This is an extraordinary proposition. Empowering women to make critical decisions in their own lives can also contribute significantly to solving the biggest environmental and humanitarian challenge of our time. It also gives women a weapon to combat a major threat to their own survival: women are 14 times more likely to die as a result of storms and other extreme weather as men. Remarkably, we don't have to wait for technological breakthroughs to achieve these many benefits.

These papers present a promising model for helping to improve lives while curbing carbon emissions. It is another arrow in the quiver. We still must press the world's leaders in government and business to make comprehensive changes to the way we produce energy and transport and house ourselves. Yet as we do that, we can also engage the world's women as a potent force of change.

– Frances Beinecke

What's Good for Women is Good for the Planet

By Kavita N. Ramdas

Ammi, my mother-in-law, was 16 when her marriage was arranged. Before she was 18, she had borne her first child, who died within the year because of an infectious disease. Pregnant again at 19, she journeyed 1,000 miles from her small village in eastern India to reconnect with her husband in Karachi, in the new state of Pakistan. By 30, she had borne seven children. She had a fourth grade education, and, like others of her generation, knew very little about contraceptive choices.



My husband, Zulfiqar, and his five surviving siblings are all educated, and none has more than two children. Yet for millions of women in modern day Pakistan, like Rani, the young woman who cleans Ammi's home in Karachi, access to contraception remains almost as inaccessible as it was to Ammi more than 50 years ago. Married off to a cousin at 15 and illiterate, Rani already has three children and, like the majority of married Pakistani women who have never used modern contraception, will most likely have at least one more.¹

Around the world, hundreds of millions of women like Rani are still denied a basic education, married off too early against their wills, subjected to forced sex, or simply unable to access, afford, or negotiate with their partners about birth control. Most would like more control over how and when they become sexually active or pregnant, but lack the personal power and access necessary to make informed choices.

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The ability to determine whether and when to become pregnant is fundamental to the realization of women's rights – basic human rights. It is also a proven health and development strategy. When all women are able to choose to engage in sex, ensure that it is safe, decide how many children they want, and raise those children in decent living conditions, the world will be a much better place. Women's health, children's health, and opportunities for families and communities will improve dramatically².

World leaders agree. At the Millennium Summit in 2000, 189 United Nation members and 23 leading development institutions agreed to eight Millennium Development Goals. These goals contain 18 quantifiable targets to be achieved by 2015, including universal access to family planning.

Two recent studies offer us new and compelling evidence that enabling women to determine the number and spacing of their pregnancies has another benefit besides improving women's health and advancing their human rights. What is good for women is also good for our planet.



These groundbreaking studies have, for the first time, rigorously quantified the effect on the environment of allowing women and girls to control their reproductive destinies. The results are tremendously heartening to anyone concerned about advancing human rights, development, and environmental justice. The studies demonstrate that giving women and girls access to contraception offers a precious co-benefit: a substantial reduction in carbon emissions. The logic is simple: when women have the power to plan their families, populations grow more slowly, as do greenhouse gas emissions. This strategy is also relatively inexpensive.

The new studies--by [the Futures Group](#) and [the National Center for Atmospheric Research and the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis](#)—together show that:

- Empowering women to time their pregnancies would reduce carbon emissions significantly, providing 8 to 15 percent of the reductions needed to avert dangerous climate change³.
- The cost of providing these needed family planning services is minimal compared with other development and emissions reductions strategies -- roughly \$3.7 billion per year for the United States and developing countries.

The Toll Worldwide

More than 200 million women in the United States and developing countries are sexually active and do not want to become pregnant, yet are not using modern contraception⁴. The results are staggering: one in four births worldwide are unplanned, and 42 million abortions are performed each year, half of them clandestinely, killing 68,000 women in the process. The human toll of denying women the fundamental right to plan their families is extraordinarily high.

The large number of women in the United States and around the world who become pregnant when they do not want to is a significant source of population growth. The Futures Group study shows that if all women who want to avoid pregnancy were able to use family planning, the rate of population growth would slow substantially worldwide⁵.

The Futures Group research calculates that meeting existing demand for family planning services, while requiring a substantial investment, is well within reach for existing aid flows and in-country health spending. An additional \$3.7 billion per year would provide services for all who need them.⁶

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The research from Brian O'Neill of the National Center for Atmospheric Research and colleagues calculates the emissions that result from a range of demographic trajectories,⁷ including a lower population trajectory that would be attainable by providing contraception to those who need it.

Combined, the Futures Group and O'Neill research show that a reduction of 8 to 15 percent⁸ of essential carbon emissions can be obtained by providing family planning to all women who want it. This reduction would be equivalent to stopping all deforestation or increasing the world's use of wind power fortyfold.⁹ Although this is just one piece of the puzzle, it is a substantial piece.

The opportunity to empower women and simultaneously help the climate exists in both developing countries and in the United States. Many people are not aware that millions of women in the United States lack access to family planning. In fact, the United States has a higher proportion of women facing unwanted pregnancies than any other developed country, and, as a result, an abortion rate twice that of most European countries. The co-benefit of providing women with the services they need to avoid unwanted pregnancies is particularly large in the United States because of its high per capita emissions.

Acknowledging and addressing reproductive health challenges in the United States could have an unexpected foreign policy benefit by signaling greater humility and thus helping to shift what developing nations view as a patronizing attitude in the West about both climate change and population growth.

Conclusion

The world is now facing the multi-layered challenges of economic distress, rising inequality, and environmental devastation caused by climate change. International climate negotiations have repeatedly stalled as powerful nations play the blame game and block progress. Meanwhile, a series of severe weather events has buffeted the earth from Haiti to Pakistan, each one hitting women and children hardest. This is the reality that rich nations must reckon with--and commit to changing--today.

Women bear a disproportionate share of these challenges. Yet they are also the most powerful leaders of change in their communities and on the world stage. It's time to harness their vision and energy.



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In my 14 years at the Global Fund for Women, I have observed the wave of change that comes from empowering women—what some call the “the girl effect.” Making information, education, and access

to contraception easily available offers us an affordable, no-regrets strategy that can be implemented now.

Meeting the need for family planning services is not a complex challenge. We know how to provide the commodities, services, and education that women and their families want.¹⁰ There are thousands of programs around the world with successful track records in every conceivable religious, cultural, and political setting.

The new evidence of a climate benefit can help bolster the case for renewed investment in women's health and empowerment. Like Julia Whitty, the environmentalist and author, I see how this demonstrable effect is already uniting the once-divided conservation and human rights communities. I believe a climate-specific focus also has the potential to unite us across conservative and progressive political spectrums.

Investing in women has already been proven as an essential strategy to ensure the health, safety, and development of societies. We may now also find that a comprehensive approach that includes investments in women is also the most effective way to safely steward Mother Earth through some of her most challenging crises.

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- ³ The Futures Group paper measures the demographic impact of meeting unmet need and projects a population growth trajectory that would result if all women who wanted to prevent pregnancy were able to use family planning. Those trajectories are close to the UN low or UN medium population growth trajectories, depending on the region. The National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) paper projects the emissions reductions that would result from each of the UN population scenarios, and in particular compares the UN high to the UN medium scenario. The 8-15 percent reduction referred to here is derived from the NCAR comparison of the UN high and medium scenarios (16-29 percent of total reductions) but excludes China and the European Union, where unmet need is extremely low.
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- ⁵ S. Moreland, E. Smith, and S. Sharma, *World Population Prospects and Unmet Need for Family Planning*, Washington, D.C., April 2010. <http://www.futuresgroup.com/publications/world-population-prospects-and-unmet-need-for-family-planning/>
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- ⁷ B. O'Neill, M. Dalton, R. Fuchs, L. Jiang L, S. Pachauri, and K. Zigova, *Impact of demographic change on future carbon emissions: A global assessment*. Proceedings of the National Academies of Science, Oct. 11, 2010. This forthcoming paper was written by Brian O'Neill and a team of co-authors from China, India, Austria, and the United States. O'Neill served as a lead author for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Fourth Assessment Report.
- ⁸ These figures are based on a goal of stabilizing carbon at 450 ppm, a widely used projection in climate analyses to avert the worst impacts of climate change. Whether the reduction is 8 percent or 15 percent depends on what assumptions are made about future economic development and its impact on per capita emissions.
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