Introduction

*Women as Sexual Stewards*

One fine day in the spring of 2009, I found myself in a Berkeley, California art gallery for a Sierra Club–sponsored wine and cheese reception. The event was called *Sex and Sustainability,* and it featured presentations by Sierra Club staffers, activist partners, and a local professor, all focused on global population growth, family planning, and the environment. At the time, the global population was well over 6 billion people (we would hit the 7 billion mark two years later), and climate change activists and policymakers had long been frustrated with the U.S. reluctance to join the global policy community in aggressively combating climate change. Meanwhile, the pace of climate change was relentless. Floods, melting glaciers, sea level rise, and threats to wildlife claimed newspaper headlines every week. These weren’t just environmental impacts: reported human death tolls in the tens of thousands from intense storms, heat waves, and droughts found their way onto the evening news, illustrating climate change’s deadly threat in frightening ways.

However, the reception was upbeat. Barack Obama had been elected president several months prior, ushering in a new era of hope that the U.S. would both increase funding commitments for international family planning, as well as enact binding climate change legislation. The Sierra Club facilitator gave a speech drawing a seamless line of connection between women’s fertility, population growth, and environmentalism: “Poor women all over the world are having babies in record numbers, with disastrous impacts on their health, the health of their families, and the environment,” she argued. We, the mostly student crowd in the room, had an important part to play in making a difference, by signing up for the Sierra Club’s Global Population Environment Program (GPEP) mailing list and connecting to information on various legislative initiatives. “We have to empower women globally, advance access to vol-
untary family planning, advocate for sexuality and reproductive health education, work to reduce consumption, and support the campaign for international family planning. Oh, and write to Obama!”

Her words highlighted the issue that is central to this book, namely the return of global population to prominence in environmental debates, particularly in the context of climate change. Type “climate change” and “birth control” or “family planning” into your Google search bar, and an endless array of articles proclaiming the climate-solving benefits of contraceptives comes back. Curiously, a number of these articles claim that this solution is new, innovative, or so shrouded in taboo that no one is talking about it. However, this could not be further from the truth. Neo-Malthusians—people who view population growth as the main driver of environmental, social, and economic problems—have been making these arguments for decades, blaming human numbers for everything from deforestation to air pollution, global poverty, civil unrest, international migration, and now climate change. This is a long-enduring narrative that permeates ecological sciences, international development, and everyday conversations about the environment.

What is relatively new is the way women’s empowerment is being linked to these debates. Population advocates argue that harnessing American foreign aid to provide poor women around the world with universal, voluntary access to contraceptives empowers them to make decisions about their childbearing in ways that affirm their human rights while benefiting the environment by decreasing human numbers. In this schema, fewer people will consume resources and use polluting technologies, relieving pressure on the earth and its atmosphere, which are already being catastrophically stretched to their limits by destructive human activities. While these advocates reject population control because of its historical associations with coercion and human rights abuses, they do maintain that population growth makes environmental and social problems worse, and that their solutions will be easier to achieve if population growth is stabilized.

The distinction, while subtle, is important. Population advocacy arises historically from the deployment of neo-Malthusianism, an expansion of a set of ideas developed in the late 18th century by British cleric and political economist Thomas Robert Malthus. Malthus postulated a theory of the exponential growth of human populations, comparing it to
the more limited growth of food production and arguing that human growth far outpaces the earth’s capacity to maintain the necessary conditions to sustain human life, leading to inevitable famine and widespread misery. Malthusianism is a political-economic concept couched in the language of biological fundamentalism. Malthus was writing at a time of recent, rapid growth in Britain, primarily among the poor. Debates about state aid to impoverished people were ubiquitous, and Malthus developed his ideas to make a case for why British authorities should remove the state-supported food aid provided to the poor via the British Poor Laws. However, he articulated the problems of population growth and the earth’s capacity as functions of nature—describing them as natural law, universal and unchanging.

Twentieth-century neo-Malthusian proponents updated this theory, using it to explain environmental degradation writ large, including everything from toxic air, soil, and water pollution, to deforestation, species extinction, soil erosion, and most recently, climate change. They continue to posit these problems as biological—a natural function and result of human population growth. However, population advocates today reject Malthus’s ideas, at least some of them do. One could argue that their position is more closely aligned with what Angus and Butler refer to as “populationism.” Like neo-Malthusians, populationists “attribute social and ecological ills to human numbers”; however, they reject coercive population control and demographic targets, and support rights-based solutions, including voluntary access to contraception, access to education, and income-generating opportunities for women and girls worldwide.

Populationism suggests that one can uphold Malthus’s and his followers’ central claim that there are natural limits to the earth’s ability to sustain human life, and that human numbers threaten those limits and must be decreased, while also supporting human rights and international development solutions as the right strategies to slow growth. This populationist perspective is at the heart of population advocacy today. In the words of many advocates I spoke to, family planning programs offer a “win-win” solution for women, population, and the environment. But is it that simple? Are there actual differences between neo-Malthusian and populationist perspectives in terms of how they frame women’s relationships to nature, the environment, and reproduction? If so, how do
these values shape the kinds of advocacy they develop, the partners they engage, and the outcomes they seek?

Making Sexual Stewards

When population-environment advocates talk about “women” in workshops and other messaging campaigns, they are constructing an idealized model of a woman: a moral agent who manages her fertility and the environment responsibly for the greater good. She is a modern woman who wants two or fewer children, engages in monogamous sexual relationships within the context of marriage, always uses contraceptives consistently and correctly, and makes childbearing decisions in concert with environmental values, including responsible (limited) consumption of energy and natural resources. This is a neoliberal concept: a symbol of the ideal woman framed within the logics of private, individual decision-making and choice, who adopts a modicum of embodied environmental responsibility in the service of global development goals, and who helps advocates weave together narratives of the urgency of simultaneously addressing climate change and empowering women around the world to use contraceptives. She is what I refer to as a sexual steward, and she is vital to the future of international family planning policy.

The sexual steward is exemplified in countless reports and articles linking population, climate change, and social justice. Take, for example, a quote from a report produced by the Worldwatch Institute: “Women and children in poverty are among the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, despite their disproportionately low contribution to the problem. Removing the obstacles that hold back more than 3 billion potential agents of change—women and girls—is both pragmatic and necessary.” The obstacles the report is referring to are reproductive. And the report postulates that removing them will not only improve women’s social status, it will potentially solve problems for the entire world: “Through slowing growth and other benefits, supporting women’s efforts to manage their own lives and improving their status will in turn elevate the well-being of all of the world’s population—with Earth’s climate representing one aspect of this. And the most effective way to do all this is by making sure, to the extent possible, that women and men
everywhere realize their own childbearing intentions, including timing, spacing, and number of children.”

This text encapsulates the sexual stewardship idea: “women” are assumed to be fertile, reproducing beings, whose improved status will ideally lead to making responsible family choices—choices that include the proper spacing, timing, and number of children that will slow global population growth. Linking these decisions and behaviors to climate change places women’s individual reproductive lives in global context. Women’s childbearing decisions are thus never individual, never free from the weight of potential environmental catastrophe—and thus never free from a duty to reproduce responsibly. In addition, women in this model are a monolith: sexually active, heterosexual, able to become pregnant and bear children, and free to make their own bodily choices, free of coercion or violence.

As I discovered at the reception described at the start of this chapter, sexual stewards are not just a product of institutional development actors, they also arise from youth activism. Consider the policy statement developed and circulated by youth advocates at the international climate change meetings in Cancun in 2010: “Climate change disproportionately affects women, especially young women, who are often the stewards of their area’s natural resources—as they must walk farther to collect water, work harder to produce crops from dry soil, and cope with drought, flooding, [other] natural disasters and disease. At the same time, empowered women can be particularly strong agents for sustainable change in their communities. An effective approach to climate change mitigation and adaptation must support young people’s sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), as doing so is essential for adaptation while contributing to reducing the impact of future climate change.”

Linking environmental problems to women’s agency through responsible reproductive management is, apparently, the wave of the future—and the people at the heart of the narrative are young people.

In this book, I argue that sexual stewardship was created to address an international development sector in crisis. Population has been a troubled issue for decades. Decreased funding, histories of coercion, racism, and human rights abuses, and a lack of attention among the broader public have eroded support for what was once a very popular topic of
discussion in the U.S. In the mid-twentieth century, population growth was front and center in environmental activism, and had strong ties to the mainstream women's reproductive rights movement. However, as evidence of international and domestic coercion increasingly came to light, coalescing with a conservative political and religious backlash against family planning in the 1980s, population lost its place in the sun in development circles. In the 1990s, transnational feminists organized to offer the international policy community a new way of addressing family planning—emphasizing women's empowerment through voluntary access to contraceptives within broader programs supporting women's SRHR in a human rights framework. This approach is the foundation of sexual stewardship.

Sexual stewardship also rests on instrumental approaches: using a technological solution (contraceptives) to address the complex social, political, and economic drivers of population growth, as well as to build the base of science and activism to support international family planning policy. When women's fertility and reproduction is lifted out of the social contexts of entrenched poverty, gender inequality, growing wealth and income inequality, inadequate access to comprehensive health care, educational services and employment opportunities, and cultural norms favoring large families, it is easy to imagine women as freely acting, autonomous agents whose enduring high fertility is individually driven. In development circles, this model is an attractive way to build a base of new advocates—specifically young environmental activists—as well as to maintain support from those who might otherwise have long abandoned the issue of population.

Given that it rests on such long enduring ideas, is sexual stewardship new? In some ways, it is. Gone is the long-familiar twentieth-century language of population control, through which imminent “global famine,” “death,” and “destruction” signaled the need for top-down, demographically driven intervention programs. This language has been replaced by a focus on women's rights, justice, and affirmation of the importance of voluntarism to the success of family planning programs. As many population-environment advocates would argue, today's focus on women's reproductive rights and justice evinces a clear break from the so-called dark past of population control—and cements a decades-long shifting of population concerns into the realm of progressive politics.
However, sexual stewardship is in line with a host of neoliberal development strategies focused on population. One such strategy aims to capitalize on the “demographic dividend” produced in a key phase of a nation’s demographic transition from high to low population growth. Theorists describe the demographic dividend as an opportunity that arises when, in a transition from high birth and death rates to lower ones, the relative proportion of adults in the labor force is high, compared to their dependents. Their financial resources are more available for investment in the family and the economy, leading to per capita income growth. This is the first dividend. A second potential dividend comes in the form of the increasing longevity of elderly populations, when a concentrated older population accumulates and invests their assets, leading to increased national income. In other words, when there is a higher proportion of working age people relative to the number of dependents, production can increase relative to consumption and GDP per capita may increase. These gains are not automatic: there must be productive workers and consumers, and governments must maximize the opportunities of the population growth window by investing in education, health care, and neoliberal economic policies favoring job markets and future pension programs.

Family planning is central to the demographic dividend strategy in that it slows birth rates and frees workers from responsibilities in the domestic sphere, allowing them to invest more in the formal economy. This approach has gained traction among the international family planning community, and has been included in reports written by the World Health Organization and UN Population Program. However, they promote the demographic dividend as a counterpoint to the “youth bulge” concept, arguing that the youthful demographic dividend must be managed in order to be productive and peaceful; otherwise, if not properly supported, it could manifest as a violent bulge of young people, usually men, that threaten global geopolitical security. These concerns mirror mid-twentieth-century Cold War anxieties about the spread of communism among rapidly growing populations in the Global South. At that time, U.S. government leaders, economic planners, and military officials all postulated that slowing population growth in Global South nations through artificial means—Western contraception—was necessary to their economic modernization, as well as to global political sta-
bility. The contrasting narratives of demographic dividend and bulge directly rehearse these old discourses, shaping the ways young people access reproductive services. As Hendrixson demonstrates, in the absence of fuller understandings of young people’s sexuality and reproduction within the broader context of their lives, dividend-versus-bulge discourses actually constrain young people’s access to sexual and reproductive health services, particularly for young men.

In this project, I explore the context in which the sexual stewardship model arose, why it continues to gain in popularity, particularly among college-aged environmental activists, and what possibilities it holds for social justice organizing in the future. Taking the concept of sexual stewardship as my point of departure, my aim is to offer a new way to think about recent population-environment advocacy, and its newest iteration, population-climate advocacy. This advocacy is not comprised of strategies supporting population control, but rather those designed to reframe population interventions as progressive, socially just, and attractive to a new crop of younger environmentalists. In exploring these strategies, I focus on three key trends: recent efforts to build scientific knowledge linking population growth and climate change, making a case for contraceptive intervention from a scientific perspective; the role of private donors behind the scenes; and non-governmental organization (NGO) efforts to enroll youth as population advocates. In particular, I focus my ethnographic observations on a now-defunct training program created by the Sierra Club, known as the Global Population Environment Program. The GPEP was designed to develop a new generation of global population policy advocates through upbeat approaches linking youthful energy, the language of women’s empowerment and justice, and policy-relevant science.

This book has three main arguments. First, I argue that science plays an important role in population-climate advocacy, one that functions to legitimate advocates’ work and minimize controversy. The more scientific studies that are produced to demonstrate linkages between population growth and climate change, the more effectively the political underpinnings of this argument are obscured. Yet, scientific knowledge is never produced in a vacuum. The cultural beliefs of the day, prevailing scientific paradigms, and funding opportunities and constraints all play a significant role in shaping which scientific
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questions are answered, and which problems are pursued. In many ways, this project demonstrates the impossibility of understanding population-environment or population-climate science outside of the context of politics. Because the perception of demography, ecology, atmospheric sciences, and other quantitative sciences is that they are objective, rational, and value-free, the ease with which political values are embedded in science makes this arena of advocacy attractive to potential advocates. In bringing these values to the surface, my aim is not to expose evidence of “bad science.” Rather, it is to interrogate the ways politics are deeply entrenched with scientific paradigms, operating largely behind the scenes.

Second, I argue that populationism is currently growing in popularity because of its appeal to young people, who are attracted to the neoliberal language of individual choices and consumer actions as solutions to large-scale environmental problems. This approach infuses how youth activists understand the concept of women’s empowerment: it is action-oriented and facilitated through individual access to contraceptives, based on narratives of individual personal responsibility. These framings are key drivers of young people’s desire to be population advocates as well: the narrative of the individual, action-oriented development actor infuses trainings that construct youth advocates as development experts and leaders on a global stage. The private consumer choice model is so pervasive as a part of American culture that it deeply informs our ideas about morality, individualism, and personal responsibility in a range of ways—including how we think about reproduction and environmentalism. While the young activists I interviewed proclaimed that broad social values such as women’s empowerment and reproductive justice are their primary motivations for their advocacy, I demonstrate throughout the book that what actually resonates with them most is a neoliberal activist model focused on individualism.

Third, and most importantly, the term “social justice” seems to be losing its meaning. Drawing on language and strategies rooted in civil rights activism, a wide range of social actors describe their work as social justice-oriented. This has been an effective and attractive rallying cry for young people who are leading major movements on issues ranging from racial justice (Black Lives Matter) to wealth inequality (Occupy Movement). However, the vagueness and lack of precision of the term has led
many other kinds of advocates, including those representing conservative right-wing social movements, to adopt this language, from the Tea Party to the pro-life movement. As this terminology becomes diluted, anyone can lay claim to it—including populationists whose advocacy has uncomfortable historical resonances with population control. In so doing, they potentially undermine the work of more radical movements that truly support reproductive justice by challenging the structures of inequality that have shaped reproductive politics historically, and continue to do so today.

Population and Climate Change in Development

From 2009 to the end of 2010, I followed a loosely assembled network of international development actors whose goal was to increase U.S. funding support for international family planning policy by emphasizing its benefits for climate change, SRHR, and poverty alleviation. They pursued this goal through workshops, advocacy training sessions, research reporting sessions, private meetings, and Congressional lobbying visits. Members of the network came from a range of backgrounds. Some were donors at private philanthropic organizations or at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID); others worked at NGOs, universities, or were simply volunteers in local communities or on college campuses. Some identified as feminists and reproductive health advocates, while others were almost entirely consumed by environmental concerns, and saw the importance of women’s reproductive health and rights as secondary. As one network member stated in an interview, “There is no one uniform movement; there are several streams or groups. Some are more concerned with demography, some family planning, some the union of environment and reproductive health concerns.” Despite this diversity, what held the network together was the belief that providing poor women in the Global South with contraceptives will slow global population growth, and that this in turn slows the pace of greenhouse gas emissions and helps countries adapt to climate change, eventually benefiting us all.

There are two key challenges to this perspective, the first being that the countries that contribute the most greenhouse gases to the atmosphere every year are not those with the highest fertility rates. China,
the U.S., Russia, India, and Japan emit the highest greenhouse gases (the gases that trap heat in the atmosphere) every year; each of these countries has low fertility rates (measured as the number of children born per woman over the course of her lifetime). The average woman in China gives birth to 1.5 children over the course of her lifetime. For the U.S., India, Russia, and Japan, the numbers are 1.8, 1.7, 2.4, and 1.42, respectively. Compare these numbers with the countries population advocates focus on for their family planning advocacy efforts: high fertility countries in sub-Saharan Africa like Nigeria, Tanzania, and Ethiopia. In those countries, fertility rates are 5.6, 5, and 4.4 respectively, while their national greenhouse gas emissions (GGEs) don’t even rank in the top 75. In fact, with the exception of South Africa (which has a fertility rate of 2.3), none of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa rate in the top 75 greenhouse gas–emitting nations.11

The second challenge is that fertility rates are coming down all over the world, and they have been for the past fifty years or more, albeit unevenly. According to a 2015 report by the United Nations that looked at data from 197 nations, the average woman worldwide has 2.5 children in her lifetime, a steep drop from rates of the past.12 Women in most parts of the world get married later, have fewer children, and access higher education at higher rates than ever before. At the same time, the report found that in 2014, 145 million women around the world had an unmet need13 for family planning—a measure of the number of women who would like to delay or stop childbearing, who are sexually active, but who are not using Western contraception.

In these figures, sub-Saharan Africa stands as an outlier—which is why the continent receives the lion’s share of focus in populationist circles. Approximately half of women in sub-Saharan Africa who would like to access Western contraceptives report not having full access. The region has the world’s highest fertility rates, the lowest contraceptive coverage, and among the lowest ages at marriage. These trends are changing, though somewhat slowly. Fifty years ago, the average woman in sub-Saharan Africa had 6.7 children, compared with today’s 5.1. In addition, these figures mask wide variation between countries on the continent, where fertility rates are impacted by religious and cultural diversity, poverty, social inequality, and uneven access to health care and education. As women’s access to education increases along with the
growing trend toward urbanization, fertility rates are expected to continue to decline across the continent.\textsuperscript{14} Average fertility rates across the continent are projected to reach 3.9 children per woman by 2030, and 3.1 children per woman by 2050.

The significance of African fertility trends must also be understood within the context of broader global discourses on population, particularly those framed through the language of crisis. If Western contraceptive use, replacement fertility (two children per couple), monogamous, married couples, and educated, working women in urban settings are the modern ideal in development narratives, discourses on Africa stand in sharp contrast to that. The continent is all too often reduced to narratives of endless failure, poverty and disease, war and extreme inequality, described as always in need of Western intervention and salvation. These racialized, colonial narratives have long constructed Western imaginaries about the continent: Western societies have long viewed Africa as their “radical other,” a counterpoint to “their own constructions of civilization, enlightenment, progress, development, modernity, and . . . history.”\textsuperscript{15} As novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie reminds us, circulating a “single story” of a place, or a people, is dangerous.\textsuperscript{16} The elisions and erasures required to create such a limited narrative not only reinforce enduring stereotypes, they also circumscribe the imaginations of those who construct and maintain the narrative, in ways that foreclose new knowledge and forms of engagement. These limitations directly shape understandings of African social, cultural, and gender relations governing sex, fertility, and reproduction, locking the continent into static images of high fertility in a fixed, unending pattern of explosive growth.

Part of the reason for this is because population-climate narratives tend to naturalize poverty and inequality in the Global South. In advocacy trainings, images of the poor are presented as dark-skinned women of color, often in tattered clothing and surrounded by children. While these images do reflect the lives of some women, they are also constructed representations, informed by colonial legacies that circumscribe Western audiences’ understandings of the lives and experiences of those depicted. Dogra’s 2011 analysis of images used in international non-governmental organizations’ (INGOs) advocacy and fundraising materials demonstrates that depictions of racialized Global South
women are used to project “universal” values of motherhood and womanhood at the same time that they symbolize Global South difference. Stylized images of women and children are particularly common in depictions of disaster, famine, the environment, and grinding poverty, presenting visual narratives of women and families—devoid of men—in ways that represent women as vulnerable and needy. Their roles as mothers are represented as universal and homogenous, in contrast with missing men, whose absence can be read as either lack of family presence and responsibility—or worse, that missing men are the cause of women’s vulnerability. These images of excessive fecundity, lack of stable male presence, and extreme poverty pathologize poor families while essentializing women’s vulnerability. More importantly, they render women as always in need of, and in their vulnerability, always deserving of, Western assistance.

As African feminist Everjoice Win argues, the image of the African woman as “always poor, powerless, and invariably pregnant, burdened with lots of children, or carrying one load or another on her back or her head . . . is a favourite image, one which we have come to associate with development. Like the fly-infested and emaciated black child that is so often used by international news agencies, the bare-footed African woman sells. Without her uttering a word, this woman pulls in financial resources.” While this image proliferates, alternative images are obscured, particularly those of the rapidly growing urbanized African middle classes. In rendering class diversity invisible, the needs and desires of middle class African women are erased, foreclosing opportunities for development policies that address gender inequality across class lines.

Ironically, similar images of women of color in the U.S. historically accomplished just the opposite. Prior to the mid-1960s, American news media represented poverty in images of white families, primarily in Appalachia. However, in the two-year period from 1965 to 1967, these images became dramatically darker—with images of African Americans coming to dominate the “face of poverty” in the news—while poverty rates remained stable. This dramatic shift was facilitated by a change in the moral tone through which poverty was described. As coverage of the poor was presented in a more critical light and narratives of the “undeserving poor” proliferated, images of African Americans as repre-
sentative of “the poor” flourished as well. Further, as poverty came to be seen through a less sympathetic lens in the news, it was increasingly associated with blackness, undeserving-ness, and laziness.\(^\text{19}\) Over the next decade, these images of the black, undeserving poor coalesced around images of single motherhood, closely associated with Ronald Reagan’s (fictional) model of the welfare queen: the woman who gamed the system, whose children were produced as a strategy to drain state resources and put cash payments into the pockets of women who did not work. The idea of blacks as inherently poor and undeserving—and of black women in particular as continually reproducing a race of resource-draining children—was central to the policing of black women’s bodies in the second half of the 20th century, particularly the coercive sterilization of women of color in the U.S. (see chapter 5).

Yet, simplified images of conditions in the Global South remain central to the visual narrative of development, tugging at the heartstrings of audiences in the Global North, who project their own values onto the difference rendered in these images.\(^\text{20}\) This visual imagery is central to producing and maintaining ideas of sexual stewardship. As Chandra Mohanty famously described, the homogenous, universal Global South woman in these and similar images “leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being ‘third world’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimised etc) . . . in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions.”\(^\text{21}\) Sexual stewardship discourses are similar: Global South women are presented as the homogenous poor, simultaneously burdened by environmental problems, poverty, and their own excess fertility. These representations trap them in a static, unchanging narrative of victimhood and vulnerability that contrasts with the potential for assumed agency through reproductive self-management. This model, which depoliticizes and dehistoricizes poverty, gender inequality, and environmental problems, is the basic recipe for sexual stewardship.

This book is written as a cautionary tale against the ways contraceptives and family planning are taken up for advocacy in international development by environmental activists. I argue that advocacy strategies that problematize global population growth as an environmental and climate
problem, and contraceptives as its solution, are often simplistic and do more harm than good. While family planning advocacy is a laudable goal that needs more support and increased funding, the narratives that have been used by the Sierra Club and their partners have reproduced problematic ideas about demographic change as the driver of environmental problems in ways that obscure social, political, and economic causes. They rest on an “apolitical ecology” approach that says environmental problems are caused by forces such as individuals’ poor choices, and by demographic changes including population growth. This approach leaves no room for understanding structural, political, and economic drivers of environmental change, and in obscuring these forces threatens to undermine the very goals populationists claim to hold dear: social and ecological justice and bodily autonomy for poor women in the Global South. Apolitical ecology approaches have long been at the heart of struggles to make sense of environmental problems—and have been central to the history of populationism and population control.

De-Naturalizing Environmental Problems

A key argument of this book is that population-environment discourses and logics persist in international development due to the enduring power of Malthusianism. Yet, Malthusian logic has been thoroughly critiqued—many would say debunked—by critical scholars and activists for decades now. Many of the most trenchant critiques of Malthusianism have been offered by scholars of political ecology. For the past forty or so years, combining “the concerns of ecology and a broadly defined political economy,”23 political ecologists have rejected simplistic biological, demographic, and other apolitical framings of problems like deforestation, soil erosion, and climate change, instead rooting these problems in unequal social, political, and economic systems.

Beginning in the 1970s, Marxist political ecology writers have analyzed the role of class and capitalism in Malthusian logic. Harvey, for example, argued that the concepts of nature and natural resources are not fixed, but rather are constructed socially through capitalist systems that assign them value. Resource scarcity, then, did not arise from biological conditions of overpopulation or human overconsumption, but instead from outcomes of inequitable distribution of wealth.24 Studies of
local and regional famine events demonstrate that international markets and capitalist systems of production, not overpopulation, have produced entrenched hunger and poverty at the local level. For example, Davis’s analysis of nineteenth-century regional famine events found that these famines, long constructed in neo-Malthusian scholarship and media accounts as the result of local overpopulation and unsustainable cultivation practices, were actually the result of both of El Niño weather patterns that shape long-term trends in soil fertility, as well as the introduction of colonialism and capitalism in Global South countries. The resulting entrenched poverty and maldistribution of food resources, based on the deep political-economic inequalities of colonization, manifested in widespread starvation at national and international scales.

Political ecologists have also critically interrogated knowledge production itself, specifically the ways scientists make and circulate paradigmatic ideas about environmental change. Fairhead and Leach’s sharp analysis of degradation narratives describing Guinean forest and savannah landscapes details the ways ecological scientists and policymakers literally saw population-driven deforestation where it did not exist, by misreading islands of dense forest cover in broader savannah wildlands as evidence of deforestation, when in fact they exemplified afforested landscapes, restored by local communities. The scientists, presented with data counter to the neo-Malthusian narrative so deeply embedded throughout the ecological sciences, had no other framework through which to interpret and explain what they were seeing, and thus produced decades of erroneous results. In a similar vein, Jarosz’s historical study of deforestation in Madagascar demonstrates that, counter to prevailing arguments, the dramatic loss of forest cover across the island was driven by colonial policies favoring market-based production of forest commodities, rather than population growth. In fact, her research found that, under colonial rule, forest loss was intensified during periods of population decline in the country’s eastern rainforest corridor. Numerous studies have demonstrated that the intersection of population control programs and rural development schemes have resulted in the intensification of local poverty, land dispossession, and few, if any, impacts on fertility trends.

Ecological problems, and the solutions that are devised to respond to them, do not simply exist in the world of their own accord. Rather, they
are constructed by assemblages of actors and knowledge practices. Hajer illuminates this through his analysis of discourse coalitions. Discourses, or “ensemble[s] of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to phenomena,”\(^3^0\) provide the tools for constructing problems, as well as providing the context in which problems are understood. A discourse coalition—comprised of actors who share a given social construct—then takes these up, using persuasion or force to convince others to accept their interpretation of reality. When specific problems are discussed, discourses are presented as particular narratives or storylines; the complexities of the various narratives are concealed as they are assembled into a coherent whole. Policymaking is similarly discursive; it is not just about problem solving, but rather also about problem creation. This does not deny material reality, but rather argues that environmental problems, for example, cannot be understood without analyzing the discursive practices through which we perceive reality and the options available for intervening on it.\(^3^1\) Further, discourse coalitions function as advocacy networks.\(^3^2\) These networks provide non-traditional actors the ability to mobilize information strategically and transform the terms of policy debate in ways that influence more powerful institutions.

Thinking through these issues with respect to population and reproduction necessitates an analysis of questions of gender, and its attendant roles, norms, expectations, and inequalities, all of which impact environmental discourses, policies, rights, and access to resources. Feminist political ecologists have long argued that experiences, interests, and responsibilities for nature and environment are often constructed along the lines of gender inequality, and mediated by race, culture, and gender.\(^3^3\) Their work demonstrates that gender operates as a critical variable in shaping resource access and control, interacting with other social categories such as class, race, culture, and ethnicity to shape processes of ecological change, struggles to sustain ecologically viable livelihoods, and sustainable development. However, feminist political ecology does not simply add another category (gender) to political-economic analyses of environmental change; rather, it also addresses questions of identity and difference, and how multiple forms of meaning are made in relation to environmental struggle and change.

Moreover, feminist political ecology rejects the essentialist narratives, common in gender, environment, and development scholarship of the
1980s, that posit women’s relationships to nature and the environment as homogenous, static, and universal. Gendered social roles shape environmental practices, policies, and their impacts, manifesting as unequal norms, burdens, expectations, and blame narratives. Women’s employment in formal and informal sectors, roles within environmental justice organizing and other social movements, and centrality to smallholder farming, traditional medicine gathering, and water and fuel collection have all positioned women within close proximity to nature. This is not based on a natural affinity for, or inherent closeness to, nature, but rather the demands, expectations, constraints, and opportunities shaped by social norms and expectations. While much of the literature on gender and environment is focused on the Global South, feminists have also analyzed these relations in the Global North, particularly with respect to how gendered social norms impact household resource consumption and use. For example, when researchers and policymakers focus on “green duty” lifestyle changes—encouraging consumers to reduce resource consumption, to use green products, and to educate themselves about the impacts of everyday household products—these efforts fall heavily on women’s shoulders.

An enduring storyline of gender and environmental change has predominated in environmental policymaking for decades. In this storyline, women are vulnerable victims, subject to the harsh impacts of environmental changes, based on an assumed close relationship to nature. At the same time, development projects characterize women as particularly resourceful and able to adapt to environmental changes. Thus, a second image arises: that of the resilient and responsible actor, well poised to take matters into their own hands to turn environmental problems into environmental solutions.

This narrative, of closer-to-nature, victim, and potential agent of change, has characterized much of the environmental thinking on women in the environment and development sector. Resurreccion posits these enduring storylines, or “persistent women-environment linkages,” as an important historical means for women to secure a seat at the table in terms of environmental policymaking. In order to play a role or have their concerns recognized at all, women historically had to simplify and adopt essentialized representations. However, these narratives are also detrimental: they cast women in narrow, homogenous roles that
offer little room for diversity, historical contingency, or innovation. They also erase men, and therefore gender itself as a relational condition of social inequality, from the picture. In so doing, these representations depict women's condition as static and unchanging, thus naturalizing vulnerability rather than rooting it in social relations.

Ironically, the images of victims-and-agents arose from efforts to better understand women's particular roles in environmental management in the Global South. In the early 1970s, development debates arose around the linkages between Women, Environment, and Development (WED), and focused on addressing “all women's interrelations with the environment in the context of economic development as well as the effects that environmental degradation has had upon women’s lives,” including increased subsistence household labor (water and fuel collection), effects of pollution of air, water, and soil, and increased workplace exposure to toxins. Braidotti, et al. locate the emergence of WED debates in forestry (specifically fuelwood energy) and agriculture circles in early questions around fuel and water use, and women's role as collectors of natural resources for household consumption. Women began to be framed as unique victims of energy and environmental crisis, and the category “women” in this context began to be used interchangeably with “the poor.” At the same time, international development circles began to focus on women's grassroots environmental activism in the Global South, concentrating on the Chipko Movement in India and the Greenbelt Movement in Kenya as examples of women's particular role as protectors of the environment. However, the broader engagements with women's roles in, and relationships to, development extend far beyond questions of the environment and natural resources—they range back to the earliest days of U.S. involvement in international development intervention, and shape how women, gender, and gender relations have been conceptualized and made into development intervention strategies.

Untangling Women, Gender, and Empowerment in Development

Women in Development (WID) strategies were created in the 1970s in an effort to integrate women into existing international development initiatives focused in the political, economic, and social sectors. Following Ester Boserup’s groundbreaking work on the sexual division of labor
in agrarian communities, women development practitioners in Washington, DC, were concerned with ensuring that women would be better integrated into local economic structures in the Global South. Their perspectives were informed by, and closely associated with, modernization theory—the paradigm that dominated international development from the 1950s to the 1970s and focused on technological fixes such as technology transfer, market-based skills, and the development of technologies to decrease or better marketize women’s workload.

Feminist critics of WID approaches charged that they were based on an acceptance of existing, unequal social, political, and economic structures, and avoided questioning the reasons for women’s subordination. They also focused on “women” as a singular and homogenous group, thus obscuring the role of unequal relations with men, as well as the importance of race, class, ethnicity, and religion in shaping women’s life conditions. Given that WID programs were primarily focused on how to integrate women into existing development initiatives, another central assumption was that women were not already participating in development programs, which was far from the case. In fact, women were first included in international development in the 1950s and 1960s through a focus on their reproductive roles in the household, via programs and policies addressing food aid, malnutrition, and family planning. The approach primarily focused on women’s role as mothers, with an underlying rationale of social welfare. International economic aid prioritized male-dominated industries in the formal sector, while welfare for the family targeted women. This welfare approach was based on three assumptions: first, that women are passive recipients of development, second that motherhood is the most important role in women’s lives, and third, that raising children is the most effective role for women economically. In other words, women’s primary roles and contributions were assumed to be reproductive, while men’s roles were productive. As Moser argues, “Intrinsically, welfare programmes identify ‘women’ rather than lack of resources, as the problem, and place the solution to family welfare in their hands, without questioning their ‘natural’ role.”

Over time, development program managers argued that the competitive free market was a better venue for maximizing women’s potential via opportunities for self-improvement. As a result, women’s roles as economic
agents (micro-entrepreneurs, farmers, factory workers) were increasingly recognized as central to integrating women into development.\textsuperscript{42}

In the early 1980s, feminists mounted a formal response to the embedded power relations and inaccurate assumptions of WID programs, under the banner of Gender and Development (GAD). GAD approaches address not only women, but women in relation to men, and how gender relations are socially constructed within the contingent contexts of space and time. In the GAD approach, both production and reproduction are socially constructed, and both create the conditions of women's subordination—thus social, economic, and political life are all sites for questioning and critiquing the roots of women's subordination in the context of socially constructed gender roles. GAD proponents were particularly concerned with integrating these critiques into development approaches, arguing that women were active participants in development from the beginning, operating as agents of change rather than passive recipients of outside interventions.

A central concern within GAD is the question of power—how it operates, circulates, and is embedded in development. Empowerment is central to these concerns, particularly transforming power relations within development. GAD proponents have developed multiple ways of thinking about empowerment as a resource to transform interventionist models from a grassroots, bottom-up perspective, as well as altering understandings of what power is, how it operates, and how it can be harnessed and transformed.

For example, Kabeer identifies three ways of thinking through empowerment: the “power to” affects outcomes over and above the wishes of others; “power over” refers to procedures that benefit certain groups at the expense of others; and “power with” focuses on building solidarity and alliances with others.\textsuperscript{43} Sen and Batliwala extend these orientations in multiple directions, defining empowerment as the ability to mobilize resources and to determine the rules of the game in ways that mask the workings of inequality; as a “process of changing power relations in favour of those at the lower levels of a hierarchy,”\textsuperscript{44} and as control over both material resources and ideology. Sen and Grown, however, insist that women’s empowerment must be an explicitly feminist enterprise that responds to the needs and priorities of multiple kinds of women,
and that is “defined by them for themselves” (emphasis in the original). Their vision of empowerment within development prioritizes strategies to meet human needs, as well as transforming access to and control over economic and political power. In this model, improved living conditions, socially responsible resource use, and the elimination of gender subordination and socioeconomic inequality are all linked sites of struggle and necessary transformation.

However, as Halfon’s analysis demonstrates, development institutions are generally not organized around grassroots work, and tend to function in more top-down structures. They also emphasize program efficiency based on short term, easily measurable goals. Feminist empowerment models are rooted in radical grassroots political change, which does not fit easily with the kinds of bureaucratization and hierarchy found in many development institutions. In the context of population, many NGOs narrow their focus to reproductive decision-making as the center of empowerment, likely because this approach serves as a discursive link between traditional populationist groups and women’s rights advocates.

As empowerment became incorporated into population policy in the 1990s, it was translated from a political approach to social transformation into a set of policy strategies. This translation effort has diluted its radical framing in favor of efficiency and achievement of development program goals—ironically, this is the very kind of approach the empowerment model was designed to critique and resist. Halfon describes the process of dilution thus: “The meaning of women’s empowerment has become defined through the practices and discourses of population institutions rather than strictly through feminist and radical theorizing. Because of the looseness of its definition, its reinterpretation through existing policy goals and planning strategies, and the constraints posed by institutional and professional needs, empowerment-oriented projects often resemble the development frameworks they were originally conceived in opposition to.” As I argue throughout this book, empowerment has become such a loose term that it is rather far afield of its original intent. Today, in population circles and in development discourse more broadly, empowerment is often “used in a way that robs it of any political meaning, sometimes as no more than a substitute word for integration or participation in processes whose main parameters have already been set out elsewhere.”
Sex, Population, and Science in Development

As Foucault has argued, population became an economic and political problem requiring state level management and surveillance in the eighteenth century. This was not a problem to be solved through elimination, but rather one to be managed and governed in order to optimize the capacities of populations. Techniques such as statistical data collection, public health surveillance, collection of information on birth and death rates, fertility, life expectancy, and health and illness status came to operate as an opportunity for state authorities to direct the sexual energy of populations, serving as a point of entry for ever-increasing interventions into the most intimate spheres of family life. Sexual and reproductive health interventions, including family planning, population control, and policies designed to increase birth rates have all come to be managed in this way over time. Sex and sexuality, reproduction, and life itself are objects of study and intervention precisely because of the power relations governing knowledge production, surveillance, and management of populations and bodies that made them possible as such objects. And the knowledge and discourses of sex and reproduction are deeply invested in questions of power, authority, and sovereignty.50

Discourse operates as a vehicle for the consolidation of power based on the management of bodies, sex, and reproduction. Ideas of nation, state, and progress have long been tied directly to sexual conduct and reproduction through science, modernization, and capitalism—and development interventions, particularly in the arenas of sex and reproduction, operate as vehicles for such projects. As sexuality has historically been transformed into an object of scientific and medical study and intervention, sexual and reproductive health development programs have advanced notions of what it means to be modern in one’s sexual and reproductive behavior. Such programs make possible new forms of governance in which bodies and health become sites for control, management, surveillance, and dominance. In this context, sex operates as a moral object as well as a site around which projects of standardization, universalization, and scientific transformation are organized. In the context of development, sex is simultaneously rendered a moral object, an object of scientific knowledge production, and a site for expanding notions of progress and modernity.51
Population advocates in the development arena have long been in a constant quest for more scientific data to prove the link between population growth and environmental change, to demonstrate that their advocacy is driven by factual, unbiased science. The idiom of co-production, conceptualized by Jasanoff, is particularly illuminating here. Jasanoff argues that “the realities of human experience emerge as the joint achievements of scientific, technical and social enterprise: science and society, in a word, are co-produced, each underwriting the other’s existence.”

Co-production arises from the recognition that “the production of order in nature and society has to be discussed in an idiom that does not, even accidentally and without intent, give primacy to either,” and as a result is reflective of a “self-conscious desire to avoid both social and technoscientific determinism in S&TS (science and technology studies) accounts of the world.” It does not conceptualize truth and power as pre-formed entities that oppose each other, but rather argues that scientific knowledge and political orders “shape, entail, and refer to each other.” These are also powerful processes: the ability to produce, shape, and circulate knowledge is deeply linked to notions of authority and expertise, the hidden practices of which co-productionist analyses help to expose.

While population-environment advocacy has been grounded by enduring Malthusian ideologies, shifting political climates have forced the development of new discourses, frameworks, and ideological approaches. Analyzing the relationship between science and politics helps account for these shifts, even as population sciences continue to proliferate. One of the key aims of this project is to explore the political context of scientific knowledge production around population and the environment. This is not to rehearse debates about the role of “objectivity” in science, but rather to demonstrate the social and political contexts within which scientific knowledge is produced, and within which it continues to be deeply entangled. In investigating these questions, I aim for this project to serve as a corrective to ideas that naturalize relationships between population growth and environmental problems as fixed, linear, and apolitical reflections of the material world.
Introduction

Methodological Entanglements

My research initially began with an exploration of the institutional politics of environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs) working at the intersections of global population, environment, and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) in international development. The ENGOs that have been active in this arena include the Sierra Club, as well as the National Audubon Society, Worldwatch Institute, World Wide Fund for Nature, Conservation International, and Population Connection (formerly known as Zero Population Growth; despite the fact that the organization’s name is population-focused, a senior manager described it in an interview as an environmental organization). Most of these organizations employ a small staff, often designating one employee to serve as their “population person,” responsible for informing NGO members about global population trends, tracking U.S. legislation on international family planning, participating in congressional lobbying and other policy advocacy, presenting their work at conferences, and when possible, joining with other members of the population advocacy network for activities.

Over time, I realized that population advocacy at these institutions is constituted by relations within a network of similarly engaged actors, from individual donors to community and campus activists. As a result, my ethnographic lens was retrained from a focus on ENGOs to a focus on the network itself, studying how youth activists come to be so deeply imbricated within it that they see its aims and priorities as their own. A key aim of this book is to track the practices through which youth and others in the network deploy political strategy and scientific knowledge on global population growth and environmental change to produce, circulate, and ground new modes of policy advocacy. These practices are far from static in their development—rather, they are the result of the careful and persistent efforts of network members who view population interventions as necessary to ensure environmental sustainability at local and global scales.

Throughout this book, I refer to this group alternately as population-environment advocates or simply population advocates. Through interviews and participant observation with youth and other advocates, NGO program managers, and donors, I sought to understand the politics and
practices of international development policy advocacy from the perspective of those working behind the scenes. One of my goals here is to demonstrate the multiplicity of motivations, goals, ethical positions, and moral frameworks utilized by those in this field of development, as they attempt to advance a coherent movement while navigating the thorny terrain of controversy. A secondary goal is to investigate the ways in which knowledge about the body, particularly poor women's bodies and fertility in the Global South, is constructed, disseminated, and utilized as the basis for political action by a network of actors located at vast geographic, cultural, political, and economic distances from those whose experiences they claim to represent. In other words, I attempt to understand how the “other,” in this case the universal “Woman” of the Global South (Mohanty 1992), is constructed through the melding of scientific data and social activism in order to advance an international policy agenda.

My research is grounded in three modes of data collection: participant observation at population advocacy trainings, workshops, research presentations, and conference sessions; in-depth interviews with members of the network and other activists; and analysis of archival documents. I conducted fieldwork that took place over a twenty-one-month period from April 2009 through December 2010. During this period, I attended a dozen workshops, conferences, trainings, and research presentations that addressed population growth and environmental change. Of these meetings, most advocated for reducing global population growth in order to promote environmental and climate sustainability. One conference took a distinctly different approach, using a critical race and gender analysis to reject neo-Malthusian arguments in favor of an approach centered on reproductive justice. Many of the population-environment advocacy trainings I attended were focused primarily on enrolling youth activists from campus-based environmental and SRH clubs at colleges and universities around the U.S. These multi-day trainings were primarily led by the Sierra Club, in conjunction with a series of SRH and women's advocacy organizations, ranging from the Feminist Majority Foundation to the International Women's Health Coalition, and took place in Los Angeles, Washington, DC, and San Francisco. Attending trainings also provided the opportunity to conduct in-depth interviews with youth population advocates, as well as ENGO and SRH NGO representatives.
Near the end of my fieldwork, I spent three weeks in Cancun, Mexico, participating in the international climate change conference (also known as the 16th annual Conference of Parties, or COP 16), and the associated youth-led Conference of Youth (COY6). Both provided key opportunities to observe how youth activists trained by the population-environment advocacy network operationalize their advocacy training in an international context. Over the course of the project, I conducted formal, one-on-one interviews with sixty-four NGO representatives, donors, community activists, scientists, and scholars. Approximately twenty additional interviews were conducted with feminist activists who critique the network’s strategies from an intersectional perspective focused on analyzing the race, gender, and class politics of the network’s efforts. Finally, I pored over dozens of program reports, project descriptions, funding analysis documents, meeting notes, and funder network reports, in order to supplement my ethnographic material with archival and contemporary documents. My informants were very generous in providing me with these documents, as well as sharing private correspondence.

On Current Politics

The stakes of writing a book like this one are high, particularly in the current political moment. As I write this, Donald Trump, a reality television star who has been accused of multiple sexual assaults, who has repeatedly questioned the existence of global warming, and who has referred to violent white supremacists as “good people,” is President of the United States. In his early days in office, he held the world in limbo for months, refusing to come to a decision about whether the U.S. would remain party to the Paris Agreement—the first legally binding climate change agreement in which all signatories have agreed to work together to limit global temperature increase to less than two degrees Celsius (he eventually made the decision to withdraw the U.S. from the agreement). Just two days after the largest women’s march in history, he reinstated the Global Gag Rule, an order that prevents NGOs outside the U.S. from receiving U.S. family planning funding if they provide abortions, or even offer counseling, referrals, or educate clients on obtaining abortions elsewhere. In a particularly shocking and unprecedented move, at the time
of this writing, the Trump administration had just delivered a proposed budget for fiscal year 2018 that eliminated all global health funding for international family planning and reproductive health. From over $600 million dollars in 2017 to zero, with a stroke of a pen.\textsuperscript{55}

Given the funding landscape and the realities of Washington politics, population advocacy has become increasingly important from a pragmatic perspective, in order to help ensure that women around the world will have access to contraceptives and other reproductive health services. However, a critical, feminist corrective to the narratives that sustain this advocacy work is increasingly needed. This book offers this kind of corrective: it interrogates the development and enduring roles of Malthusianism and populationism in the ways activists think about, and act on, population and family planning through international development. It centers critiques of race, gender, and class politics in the construction and circulation of populationist framings, and the ways activists link environmental degradation and climate change to human numbers. It also explores the politics of knowledge production and the stakes of the close relationship between science and policy advocacy in creating and sustaining international family planning advocacy efforts. With this said, I have long been, and remain, a strong advocate for women’s voluntary access to contraceptives and other family planning services within a context of comprehensive sexual and reproductive, and broader, health services.

Organization of the Book

This chapter has laid the groundwork for understanding the conceptual questions that this book seeks to address. In chapter 1, I take up the tumultuous politics of population in development, linking historical controversy and international policy activism with the context of declining donor funding over time, and the recent focus on population as a climate problem. I argue that, as climate change discourses bring environmental crisis narratives to the forefront of population debates, these narratives open the possibility for new ways of considering reproductive governance and surveillance—and a return to population control. Chapter 2 traces the history of neo-Malthusian thought, exploring how population was constructed as a scientific and environmental problem in the U.S.
over the course of the twentieth century as it entwined with American anxieties over nation, geopolitical stability, and the global racial balance of power. Chapter 3 explores the science-policy interface through an analysis of the close relationships between climate-population scientists and their funders. It analyzes the workings of donor advocacy behind the scenes, arguably the most important element in how scientists’ models not only project, but also produce, potential futures.

Chapter 4 departs from a focus on knowledge production to interrogate the process through which young activists transform themselves from local policy advocates to self-styled development leaders, experts, and social justice actors. Focusing on training workshops, I explore how young people negotiate their own ambivalent subject positions as population advocates, attempting to reframe their role within the language of social justice. Chapter 5 investigates the ways mainstream reproductive health NGOs draw on the language of reproductive justice to frame population advocacy as socially progressive, while obscuring the intersectional politics that structure the reproductive justice movement’s history and current work. The final chapter concludes the book not by offering solutions, but remaining in a thorny, uncomfortable, and vitally important space—a space of fretting over the future of populationism, and its ever closer engagements with gendered neoliberal development discourses.