In recent years, United Nations conferences, meetings and events have been transformed by the participation of various interest-based non-governmental organisations. Seen as the life-blood of a dynamic international civil society, these organisations have brought a measure of grass-roots democracy to the often elite-dominated structures of the UN and related bodies. Feminist and women's groups have been at the forefront of this invigorated NGO community, and over the past several years, have been a constant feature at UN conferences and meetings.

The focus of much feminist activism has been on challenging international legal, including human rights norms which have the effect of excluding women from legal protection. In the context of human rights, this focus is captured in the slogan "Women's Rights are Human Rights" which reflects the campaign to transform key human rights concepts to incorporate the human rights needs of women. To this end, feminist activists have lobbied for a rethinking of human rights and related language negotiated at conferences such as the Vienna Conference on Human Rights (1993); the Cairo Conference on Population and Development (1994), the Beijing Conference on Women (1995) and so on.

To a significant degree, those conferences appear to represent a victory for feminist activists. For example, as a result of feminist lobbying, the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action recognises widespread discrimination and violence against women, and calls for the "full and equal participation of women in political, civil, economic, social and cultural life" and "the eradication of all forms of discrimination on grounds of sex" (Art. 18). In addition, the Beijing Conference on Women, building on gains made at the Cairo Conference on Population and Development, includes important recognition of women’s reproductive and sexual rights.

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1Paper prepared for the ECPR Joint Session of Workshops, Mannheim, 26-31 March 1999, Workshop on women’s Movements and Internationalisation. This is a draft paper. Please do not cite, quote or distribute without the author’s consent.

2Lecturer, Law Department, Keele University, Keele, Staffordshire, U.K. ST5 5BG.
While the inclusion of language such as this does not guarantee that feminist demands will be included at the level of concrete projects, it is both a significant departure from existing international human rights agreements (for example, CEDAW does not refer to violence against women), and an important first step towards operationalising the protection of women's human rights. To the extent that feminist activists have been successful in placing many issues, such as violence against women, on the international agenda, and securing international agreement (within limits) on language recognising women's sexual and reproductive rights, their influence has been notable. This apparent success, I argue, raises a number of questions about the nature of feminist engagement with international law and the growing significance of international human rights as a forum for the contestation of social relations in a ‘globalised’ world order.

The inclusion of language recognising women's rights as human rights, or, to a lesser extent, women's reproductive rights has been accepted, with relative ease, by the international community. While feminist claims for women's human rights have been opposed by conservative states and non-state actors, particularly those on the religious right, that resistance has been countered by a coalition of Western, some Southern countries, and nongovernmental organisations. This suggests that the international community is remarkably receptive to feminist demands at this historical juncture. My concern with this is not that human rights gains must therefore be illusory (or else why would states be so quick to accept them), but that these apparent gains need to be considered in the context of the language and processes of globalisation and in particular, the changing political significance of international human rights debates. International human rights as both a language and forum for negotiating social relations appears to be assuming greater prominence in the context of certain globalising trends. That is, I would argue that international human rights is seen by many as an important forum within which the effects of economic, social and cultural globalisation are mediated. Increasingly, human rights language and structures are being used by identity-based groups, such as feminists, gays and lesbians, environmentalists and so on, as a space for transformative politics. While this radicalisation of international human rights is both promising and exciting, in this paper I want to start the process of thinking more critically about some aspects of international feminist activism in human rights and other areas. Although the language of human rights represents a potential vehicle for advocating social change, it may also be a limiting forum within which social justice issues, such as women's equality, can be effectively addressed.

3By ‘religious right’, I am referring to conservative religious groups, primarily Christian, Catholic and Islamic groups increasingly active in opposing population policy, particularly around women’s reproductive rights.
The transformative potential of human rights/civil rights campaigns has been subject to extensive critique in the context of domestic law and politics. Many of the concerns expressed about the limitations of rights discourse apply at the international level; rights do not necessarily result in substantive change, the illusory appeal of rights language can obscure more fundamental structural inequality; rights language reflects a Western modernist tradition in which the individual is the privileged, and problematic, rights bearer, and so (for a nuanced summary and analysis of these positions, see Bakan, 1997; Herman, 1994; Olsen, 1984; Williams, 1919).

While I am sympathetic to much of the rights discourse critique, my concern with international human rights is more focused on the relationship between rights language and an international order characterised by globalisation. My concern is that in a changing global order, the definition/constitution of global subjectivities - such as individuals, societies, community - are subject to renegotiation. While this is neither essentially progressive nor regressive, it becomes problematic when human rights claims are made without considering whether or how those rights claims challenge or reaffirm problematic constructions of ‘self’, ‘society’, ‘community’. Thus, apparent ‘successes’ in the human rights realm need to be examined in the context of other globalising processes which interact with, and possibly limit human rights claims.

In this paper, I would like to begin the process of considering some of these issues by looking at the Cairo Programme of Action as an apparent success story for women’s international activism. While not formally a human rights document, the Cairo Programme offers a good example of how the language of international human rights intersects with, and reflects, discourses around an increasingly globalised world order, particularly in the areas of environment and economic development. My objective is to explore how seemingly progressive language around women's reproductive rights may in fact, reinforce regressive assumptions about the relationship between women’s health, environmental protection and economic development. It is not my intent in this analysis to offer a far-reaching critique of women’s activism or human rights campaigns but, instead, to try and complicate the use of human rights as a forum for advocating women’s equality.

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In the first section of this paper, I provide a brief overview of the Cairo Conference and the history of population policy that preceded it. In the second section, I examine the interrelationship between population, environment and development described in the Cairo Programme of Action. While the recognition of linkages between environment, development and population represents an important development in population policy, by challenging historical constructions of over-population as an isolated ‘problem’, I examine how these linkages are imagined in potentially regressive and harmful ways. The relationships between population, environment, and development are articulated in the Cairo Programme of Action in terms of economic value. Economic productivity replaces women's reproductivity and women's empowerment is justified in terms of economic development. Rather than suggesting a paradigm shift, this approach, I argue, constructs women's fertility as counter-productive to a particular idea of economic progress and hence, as ultimately dangerous. By way of conclusion, I offer a few comments on the relationship between human rights language and the renegotiation of the individual, community and citizenship in a globalised world.

I. INTERNATIONAL POPULATION POLICY AND THE CAIRO CONFERENCE ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT

History of International Population Initiatives

While concern for the disastrous effects of world population growth have been a Western preoccupation since at least the time of Thomas Malthus, the existing coalition of international population institutions traces its birth back to the 1950 and 1960s. At that time, Western policy makers, particularly those in the United States, adopted the view that overpopulation not only prevented economic development in the South, but also represented a risk to world stability. The U.S. government and various institutions such as the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Population Council began to channel substantial funds to family planning organisations resulting in the emergence of a vast apparatus of family planning institutions and programmes.

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6 Hartman, 57.
This surge in funding for international family planning organisations was made possible by a convenient convergence of several historical factors: growing concern about the failure of third world economic development, an international population census that provided demographers with statistical information on which to describe demographic trends; the development of the intrauterine device (IUD) for preventing pregnancy which was perceived as "safe, effective, reversible, inexpensive and easy to administer"; and the declining influence of American conservatives and Catholics which facilitated a reversal in US foreign policy on population funding. To this list can be added the publication of Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*, which contributed to a climate of concern about overpopulation as the cause of food scarcity, poverty and environmental destruction.

Additionally important to the growth of the current international family planning industry was a pre-existing infrastructure of birth control organisations principally within the United States, but also in Britain. Some international family planning organisations, such as the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), were born out of, or had direct links with, eugenics societies in those countries. IPPF for example, was encouraged by Margaret Sanger, an important figure in the American eugenics movement, and had direct ties to eugenics societies in the US and England.

Initial efforts to control population growth were heavy-handed and focused on meeting demographic targets. The first World Population Conference held in Bucharest, 1974 saw Third World governments and some women's groups challenging the approach, and dominance, of international population institutions. The result was a change in the language of population control, with an attempt to adopt more of an integrationist approach where population was linked to socioeconomic transformations required in developing countries. Rigid demographic goals were de-emphasized and the idea of women as decision-makers in the population area was

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8Betsy Hartmann, at p. 99-100.

9Hartmann, p. 107-8.
tentatively introduced. The "integrationist" language had little subsequent impact on the delivery of population programmes, and the focus remained on limiting fertility in order to reduce the "negative externalities of childbearing" and promote economic growth. Following the Bucharest Conference some developing states, contrary to their position at Bucharest, began to develop state sponsored fertility control measures. By the time of the second World Population Conference in Mexico, 1984, many developing states had accepted population control measures as essential for economic growth.

The Mexico City conference was dominated by a shift in US policy on world population growth. Under the Reagan administration, the New Right was successful in lobbying for a change in US foreign policy in which population growth was described as a "neutral" phenomena. Up to that point, the US had been a principal source for funding international population programmes. However, under the Reagan administration, US foreign aid could not be given to "any organisation that performs abortions, advises women on abortion, or lobbies on behalf of abortion rights - even if these activities are supported by non-US funds."

This shift in US foreign aid affected population programmes in places like Bangladesh where reliance on external funding meant that access to abortion had to be curtailed. Paradoxically, however, the changes in US foreign policy may have invigorated some international population groups who benefitted from a shift to privatised programme funding and delivery. In addition,

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12Crane, 1994 at 363

13Correa at 12.


15Dorothy Stein, "Reproductive Politics and the Cairo Conference" (1996) 5(2) Contention 37-58, 46. See also: Hartmann, p. 123-125; Crane, 1994: 366

16Stein, at p. 33.

17Crane, 1994, at 367
the construction of population as a developmentally "neutral" phenomena underscored a shift in Western thinking about the ‘population problem’ as one of environmental destruction. In 1990, the Ehrlichs published *The Population Bomb* which drew a correlation between population growth and environmental degradation. The discourses around population and environmental were important in countering the arguments of neo-liberals who argued for a regulation of population through market forces.

In addition to the privatisation of population programmes, the 1980s saw the rise of women's groups in both the South and North who challenged the family planning focus of population institutions. Feminist activists pointed out that substantial international funds were being poured into developing countries to establish extensive birth control and sterility services without considering or treating related health care issues such as sexually transmitted diseases, sexual health and the sexual health needs of adolescents and infertile women. Feminist and other groups argued for a rethinking of international population initiatives based on reproductive health rather than fertility control. To a large extent, the language of reproductive health was adopted by population institutions and by the late 1980s was part of mainstream population rhetoric but without fully integrating reproductive health into programme provision. The result was a language of reproductive health which maintained a focus on medical intervention over systemic changes, and reinforced the construction of women solely in terms of their reproductive and gender roles. In this way, population policy, despite efforts to change it, maintained a ‘neo-Malthusian’ approach which, in the main, sought to control/limit [some] women’s fertility. In the lead-up to the 1994 Cairo Conference, feminist groups in the South and North argued for a fundamental rethinking of population programmes to shift the focus away from fertility regulation to the empowerment of women. They argued for the need to explicitly recognise women's sexual and reproductive rights. A key actor in promoting a reproductive rights approach to population is DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era), a

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18Correa, at p. 13.


21Correa, at 62; see also Germaine et al, pp. 37-41.

network of women, researchers and activists from the economic South. According to the DAWN reproductive health and rights framework, women's reproductive health cannot be addressed in isolation. It requires first, a recognition of the interrelationship between women's biological reproductive functions and their "economically productive and cultural roles"; second, a guarantee of women's "access to housing, education, employment, property rights and legal equality in all spheres", and third, a holistic approach to comprehensive health services as a component of social policy and infrastructure designed to address basic needs.23

The 1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development (ICCPD)

The Cairo Conference was a notable departure from its two predecessors in a number of ways. First, it was a large international event, attracting intense media coverage. Following the precedent set by the Rio Conference on Environment and Development (1992), Cairo was typical of the new generation of United Nations Conference: part negotiation session and part performance. With Jane Fonda, the UN's 'goodwill ambassador' in attendance,24 the Conference was a public relations event. Second, Cairo was notably controversial, not just for the subject matter under consideration, but also for the actions of the participants and interested parties. While previous population conferences had also been controversial, Cairo was unique in the scale of public interest and hostility it attracted. For example, in the lead-up to Cairo, Islamist lawyers filed a law-suit to block the Conference being held in Cairo,25 an extremist Islamic group threatened to attack Conference participants,26 and the Vatican, through its official office, the Holy See, entered into a formal alliance with fundamentalist Islamic countries and set-about preventing international consensus on the draft Programme of Action.27

Third, the Cairo Conference involved the participation of a large number of nongovernmental organisation (NGOs), and particularly, feminist and women's groups from a range of geographic

23 Reproduced in Correa, at p. 58.


25 "Islamists try to block UN conference", The Independent, 26 August 1994, p. 11.


areas. The Programme of Action appears to reflect the input of feminist and other NGOs,\textsuperscript{28} and as discussed above, has been hailed as representing a paradigm shift in the way population is addressed through international law and policy. Later in this paper, I explore, and challenge, the extent to which Cairo is in fact a dramatic shift in population policy. In this section, however I want to discuss the many aspects of the Cairo Programme which appear to represent a fundamental shift in approach to world population growth.

The first notable feature of the Cairo Programme of Action is the almost total lack of discussion about population growth. Unlike previous conferences, Cairo does not start with a recitation of statistical evidence of dangerous population growth. Indeed, the Programme rarely refers to population growth, adopting instead, the ostensibly neutral phrase "population trends" (see, for example, articles...). Second, the Cairo Programme makes explicit the need to address population in the context of other related factors such as development, the environment, and gender, and contains a separate chapter on the "Interrelationships between population, sustained economic growth and sustainable development" (chapter III). This marks a significant departure from previous pronouncements on population policy which tended to address population in isolation from other social or economic processes.

Perhaps the most significant, and controversial, aspect of the Cairo Programme of Action is the recognition of gender as an important variable in population trends. The Programme contains a separate chapter on "Gender Equality, Equity and Empowerment of Women" (Chapter IV), which recognises the importance of women's empowerment both for the success of population programmes, and, more importantly, as an "end in itself" (paragraph 4.1). Women's empowerment is defined in terms of: access to education, equality between women and men, full involvement of women in decision-making processes, equal representation and involvement in political and public life, economic self-reliance, and eliminating violence and discrimination against women.

In addition, the Programme contains a separate chapter on "Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Health" (chapter VII) which provide a means by which women's reproductive and sexual autonomy can be expressed in a human rights framework. Importantly, the language of

\textsuperscript{28}\textsuperscript{}Rosalind Petchesky, for example, argues that the Programme of Action "enshrines an almost feminist vision of reproductive rights and gender equality": Commentary: "From Population Control to Reproductive Rights: Feminist Fault Lines" (1995) 6 (November) Reproductive Health Matters 152-161, at 152.
this chapter seeks to broaden the meaning of reproductive health beyond the narrow confines of birth control and sterilisation traditionally associated with family planning. This chapter, for example refers to the right of people to "have a satisfying and safe sex life", and to have "sexual health" which is more than absence of disease (paragraphs 7.2). It also contains an explicit recognition of the right of men and women to have the information and means to decide freely, without coercion, when and if to have children (paragraph 7.2). In this context, reproductive health care should include: family-planning counselling, information and education; pre and post natal care, information and health care for breast feeding women, information on preventing and managing the consequences of abortion, treating reproductive tract infections and sexually transmitted diseases and information on responsible parenthood (paragraph 7.6).

Thus, on balance, the Cairo Programme appears to offer a dramatic shift in the language of international population policy. First, it has tried to move away from an approach which constructs women as objects in the reproductive process; to be controlled rather than consulted. Women's empowerment is included as a necessary part of population policy, not simply because it leads to lower fertility but as an important aim in itself. Second, by recognising population as interacting in a complex way with development, environment and gender, the Programme moves away from a quick fix approach that targets women's fertility as 'the problem'. Third, the Cairo Programme minimises references to population growth; replacing demographic targets with social justice and redistribution aims. Fourth, all of the above developments represent hard-fought battles in which feminist NGOs and sympathetic state governments faced, and were apparently victorious over, hostile opposition by religious fundamentalist actors.

In sum, the Cairo Programme of Action appears to shift the very paradigm of population policy away from a neo-Malthusian emphasis on demographics and fertility control, and towards a more integrated approach, looking at population in the context of other variables such as development, environment, and women’s human rights. In the following discussion, however, I challenge this conclusion by demonstrating that despite the many ostensible gains made at Cairo, the ideology of population control remains.

Before moving to that analysis, I would like to make some preliminary observations about the Cairo Programme of Action and my analysis of it. In my attempt to ‘re-read’ the Cairo document, I found it very difficult to go beyond the apparently very progressive language of Cairo. As discussed earlier, the Programme of Action contains many positive statements about, among other things, women’s reproductive rights. As a text, it appears to offer a progressive view of gender roles, development and international cooperation. In many respects, the following
analysis arises out of the difficulty I had in reconciling the apparently progressive language of the Cairo document with the feeling that it left in tact problematic constructions of gender and race. In the following analysis, I am mindful that the Cairo Programme is a lengthy and complex statement on various aspects of population policy, and a textual analysis runs the risk of selecting and distorting small parts of a larger document. Wherever possible, I have tried to reflect the overall feel of the document and my excerpts and references are meant to indicate what I see as larger tensions running throughout the document. In addition, the Cairo Programme of Action was written in a particular political climate shaped by other texts such as Agenda 21 agreed at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. A detailed assessment of documents such as these is beyond the scope of this paper, but clearly form part of the context within which I read the Cairo Programme.

IV. RETHINKING CAIRO: NATURE, ENVIRONMENT AND THE REGULATION OF SOCIAL RELATIONS

Although the Cairo programme of Action is said to be unique in drawing linkages between environment and development, historically, population considerations have been tied to various environmental narratives. For example, Thomas Malthus (1798) argued that population control was necessary because of limits in food production, and among some 'modern day' environmentalists, population growth is seen as anathema to environmental protection. Popular books, such as the Ehrlichs’, have contributed to the view that the world is in a state of environmental crisis brought about by over-population. The biggest threat to the environment, and hence an important aspect of the solution to world collapse, is population control. While most population activists have not embraced the Ehrlichs' dooms-day approach to population control, there have been growing links between international environmental NGOs and population activists. To a large degree, this relationship is one of tactical convenience. For some population activists, environmental groups represent well-funded and highly mobilised actors, with whom an alliance could shore-up dwindling economic and political support.


The period preceding the Cairo conference was one of notable international activity and agreement around international environmental regulation. Starting with the Brundtland Commission report, *Our Common Future* in 1987,32 there was an apparent international commitment to negotiating an environmental framework within which differing state interests, particularly between South and North, could be resolved. The Brundtland Commission offered a compromise solution to economic development/environmental protection through the concept of sustainable development, which advocates a reciprocal relationship between economic growth and environmental protection where each is essential to the other.33 For many, the new way of thinking about global approaches to environmental protection was immediately felt in the ratification of the 1987 Montreal Protocol for reducing production of ozone-depleting Chloro-fluoro carbons (CFCs).34 That agreement has been held out by many as a 'success' story for negotiating international environmental treaties and conventions.35 The momentum generated by these two developments - the Brundtland Commission and the Montreal Protocol - was a significant driving force in the preparation for the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED), held in Rio de Janeiro, 1992.36 Although UNCED was disappointing and failed to achieve the level of international agreement initially anticipated, it was a significant international event attracting global attention and consideration, and constitutes a defining event in the area of international environmental regulation.

Coming on the heels of UNCED, the Cairo Conference reflects the international preoccupation with environmental issues expressed at Rio. While Cairo contains many overt references to environmental protection issues, I would argue that UNCED also echoes throughout the Cairo Programme of Action in the assumptions made about the nature of the international community and, to borrow a phrase from the Brundtland Commission, the shape of our "common future".

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32 The Brundtland Commission is formally known as The World Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by Norweigan Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland.


36 Buttel, at 279.
In the following sections, I argue that the seemingly progressive language of environmental protection found in the Cairo Programme of Action constructs a particular view of a global community defined by collective environmental risk. This definition of community, I argue, implicitly naturalises the control of women's reproductive and productive capacity in the interest of environmental and economic survival. References to the environment in Cairo function to reinforce particular gender and race ideologies in which black women's reproductive capacity is seen as dangerous and in need of regulation. As I stated at the outset, the language of Cairo is disarmingly progressive and I am not suggesting that the Programme of Action is overtly gendered and racialised. Rather, in the following analysis, I explore how environmental narratives reflected in the Cairo Programme are a product of, and contribute to particular social values and gender norms which reinforce, rather than represent a shift from, a neo-Malthusian approach to population policy. In this analysis, I am considering the social construction of ‘the environment’ implicit in the Cairo Programme of Action. The language of environmentalism is, to use the words of Klaus Eder, "socially constituted and culturally defined". Thus, environmental narratives found in the Cairo Programme and related documents need to be considered in terms of the social values and ideals implicitly reinforced in the construction of environmental 'problems' and environmental solutions.

Constructing the 'environment'

References to 'the environment', however defined, implicitly require constructing the 'natural' and the 'non-natural'. That is, the 'environment' is not a pre-determined, absolute entity. It functions as a symbolic amalgam of various cultural referents in which the 'natural', the 'man-made' and the

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37Within population policy documents, such as the Cairo Programme of Actin, the "target" recipients of family planning initiatives, etc are women in the developing world. For example, paragraph 6.2 of the Programme of Action describes the "disparate" levels of population growth between the "more developed world" and regions with "economies in transition". While women from the developing world are not specifically referred to as black, I argue that they are constructed as racially ‘other’ and that their raced bodies are the essential subjects of international population policy.

This paper is a work in progress, and in its current state has not yet fully addressed the issues of ‘race’, and particularly the racialisation of women’s reproductive bodies. The question of race and the history of population policy in the context of colonisation, imperialism and domestic eugenics movements is, I argue, central to understanding Cairo and its failure to move beyond a neo-Malthusian conception of population policy.

'vulnerable' aspects of the physical world are defined. As Margaret Davies and others have argued, however, 'the natural' is a political category through which particular world views are made "normal, eternal, and unchangeable". In the context of references to 'the environment', particularly as they pertain to women's fertility, there is therefore, a need to consider how the 'environment' is used to construct as 'normal' certain expectations about women's reproductive behaviour.

Mary Douglas and others have demonstrated that distinctions between the 'natural' and the 'man-made' function as a primary dichotomy in the self-definition of a society. 'Nature' is defined through, and constitutive of dominant economic, political and cultural processes (McNaghten and Urry, 95). While there are many 'natures' (McNaghten and Urry, 15), and the process of defining nature is historically and culturally specific, there are some constants in the construction of the nature/culture dichotomy. For example, "nature is often presumed to be female" and is constructed "as a goddess or as a divine mother" (McNaghten and Urry, 1998, 14), in contrast to the male world of culture which is rationale and systematic. The language around nature often reflects "male sexualised conceptions of the raping and pillaging of nature, akin to men's treatment of women" (McNaghten and Urry, 14).

Constructions of the meaning of nature are part of the process through which community is defined and social relations are structured (Eder, p. 3(?) ; Hajer, 17; Douglas - check source; McNaghten & Urry, 15). That is, the definition of what constitutes the 'natural' involves an ordering of things according as to their pure, adultered, corrupt, or 'unnatural' status. As discussed above, the categories of 'natural' and 'unnatural' are vested with symbolic meaning and become an important part of a community's imaginary with normative as well as symbolic implications. For example, and as discussed above, the sexualised imagery of nature and culture both reflects and reinforces gendered relations of power in which 'male' is assumed to be the


40"Taking the inside out: sex and gender in the Legal Subject” in Ngaire Naffine and Rosemary J. Owens, eds., Sexing the Subject of Law (Sydney: Sweet & Maxwell, 1997), 25-46, at 32.
rational, dominating protector (and, paradoxically, violator) of the vulnerable, passive female. In addition, images of the aggressive maleness of civilization are implicated in colonial exploitation where the 'virgin' territories of uncivilised lands were "opened up" to the "penetration" of colonial powers.41

According to McNaghten and Urry, the recognition that it is not possible to speak of nature and culture as bounded and separate spheres has resulted in the term 'Environment' which gives expression to new conceptual terrain in which nature and culture share an observable and measurable space (p. 30). In this conception, Environment represents a precarious balance of various factors, and is vulnerable to corruption by pollutants, however defined. Within dominant Western narratives of environmental change, the 'threat' to the environment by pollutants will be perceived differently depending on ideological and political factors. But it is this very process of identifying environmental 'dangers' and assigning meaning to environmental change which is part of the process of a community's self-definition.42 As Mary Douglas' work has demonstrated, a community's identification of risk and pollution is part of the dialogue through which the ideal society is described (source). Pollution beliefs, according to Douglas and Wildavsky, "function to keep some categories of people apart so that others can be together".43 The evolution of environmentalism in modern societies thus signals what Klaus Eder identifies as the "crystallization of new cultural patterns." For Eder, "[w]hat is at stake in environmentalism is not the survival of mankind, but the cultural foundations of the social order of modern societies".44

In the context of Cairo, the language of environmental damage is evocative of a global community bound together by shared environmental risk. For example, the preamble to the Programme of Action notes that:

41McNaghten and Urry, at 15; Richard H. Grove, Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, tropical island Edens and the origins of environmentalism, 1600-1860 (Cambridge: Cambridge University press), at 6. Richard Grove, however, goes on to argue that the colonial relationship with colonised lands was more complex than simple imperial exploitation. He maintains that some of the roots of Western environmentalism can be traced back to early efforts to protect colonial lands from environmental destruction (not all of which was caused by imperial exploitation). According to Grove, tropical islands were constructed as "paradises" and biblical Edens, the protection and mastery of which was deeply implicated in religious, particularly Protestant, faith.


43Douglas and Wildavsky, p. 37.

44Eder, 162.
Around the world many of the basic resources on which future generations will depend for their survival and well-being are being depleted and environmental degradation is intensifying, driven by unsustainable patterns of production and consumption, unprecedented growth in population, widespread and persistent poverty, and social and economic inequality. Ecological problems, such as global climate change, ... are adding to the threats to the well-being of future generations. There is an emerging global consensus on the need for increased international cooperation ... (Article 1.2).

The construction of environmental risk as a common problem uniting 'us' all functions to simultaneously construct a particular sense of community and disempower critical social inquiry. The articulation of environmental risk as a collective concern - what Lash and Urry refer to as "same boat ideology" - implies at the outset a common set of values and interests. According to Maarten Hajer,

The image of the planet ... has become the symbol of the view that the real dangers are those of a global physical crisis that threatens survival. According to this story-line the environment has become a problem of mankind which can only be resolved by one big united effort (p. 14).

This imagery of a collective risk is problematic in a number of respects. First, it uses risk as a way to construct a particular community - in this case a global community - in which not only are historical or cultural differences erased, but so too are the differences in risk and responsibility. Environmental degradation is, in many respects, an umbrella term encompassing a number of topics from air pollution to fresh water usage to fisheries management. Not all countries are similarly at risk and nor can all countries play the same role in addressing environmental risk issues. Second, and more relevant for my purposes, the focus on global environmental crisis shifts the terrain of activism from local or specific issues to seemingly global problems such as ozone deterioration or climate change. I am not suggesting that this is simply a case of the global erasing the local and nor am I suggesting that ozone depletion and climate change are not serious

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issues. Rather, my point is that the focus on environmental destruction as a 'global problem' marginalises other conceptions of the environment in which risk is differently constructed, and social relations are recast.  

Having defined the nature of the risk as global environmental destruction, the task of the international community, at Cairo and other fora, is to choose particular social forms that are appropriate in the context of the risk. As Douglas and Wildavsky have noted the identification of a natural disaster is a "normal strategy for protecting a particular set of values belonging to a particular way of life." In the context of Cairo, I argue that the "particular set of values" protected by the identification of environmental danger is first, a capitalist model of economic development based on the idea of ‘progress’, and second, gendered and racialised structures of oppression in which black women's reproduction is regulated.

Within the Cairo Programme of Action, the environment is variably referred to as "fragile" and "vulnerable". For example, Chapter III - "Interrelationships between Population, Sustained Economic Growth and Sustainable Development" - refers variably to "fragile ecosystems" (para. 3.29(b)), "ecologically fragile systems" (para. 3.29(c)), and "ecologically vulnerable" areas which are at risk from population generally and population concentration in "urban agglomerations" (para. 3.29(e)). The image of an encroaching mass of humanity threatening the fragility of the Environment reinforces the construction of 'population' or, more particularly, [some] women's fertility as a 'danger' from which the Environment must be protected. In this construction of the Environment, a distinction is made between 'nature' and 'environment' which reflects, I argue, the tension between the apparent 'naturalness' of reproduction and the threat it is constructed as presenting. The nexus between environment and population appears to challenge the sexualised imagery of the vulnerable female of nature and powerful male of culture. In the context of Cairo, it is the power of the maternal body - nature - which endangers the feminised Environment. This construction of the maternal body is both gendered and raced. It represents nature-out-of-control; nature as contagion. The Environment, which is the confluence of nature and culture, is constructed as a precarious balance of various factors which are jeopardized by the excess of nature.

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48 Supra, at p. 8.
At one level, then, the language of environmental protection at Cairo does not appear to duplicate the female/male dichotomy inherent in the nature/culture distinction discussed above. However, I would argue that in distinguishing the maternal Nature from the feminised Environment, the Cairo document positions reproduction/production as a gendered dichotomy. The apparent contradiction between what appears to be the weak, feminised Environment and the powerful, female Nature is reconciled through a conceptual division between Nature (as reproductive and destructive) and Environment (as productive and distributive). The effective distinction between reproduction and production takes on a gendered quality in the definition of production as equalling the public world of economic activity and reproduction as 'backward', and environmentally and economically threatening.49 The solution then becomes managing nature - women's fertility - to save the environment and allow development to continue.

A central strategy in this project is "sustainable development", an approach to reconciling economic development and environmental protection which encourages development that does not compromise future generations' enjoyment of the environment. References to sustainable development can be found throughout the Cairo Programme of Action, generally in the context of balancing "sustained economic growth" with "environmentally sound development" (paragraph 1.1, Preamble) The relatively prominent position of sustainable development throughout the Programme of Action (see, for example, Principle 6, paragraphs 1.1, 1.2, 1.8, 1.9, 1.11, etc.) reflects the influence of the Rio Conference (particularly Agenda 21) and the Brundtland Commission Report which, together, have positioned 'sustainable development' as a key international strategy.

Sustainable development is a complex concept which has been described as "a methodology as well as a normative goal, a model for planning, a strategy" for managing the environment.50 In its ambiguity and breadth, it has been seen as both potentially transformative and regressive. Wendy Harcourt sees sustainable development as offering the potential for "a new productive ethic at the heart of development which will value the quality of peoples' relations with each


other and with nature." According to Harcourt, the "sustainable development debate marks a shift in development thinking and practice as well an open challenge to traditional economics (sic)." In an another view, Michael Redclift argues that sustainable development needs to be considered in the context of a particular "Modernist tradition" in which "the idea of 'progress'' and the dominance of scientific discourse serve to privilege an "optimistic" model of economic progress:

By incorporate the concept of 'sustainability' within the account of 'development', the discourse surrounding the environment is often used to strengthen, rather than weaken, the basic supposition about progress. Development is read as synonymous with progress, and made more palatable because it is linked with 'natural' limits, expressed in the concept of sustainability. The essential discourse surrounding nature, and what are assumed to be natural laws, is viewed not as part of a broader socially constructed view of 'progress', but as part of an essentially non-human logic, located in biological systems.

In the Cairo document, references to sustainable development serve to reinforce the conception of environmental protection as having a 'use value'. That is, the environment is both exploitable and an economic resource and should be protected - and used - on that basis. Similarly, population needs to be managed to ensure sustainable development, that is, linear economic progress which does not undermine environmental integrity. References to sustainable development encourage a particular model of growth consistent with existing international capital structures. As such, sustainable development as used at Cairo does not offer a challenge to on-going economic colonisation through unequal or exploitative trade regimes, but rather,

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52 Harcourt, at p. 12.


54 Redclift, at p. 7.

encourages the integration of population into existing development strategies. For example, paragraph 3.3 provides that:

Sustainable development implies, inter alia, long-term sustainability in production and consumption relating to all economic activities... Macroeconomic and sectoral policies have, however, rarely given due attention to population considerations. Explicitly integrating population into economic and development strategies will both speed up the pace of sustainable development and poverty alleviation and contribute to the achievement of population objectives and an improved quality of life of the population. (paragraph 3.3)

In the following section, I argue that in its elaboration of the relationships between population, environment, development and women's empowerment, the Cairo Programme of Action constructs an ideal representation of 'woman' in which economic productivity is the justification for reproductive rights.

**Making Producers out of Reproducers**

In its attempt to situate population issues in the context of other socio-economic factors, a significant part of Chapter III of the Cairo Programme is devoted to exploring the linkages between population, economic growth, environmental protection and women's empowerment. While the Programme of Action describes a fairly interdependent relationship between these various factors (see, for example, paragraph 3.1), it is economic development and population which emerge as the crucial variables. While both environmental protection and women's empowerment are recognised as worthy aims in their own right, they are nonetheless justified in terms of their potential economic benefit.

For example, paragraph 3.3 calls for an integration of population issues into economic and development strategies which will "both speed up the pace of sustainable development and poverty alleviation and contribute to the achievement of population objectives and an improved quality of life of the population". While this chapter contains a number of actions and objectives, no further explanation is given for what "integrating population into development strategies" would look like. The implication is that if international development agencies and institutions such as the World Bank include funding to reduce population as part of development projects, there would be consequent economic improvement and hence, "an improved quality of life". This direct causal relationship between population reduction and economic betterment is
explored further in paragraphs 3.14 -5 which note that success in slowing down population growth has resulted in poverty alleviation, greater protection of the environment and contributed to sustainable development. Paragraph 3.15 goes further to note that "[s]ustained economic growth... is essential to eradicate poverty" which in turn will slow population growth. Thus, while the Cairo document argues for a complex approach to population, the focus remains on lowering population to improve economic performance.

The role of women is, of course, central to these goals of reducing population levels and encouraging economic growth. Once again, the Programme of Action contains some nuanced discussion of the interrelationships between women's empowerment, economic development and environmental improvement, but the emphasis remains on women's relationship to sustained economic growth. Paragraph 4.1 (in the chapter on "Gender Equality, Equity and Empowerment of Women") argues that "empowerment and autonomy of women... is a highly important end in itself", but is also "essential for the achievement of sustainable development." Although this chapter contains some promising language around the need to redress inequality, the focus remains on improving women's access to the 'public' sphere (defined as "production, employment, income-generating activities, education, health, science and technology, sports, culture and population related activities", para. 4.3(b)) and decision-making structures (see for example, paragraphs 4.3 and 4.4). While these are important objectives, the thrust appears to be striving for formal equality between men and women (as an equal "partnership... in productive and reproductive life"), and for women's equal opportunity, primarily in the economic sphere. This emphasis is problematic in two respects. First, it leaves unaddressed structural inequalities that make women's access to the public sector a hollow objective.56 Second, it constructs a narrow vision of women's empowerment which is equated with economic productivity. That is, women's empowerment is justified in terms of economic "efficiency" which requires that women's reproductive capacity is de-emphasised and her economic productivity is encouraged.57 For example, paragraph 3.18 sets out as an "action" point that:

56Dianne Otto makes a similar argument in the context of the Beijing Platform for Action which, she argues "ignores the reproduction of gender hierarchies by free market economic competition”. The emphasis in that document on increasing "women's participation in economic decision-making” is directed at "equipping women to be better able to compete, equally with men, in the global capitalist economy” without addressing economic globalisation and structural adjustments which have exacerbated conditions of inequality: “Holding up half the sky, but for whose benefit?: A critical analysis of the Fourth World Conference on Women” (1996) 6 Australian Feminist Law Journal 7-28, at p. 21.

Existing inequities and barriers to women in the workforce should be eliminated and women's participation in all policy-making and implementation should be promoted. Governments, non-governmental organizations and the private sector should invest in the education and skill development of women and girls in all aspects of reproductive health in order to enable them to effectively contribute to and benefit from economic growth and sustainable development.

I am not suggesting by this that the Cairo Programme of Action does not also contain language which supports women's equality in other areas (ie through increasing men's involvement in childcare and housework, paragraph ), but the emphasis in the Cairo document is on encouraging women to be economic producers. That is, the Programme of Action creates an ideal "Cairo Woman" who curbs her reproduction, has a responsible relationship with the environment and becomes an effective participant in the economic realm. The model of economic development assumed at Cairo is clearly based on global capitalism and developing countries are encouraged to develop into participants in this system.

V. CONCLUSION: WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS AND GLOBALISATION

The starting premise of this paper is to question the apparent success of women’s international human rights campaigns. My objective is not to point out the many respects in which international human rights, or international law more generally, has ‘failed’ women. I do not anticipate that there are many, if any, feminist activists who feel that the fight for women’s equality is over. Rather, my aim in this paper is to use the Cairo example to raise questions about some of the complexities inherent in using international law/human rights as a forum for contesting social change. In this concluding section, I explore the changing nature of international human rights fora in the context of a globalised world order and the implications this might have for feminist engagement with human rights.

The idea of an invigorated international civil society populated by organised and effective interest-based actors, such as feminist groups, is now a common reference point for scholars and activists exploring global change. Indeed, as many papers in this working group will no doubt explore, feminist activism has dramatically changed the international arena by bringing women’s equality issues to the forefront of political and legal agendas, particularly in the area of international human rights. Parallel to this feminist activism is the growing activism by the
religious right. At various international conferences and meetings, such as Cairo and the Beijing Conference on Women, conservative Catholic and Christian groups/organisations have opposed reproductive rights language, particularly around abortion, the recognition of sexual autonomy for women, and the concept of ‘women’s rights as human rights’. A leading actor in this area is the Vatican through its official body, the Holy See. The Holy See has observer status at the UN which entitles it to restricted participation in UN activity. In this capacity, the Holy See has been a major force in resisting agreement at Cairo on reproductive rights, at Beijing on reproductive rights, sexual autonomy, and the use of the term ‘gender’, and continues to be a strong presence at UN meetings and follow-up conferences.

In addition to the Vatican, there is a growing community of conservative Christian and Catholic organisations strongly resistant to international population policy, women’s human rights, human rights of gays and lesbians, and environmental protection. Increasingly the established domestic activism of Christian fundamentalists (see: Herman, 1998) appears to be shifting to include the international realm.

The presence of conservative religious actors in the international realm is partially symptomatic of the extent to which human rights in particular has increasingly become a forum within which social relations are negotiated and contested. Despite the increased involvement of the religious right in international law and policy, however, feminist lobbying around issues like reproductive and sexual rights has been largely incorporated into international texts. That is, the religious right appears, at least so far, to have been unsuccessful in preventing international agreements, such as Cairo and Beijing from including references to abortion, women’s sexual autonomy, and the rights of adolescents to reproductive information. Should we conclude from this that as an international community we have accepted women’s equality and all that entails? Clearly, the

58 The Holy See’s status seems to occupy a controversial position under international law; not quite a state but something more than a typical non-state actor (Kunz, 1952).

59 For a more detailed discussion of the Vatican’s tactics at Cairo and Beijing see: Buss, 1998.

60 For example, the Vatican was present at The Hague Conference on the Cairo Programme of Action (‘Cairo +5’), February 1999, where its interventions on issues around reproductive rights and abortion (and particularly the so-called ‘abortion pill’) were consistent with its earlier positions at Cairo and Beijing.

61 For example, Concerned Women for America, which hails itself as the “largest pro-family organization” in the United States, is increasingly warning about, and lobbying around, the threat of “globalisation”, and particularly UN population and environmental policy and human rights: Concerned Women for American web site: http://www.cwfa.org
answer is no and the reason is that human rights gains, while important, are contingent on other social processes and structures. That is, rights are indeterminant; they are neither progressive nor regressive (Brown, 1995: 86-87; Cheah, 1997: 264; Herman, 1994: 64). In the context of increasing globalisation, the language of human rights, particularly women’s human rights, needs to be considered in relation to the constitution of international (or, possibly national) communities and citizens. To what extent is the language of human rights being used to construct the ideal ‘global citizen’? And where do - how do - women figure in as ‘citizens’?

Roland Robertson argues that the ordering of the global field can be divided into four components: national societies; individuals/selves; relationships between national societies (international relations), and humankind (1992: 25). Globalisation as the “compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole” (1992: 8) necessarily involves the reconfiguration of each of these elements and their relationship to one other (1992: 175). Thus, thinking of the world as a ‘totality’ requires a reconsideration of self, community, humanity, and the relationship between oneself, one’s community, one’s world. This rethinking of self is a process of definition of the individual and the ‘other’, which Robertson refers to as the “institutionalized construction of the individual” (emphasis in the original) (1991: 80).

While I am not in complete agreement with Robertson’s theorisation of globality, his conception of the world ‘order’ provides a useful context within which to consider how the language of human rights may play a role in the “institutionalized construction of the individual”. In the context of Cairo, for example, the language of environmental protection, economic development, and population policy, I argue, converges to construct ‘Cairo Woman’. This Cairo Woman is granted certain rights to reproductive and legal autonomy provided that she acts responsibly by protecting the environment, curbing her fertility, and being economically productive. That is, the Cairo document clearly constructs women - and more particularly an idealised Cairo Woman - as citizens of a global community, defined in part by the threat of environmental destruction. Within this community, Cairo Woman must play her part in protecting her society/world from disaster and contagion (Douglas). Thus, human rights language, and Cairo more particularly, are part of the process through which the individual in a global world is constructed. In the context of Cairo, however, that individual is problematic.

Cairo Woman reflects dominant constructions of race and gender. In addition to the gendered aspects of environmental and economic discourses outlined earlier, the Cairo Programme of Action also racializes Cairo Woman. In this case, though, racialization comes about through the
complete failure to consider race, colonisation, or imperialism when articulating the linkages between population, women’s empowerment, environment, and economic development. Although population policy is clearly designed and intended to apply to women in the developing world, race is never mentioned. This ‘erasure’ of race highlights the particular danger of constructing the global citizen through human rights. Those institutions, groups, and advocates who are involved in human rights work reflect a privileged category of international actors. While many are receptive and committed to diversity and inclusion, they remain unrepresentative of a larger constituency. This becomes problematic when one considers the relationship between human rights language and the renegotiation of community and citizenship in a globalised world. For feminist activists this does not necessarily entail abandoning human rights as a vehicle for social change, but it does require greater reflexivity about other strategies, objectives, and goals. Central to this must be the recognition of global structural inequality and the implications this has on a project for social change.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


