

# Population Control, Feminism, and Reproductive Justice: Family Planning's "Strange Bedmates" 30 Years after Cairo

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## Short Abstract (150 of 150 words)

Although widely credited with ending population control and ushering in a new era of reproductive rights and gender equity, the ICPD Program of Action included some important compromises. We critically examine how these compromises have allowed population control (and its racialized/gendered/colonial logics) to continue to flourish within contemporary global reproductive health. We show how neo-Malthusian concerns still motivate much family planning programming, though this is now shrouded in the coopted feminist rhetoric of women's health/empowerment. We argue that, rather than the binary conception of pro/anti contraception that came out of the ICPD, there are multiple ideological positions within the contested sphere of family planning, including: 1) concern over fertility/population dynamics; 2) opposition to biomedical contraception/abortion; and 3) concern for reproductive autonomy and justice. We tease out the intersecting/diverging tenets of these ideologies and conclude with a call for a new consensus for global family planning based solely on reproductive justice.

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In 1994, delegates to the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo adopted a Programme of Action (PoA). Codifying the consensus reached at that conference, the Cairo PoA defined reproductive rights for the first time in an international policy document, and framed women's empowerment and gender equality as important drivers of economic development, among other notable developments.<sup>1</sup> This focus on gender and health represented a substantial shift from the pre-Cairo focus of the population and development community, which had theretofore rather explicitly emphasized population control and fertility reduction as central to economic prosperity and stability.

In the 30 years since it was adopted, the Cairo PoA has adopted an almost mythical status in global population, family planning and reproductive circles. Widely considered the founding document of the contemporary reproductive rights movement, scholars have described the PoA alternately as a “watershed”<sup>4</sup> event, a “touchstone”<sup>5</sup> and a “paradigm shift.”<sup>6</sup> Many believe the ICPD's consensus document to be a progressive high point for international reproductive health.<sup>7</sup> Seeking to prevent the ICPD's accomplishments from being undone, the United Nations even stopped convening routine population conferences, which had, until then, been held decennially for the past forty years.

Much of this veneration of the ICPD, however, overlooks the deep compromise that went into the PoA's crafting, and the enormous implications that the document's loose ends have had for reproductive rights and autonomy in the years since.<sup>8</sup> One of the most consequential outcomes of the Cairo conference for the trajectory of global family planning was the alliance forged there between feminists and population controllers. The population control movement (dominated by anti-natalist factions) wished for the ICPD to maintain a focus on reducing population growth among the world's poor in the Global South.<sup>9,10</sup> Feminists, on the other hand, sought to promote a vision of reproductive health and gender equity in which all have the autonomy to decide for themselves how many children to have and when to have them.<sup>11-13</sup> At a PAA meeting two years after the ICPD, demographers Susan Watkins and Dennis Hodgson deemed the alliance between these two groups one of “strange bedmates,” due to their wildly differing motivations and values.<sup>14</sup> And yet, the common ground these two groups shared – the desire to expand access to contraception – enough to unite them despite widely disparate starting points. The compromise these groups forged at Cairo included a concession from population controllers to disavow coercion in their pursuit of lower fertility, while feminists accepted that fertility reduction could still be pursued as a rationale for family planning, as long as all contraceptive use was voluntary.

In the years since, this alliance had the effect of smoothing the multiple complex, fractious positions in population policy and family planning into what appears to be a simple binary: either for contraception or against. In this piece, we trace whether and how the fissures and alliances developed at the ICPD have shifted in the last thirty years, offer insights into the stalled ICPD agenda, and issue a renewed call for feminist resistance and reimagining for sexual and reproductive rights and justice. Our goals for this critical analysis are to:

- 1) Critically examine how the ICPD gave rise to a reductive binary conceptualization of pro- or anti-family planning that still governs global family planning today. We trace how

the fault lines created at Cairo continue to shape global contraceptive programming, 30 years after the conference.

- 2) Identify two important compromises that feminists made to entire an alliance with population controllers at Cairo, and the ramifications of these compromises today. These compromises include:
  - a) Not addressing racism, neocolonialism, and other sources of social stratification and structural oppression; and
  - b) Avoiding the discussion of environmental issues, leaving the door open for spurious neo-Malthusian claims to later become resurgent.

- 3) Explore how neo-Malthusian arguments and programs have shrouded themselves in the co-opted feminist rhetoric of women's health and empowerment. We argue that this co-optation has not only shaped the stated goals of the mainstream family planning movement, but it has poisoned feminist reproductive health project as well, making it now difficult to now differentiate these "strange bedmates." We further argue that, although feminist rhetoric has been become fully integrated into global family planning programs, feminist ideals, values and practices are largely absent from them.

- 4) Problematize the binary conceptualization of pro/anti-global family planning that was forged in the Cairo PoA, arguing that there are (at the very least) three main ideological positions within the contested sphere of family planning including:
  - a) Those concerned with the effects of high fertility on development;
  - b) Those opposed to medicalized contraception and abortion (commonly referred to as "pro-life" or "anti-choice");
  - c) Those concerned with reproductive rights, autonomy and justice.

We tease out the overlapping, intersecting, and diverging tenets of each of these positions, , represented in Figure 1.

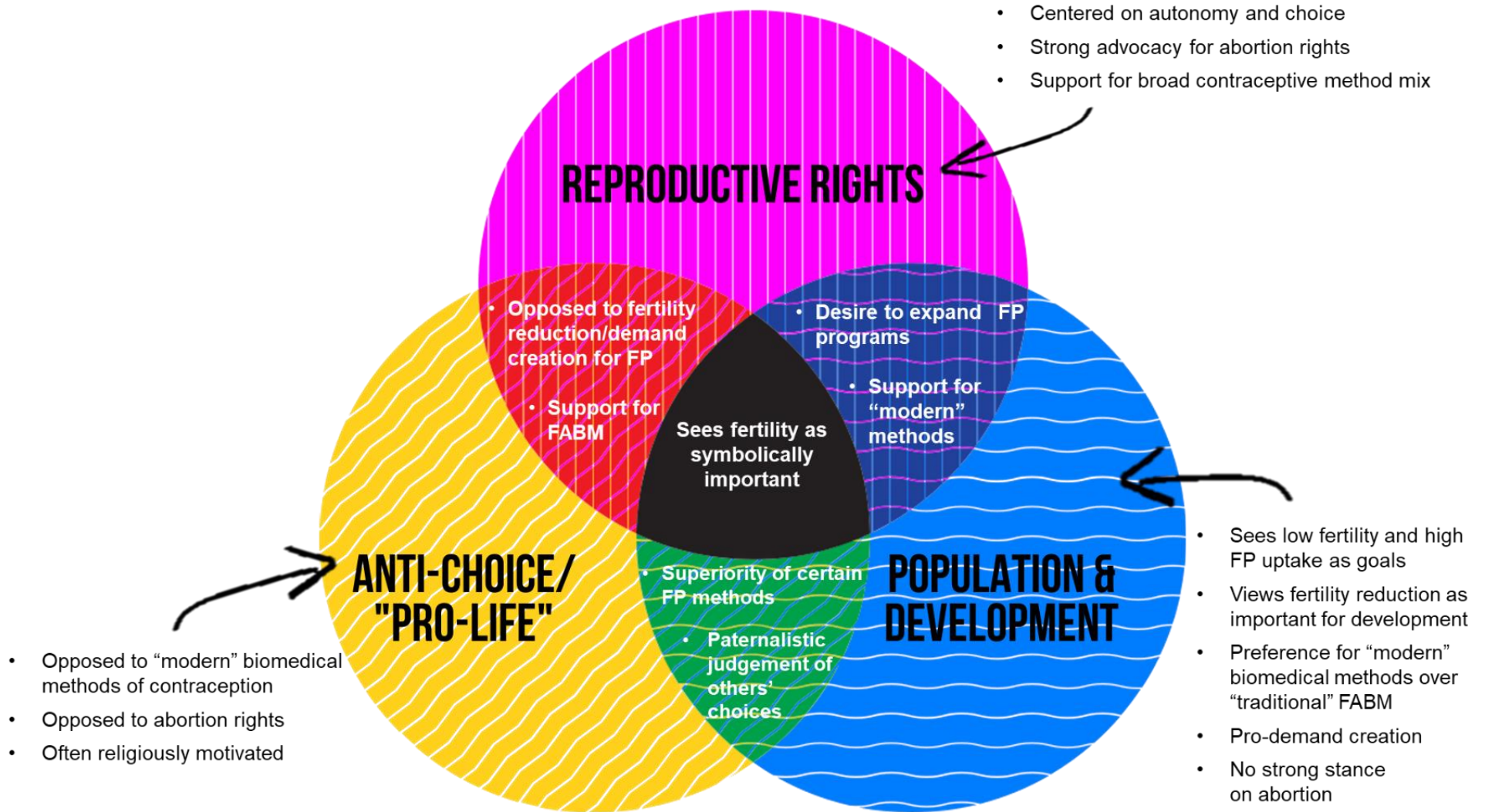
- 5) Use the example of a contemporary "Population, Health and Environment" (PHE) program in Tanzania as a case study for understanding these dynamics. We show how, under its thin progressive veneer, this program revives discredited neo-Malthusian arguments about population growth outstripping food supply and then targets population control measures on the bodies of Black African women living in poverty in the Global South. We illustrate the way this program (and PHE family planning programs more broadly) shroud these racialized, gendered, classed and colonial programs in co-opted language about women's empowerment.

- 6) Finally, in response to this evidence, we issue a feminist and rights-based call for the global family planning community to reassess the compromises made at Cairo, and to build a new consensus for family planning that based solely on reproductive rights and justice. This includes:
  - a) Taking an intersectional approach to feminism that focuses on the multiple axes of marginalization across which reproduction is stratified, including race, coloniality, class, gender expression, sexual orientation and disability, among others;
  - b) Prioritizing a global reproductive justice framework that affirms the right to parent for all as strongly as it affirms the right to prevent or end pregnancy;

- c) Explicitly and completely disavowing instrumentalist arguments for family planning that treat women's bodies as control knobs to engineer broader social goals.

Borrowing from sociologist Raewyn Connell's conception of the gender (as "the active social process that brings reproductive bodies into history, generating health consequences not as a side-effect, but in the making of gender itself.")<sup>15</sup>, we conclude this analysis with a discussion of the ways that population policies around the world have resulted in contraceptive coercion and stratified reproduction, both in the distant past as well as in contemporary programs. We close with argument that the compromises baked in to the ICPD PoA are no longer tenable, and that a new vision of anti-racist, anti-colonial, feminist contraceptive care and autonomy must be advanced in its place.

Figure 1. A Venn Diagram of Overlapping Beliefs in Family Planning by Ideological Camps, 30 years post ICPD



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