

An Intersectional, Reproductive Justice Feminist Response to LaBruzzo's Sterilization Plan ...

The **Women's Health & Justice Initiative**¹ and the **New Orleans Women's Health Clinic**² condemn Representative John LaBruzzo's recent legislative plans to pay poor women to get sterilized and reward rich, educated people to have children. The sterilization policy currently being advocated by Representative LaBruzzo is a blatant form of reproductive violence and population control policies of blame and disenfranchisement, rooted in this country's long and continual history of eugenics. The legislation and criminalization of black and poor women's bodies, sexuality, fertility, and motherhood are being used as regulatory tools for economic and ideological justification for eugenics. If Mr. LaBruzzo is really concerned about ending poverty and reducing social burdens on the state, he would not be advocating punitive social policies that restrict women's reproductive autonomy, but instead would be focusing his attention on ending corporate welfare and holding the corporate giants of Wall Street accountable for the disastrous state of the country's economy. Stigmatizing and blaming the bodies and reproductive capabilities of black and poor women, and other marginalized communities, as the cause of poverty, mask Representative LaBruzzo's unwillingness to fully examine the complex structural causes of poverty and inequality in our society. Reproductive violence and sterilization abuse at the hands of elected officials should be challenged and condemned. All women, regardless of their race, sexuality, ability, household size, economic, housing, and citizenship status, have the right to live whole healthy lives free of control, violence, regulation, and coercive social policies designed to exploit their economic vulnerability for sterilization and contraception abuse.

Social justice organizations, activists, organizers, and advocates are encouraged to use the following as talking points challenging Representative John LaBruzzo's eugenic agenda.

Eugenics, Reproductive Violence, Population Control, & Sterilization Abuse

- The **sterilization policy** currently being advocated by Representative John LaBruzzo **is a blatant form of reproductive violence and population control policies of blame and disenfranchisement, rooted in this country's long and continual history of eugenics.**
- These **reproductive modification tactics of Representative LaBruzzo are reminiscent, if not the same, of eugenics policies of the early twentieth century** to forcibly sterilize thousands of people thought to be

¹ The New Orleans Women's Health & Justice Initiative is a multi-dimensional community-based organizing project centered on (1) improving low income and uninsured women of color access to quality, affordable, and safe health care services; and (2) organizing women for sexual health and reproductive justice through community-based strategies to equip those most disenfranchised by the medical industry with the means to control and care for their own bodies, sexuality, and reproduction. WHJI is a local affiliate of INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence – a national activist organization of radical feminists of color advancing a movement to end violence against women of color and our communities through direct action, critical dialogue and grassroots organizing.

² The New Orleans Women's Health Clinic (NOWHC) is a grassroots community-based non-profit women's health clinic – operated by a radical, women of color-led, feminist health collective. The mission of the New Orleans Women's Health Clinic is to equip marginalized and underserved women with the means to control and care for their own bodies, sexuality, reproduction, health through a holistic, community-centered well women approach to health care which integrates sexual health and reproductive justice. NOWHC is a local affiliate of INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence.

socially undesirable to procreate, particularly immigrants, the poor, people of color, people incarcerated, people with disabilities, and those with mental illnesses.

- **Eugenicists, like LaBruzzo, opposed social programs designed to improve the living conditions of the poor**, arguing that adequate medical care, better working conditions, and minimum wages all harmed society because those measures enabled people with inferior heredity to live longer and produce more children³. These sentiments are directly related to LaBruzzo's statements that *"mainstream strategies for attacking poverty, such as education reform and family planning program have failed to solve the problem,"* yet he wants to create incentives for college-educated, higher income people to have more children.
- The measures Representative LaBruzzo are currently proposing is an example of controlled consent. **There's nothing voluntary about using monetary incentives to exploit women's economic vulnerability.**
- The **reproductive autonomy of women of color and poor women should not be compromised** to support Representative LaBruzzo's eugenic policy to sterilize, blame, disenfranchise, and restrict the rights of women to control and care for their bodies, reproduction, and sexuality.
- **Mandating sterilization as a condition or punishment for receiving public assistance and housing subsidies is racist, sexist, and politically idiotic!**
- It is disturbing that **reproductive modification policies and practices that disempower women** because of their family size and economic status can receive such widespread support. It truly shows that eugenics lies at the heart of LaBruzzo's plans.
- This is a direct reflection of **the reproductive violence and sterilization abuse that women of color and poor women continue to face at the hands of the state.**

Criminalization of Black Women's Sexuality, Fertility, & Motherhood

- **Policies that promote the control and criminalization of black motherhood have no place in our society.**
- As a result of punitive welfare reforms instituted during the Clinton Administration in the mid 1990s, **the attacks and criminalization of women of color and poor women's reproduction and sexuality has continued unabated despite the fact that TANF/FITAP assistance has been steadily decreasing over the past decade in Louisiana.**
- Mr. LaBruzzo is **reinforcing racial and gender stereotypes by using the bodies of poor black women and other vulnerable communities as a**

³ Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

scapegoat to bolster his political career to win the hearts and minds of a conservative base that continues to restrict women's reproductive rights.

- Mr. LaBruzzo and his conservative base advocate abstinence-only sex education in schools that don't work. Their refusal to support resources needed for comprehensive preventative reproductive health services, including abortion and safe birth control methods, makes it clear that they have no concern for poor women's economic health and well-being. Rather, **their interest is in the control and criminalization of poor women's reproduction and motherhood.**

Economic Myths - Falsehoods LaBRUZZO'S idea is based on

- What he's basically proposing is an **economic stimulus plan attacking poor black women.** So, if you're a woman, poor, and black, get in line—you're about to be sterilized!
- The **aggressive promotion of sterilization** as a condition and punishment for receiving public assistance, and the use of coercive social policies that threaten women's health and well-being like those currently being advocated by LaBruzzo **have nothing to do with eradicating poverty in our society.**
- According to LaBruzzo, the solution to ending poverty in our society is to control and regulate the fertility and sexuality of black women – **not** the creation of comprehensive programs to improve health care access, our education system, housing affordability, and employment opportunities in the state. His plan pathologizes the reproductive capabilities of Black and poor women by proposing legislation to exploit the economic vulnerability of those who are socially stereotyped as burdens on the state.
- Even if sterilization is voluntary, **POVERTY IS NOT!** Poverty, economic insecurity, and lack of sustainable livelihood can cause a woman to consider this aggressive sterilization incentive a viable option.
- LaBruzzo talks about poverty as though it were an **infectious disease**—as though poor people will eventually make everyone poor—**rather than a condition people are condemned to** by Louisiana's lack of investment in education, employment, affordable housing, and quality health care programs, services, and resources.
- LaBruzzo uses a **myth of scarcity** to argue that if economic resources are shared with everyone, no one will have enough. The reality is that **if the lion's share of our economic resources stopped being used for unnecessary military spending and corporate welfare**, such as the Wall Street bailout, then all our communities would have access to the resources and opportunities they need to survive and thrive!
- **Despite the reality** of who's on welfare and the total number of families receiving FITAP benefits in Louisiana, welfare assistance is **socially and politically associated with Black mothers** who are, unfortunately, already negatively stereotyped in mainstream media as "lazy," "irresponsible," "overly fertile," and "welfare queens." Because of these stereotypes, LaBruzzo has been

able to gain support for his aggressive eugenic sterilization initiative using monetary incentives.

- The **exploitation and regulation of Black women's bodies** and our reproductive capabilities to solve the social problems of poverty and the financial instability of the county's economy through legislation designed to sterilize poor and working class women of color is a barbaric attempt on the part of Representative John LaBruzzo to increase his popularity among conservatives, and to create a distraction from the real problems associated with the country's current economic crisis.

Economic Realities What really creates the conditions LaBruzzo is concerned" about

- **When we let the numbers** of people who are on welfare **speak for themselves**, it becomes clear that this is **not about welfare at all** – it's about politicians like LaBruzzo who are committed to controlling the reproduction of communities of color and poor people by attacking the bodies and reproductive decisions of Black and poor women.
- We are basically **witnessing a two front war against poor and working class black communities** right now. On one hand, we have the Bush administration fighting to push an economic corporate welfare bailout plan to save Wall Street, and on the other, we have an elected official blaming the bodies and reproductive decisions of poor black women for the social conditions caused by corporate greed.
- **Advocating for the sterilization** of poor black women, and publicly demonizing their motherhood under the cloak of reducing the number of people on welfare, **masks the complex causes of poverty and inequality** that permeate our society. If Mr. LaBruzzo is really serious about addressing the problems plaguing our communities right now, he would be focusing his attention on creating legislation to end corporate greed, end the War in Iraq, holding corporations accountable for the toxins that they continue to put into the environment, funding our failing education system, providing people the health care they need now, and supporting affordable housing initiatives in the city.
- The **current punitive welfare policies Representative LaBruzzo is considering will render women of color, poor women, and women with disabilities vulnerable to sterilization and contraceptive abuse** because of racial and class assumptions that their fertility is out of control. In reality, the average number of children women on welfare have in the state of Louisiana is two – but the image of the over-breeding “welfare queen” is fixed in the minds of many Americans, including Representative LaBruzzo.
- Over the past decade, **the number of women receiving welfare assistance in the state of Louisiana has been decreasing**. In the past three years, we have seen a 74.24 percent drop in women receiving welfare. According to the Louisiana Department of Social Services, families receiving assistance through the Louisiana Families Independence Temporary Assistance Program (FITAP) was down from 5764 recipients in July 2005 to 1485 as of July 2008.
- **This is a sexist, racist, and elitist attempt to distract the public from those who are really creating social burdens on society** – the corporate

welfare giants of Wall Street, the war in Iraq, the over production of unnecessary commodities that negatively impact our environment, and the wasteful spending of public resources on programs--such as abstinence only sex education in schools-- that don't work!

- The **low-income women of color** LaBruzzo feels so comfortable scapegoating for Louisiana's economic conditions are those who **support Louisiana's economy by doing its low-wage work**. When LaBruzzo goes to his office, these women clean it; when he goes to a restaurant, they wash the dishes; and when he stays at a hotel, they turn down his sheets. Rather than this mean-spirited attack, he should call for an increase in the minimum wage that would make it feasible for poor women to survive economically.

What We Need - Strategies & Social Programs for Moving Forward

- Instead of mandating punitive measures to modify and pathologize poor women's reproductive decisions, **we need legislation to increase women's access to high quality, non-coercive, voluntary reproductive health services and information** including access to safe birth control, comprehensive sexual health education, and abortion services that are unbiased, age-appropriate and culturally competent.
- The misguided priorities of legislator's like Mr. LaBruzzo to create monetary incentives for poor women to become sterilized fails to acknowledge how **our state should be funding initiatives that support preventative health care programs and social services that work to strengthen and build the health of our communities**, not blame them for reflecting the social problems of this country.
- **All women**, regardless of their race, sexuality, ability, household size, economic, housing, and citizen status, **have the right to live whole healthy lives free of control, violence, regulation, and coercive social policies** designed to exploit their economic vulnerability for sterilization and contraception abuse at the hands of elected officials.