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Investigation of affecting factors on Environmental racism

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ABSTRACT

The growing global population and straining of natural resources on the one hand and the increasing industrialization of production, on the other hand, have led to the emergence of a global issue called environmental racism. Environmental racism refers to the higher exposure of ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities to hazardous and polluted environments such as toxic and chemical wastes, nuclear and dirty power stations, recycling plants, petrochemical factories, and other potentially life-threatening facilities. The present analytical-descriptive study shows that the geography of environmental racism coincides with the slums and impoverished towns in the periphery of most of the world's major cities, and in case of continued failure of governments to alter consumption patterns, this problem is set to become a major global challenge in the present century.

Keywords: *Environmental racism, pollution, slum, urban periphery.*

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INTRODUCTION

Academic research has shown that environmental racism affects not only the poor and underdeveloped countries but also the industrialized countries. Most of the countries suffering from environmental racism attempt to control the situation by redistributing the polluting industries (e.g. textile, plastics, petrochemicals industries, etc.). Despite these efforts, this issue has led to an increased racial disparity in the incidence of diseases, especially in the underdeveloped countries, where the lack of financial resources undermines the equity of access to health care services. Given that environmental racism is not restricted to any specific region or group of countries, it can be regarded as a global problem.

For many years, social movements in North America, Western Europe, and South and South-East Asia have sought to counter environmental racism by supporting the further engagement of deprived societies in decision-making processes to improve their life with minimum environmental impacts and by providing logical solutions based on the model of "environmental justice".

The present analytical-descriptive research shows that because of the availability of cheap unskilled labor (often migrants from different parts of the country or abroad) and low price land plots required for the construction of polluting and environmentally damaging facilities, the geography of environmental racism coincides with the impoverished neighborhoods and slums located in the periphery of major cities. At the current rate of population growth and in case of the continued ineptitude of governments in promoting environmental justice and equity among people, altering the consumption patterns, and implementing sustainable development agenda, this problem may become a major challenge to humanity. The present paper briefly addresses the issue of environmental racism, but given the importance of the issue, further research from the perspective of geography and environmental laws is necessary.

Research findings

Environmental racism

Environmental racism refers to the perceptible involvement of racism, in the sense of discriminatory behavior toward a certain group of people, with the concentration of environmental risks and dangers in certain geographic locations [5] as a result of civil and social laws and regulation [2]. In other words, environmental racism can be defined as biased exposure of ethnic, linguistic, ethnic and religious minorities to hazardous and polluted environments such as toxic and chemical waste storage facilities, nuclear and dirty power plants, high-voltage power grids, urban and industrial sewage wells, waste incinerators, and any other potentially life-threatening facility.

The cause of growing environmental racism in many societies, both developed and poor, is the flawed government policies regarding the position of industries in urban peripheries, which tend to be inhabited by minorities, who are generally migrants from other regions or countries. The deficiency of government control over pollution, widespread poverty and the shortage of health facilities in these areas put these communities at serious health risks. Standard health services often cost more than what most of the inhabitants of these marginalized areas can afford, and governments, too, are often unable to subsidize their healthcare. Because of this, people living in these areas have a higher prevalence of cancer, asthma, hormonal, behavioral and neurological disorders due to exposure to industrial chemicals, pesticides, toxic contaminants, chemical and electronic waste, etc. [3]

A study in the United States has shown that black people and other ethnic minorities have a higher mean prevalence of chronic illnesses (cancer, asthma, skin diseases, etc.) than white people, which is because of higher exposure of low-cost residential zones, where the disadvantaged groups tend to live, to pollution centers. According to a Yale study in the United States, an African American child is three times more likely to be exposed to asthma than a white child, as these children are more likely to live near coal-fired power plants. In another study, residents living in the vicinity of a glass factory were found to be suffering from breathing difficulty and asthma, and children in that neighborhood were suffering from silicosis. In another example, residents living near a metal recycling plant were suffering from severe skin reactions and complained about the damage done to their homes by movements of plant machinery. According to US government statistics, there are more than 35 million poor people in the United States, of which 27 million live in urban peripheries [7].

Today, the growing awareness about the destructive effects of environmental racism has led to the emergence of a movement called environmental justice, which seeks to fight the inequity caused by unfair environment conditions imposed on poor and underdeveloped areas. This movement aims to organize the disadvantaged communities to ensure their further involvement in decision-making processes with the goal of achieving a better life with minimum environmental damage. This movement tries to provide a new and different interpretation of the environment and believes that to reduce environmental damage, there must be an integration between physical, natural, and cultural aspects of the issue, which is, of course, a long-term objective [3].

Geographic distribution of environmental racism

International organizations have estimated that about 32% of the world's urban population, i.e. more than one billion people, live in urban peripheries, and this figure is expected to increase to 2 billion by 2030 [6].

The fundamental changes in the economic activities and social relations in urban, rural, tribal and nomadic societies create a surplus of labor that tends to flow toward large urban centers where there is a high concentration of wealth. But the cities that lack the facilities to absorb this population push them back to urban peripheries where service facilities are scarce. With the gradual growth of these peripheral areas, they develop a particular physical form that is visibly different from the conventional urban standard, which provides a foundation for further growth of slum [1].

In most of the developed countries, urban peripheries that are exposed environmental damage are often located in the vicinity of nuclear and dirty plants, food factories and small manufacturing industries, and are mainly home to immigrants from other countries who do minimum wage jobs in these industries. In recent years, the adoption of economic assistance and development programs in the poor countries has accelerated the migration of polluting plants and industries from the developed countries to south-east Asian and South American countries. Most of these migrating industries, which include the oil processing, petrochemical, rubber, textile, paint production, battery production, and electronics industries, have a significant impact on pollution and environmental degradation. In addition, fossil fuel burning in developing countries has always been a major contributor to the atmospheric pollution and has put extra pressure on the global environment.

Research has shown that the geography of environmental racism matches the economic and industrial developments in slums and urban peripheries, which is because of high availability of cheap labor and low-price land plots needed for the construction of industrial plants and factories [4].

The growth of environmental racism in the last century has also been a reflection of the industrial and technological developments within the countries. The growing exposure of impoverished and peripheral areas to pollution seem to be associated with the rapid growth of the commercial sector due to the growth of consumer population, which originates from the change in the societies' internal composition and structure and could be a product of macro policies of the great industrial powers aiming to control and direct the international community towards their own goals.

Environmental racism in Iran

The definition of slum and urban periphery in Iran has undergone fundamental changes over the years. In an article by Dalir published in the seventh Iranian geography congress (1991), the urban periphery in Iran was defined as (quoted from Shokuee): 1- Growth of areas containing decrepit and deteriorating residential units with deficient facilities on the periphery of cities. 2- Domination of poverty culture in the area. 3- Separation of a mass of rural people from the urban community. 4- Construction of towns with low-quality materials in the vicinity of large cities. 5- Withdrawal of the people living in peripheral areas from the urban life. 6- Immigration and settlement of rural people in the urban periphery [1].

This definition was limited to the migration from the rural community to urban areas, but Iran's today urban peripheries house not only the rural immigrants but also educated people from both urban and rural communities, and immigrants from neighboring countries, such as Afghanistan and Pakistan. This change has been triggered by the construction of industrial estates in the vicinity of small and large cities. The jobs available in large Iranian cities such as Tehran, Karaj, Mashhad, Tabriz, etc., which house many large and small industries, and the southern midsized cities that have grown around petrochemical, oil and gas industries, have tuned these areas to attractive migration destination for the educated people. Since Iran's economy is dependent on the export of mineral and natural materials (oil and gas, and various types of mineral products), environmental racism in Iran is associated not only with educational, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic differences, but also the geographic distribution of natural reserves that fuel the industries.

The statistics show that in 2015, the total population of cities with 20000-50000 residents and their peripheries was 15,212,226, of which 4,931,956 people were living within these cities and the remaining 10,280,270 people were living in the suburban and peripheral areas or in informal settlements [6].

Conclusion

The late 20th and early 21st century have seen the continued rapid growth of population across the world. The growing need of this growing population to consumer products, the dissemination of consumerism culture in most societies, and widening income inequality had pushed the low-income groups, who are often ethnic and religious minorities, towards the areas with higher exposure to pollution and environmental problems, thus causing a global phenomenon known as environmental racism. The geographic distribution of environmental racism coincides, in the domestic scale, with the improvised and peripheral areas in the vicinity of large and small cities, and, in the international scale, with underdeveloped and developing countries.

The solutions to this challenge include encouraging public support for environmental justice movement to broaden its reach and efficacy, developing national and international environmental protection laws, supporting population control programs, promoting anti-consumerism culture, advocating fairer distribution of wealth among people, regardless of ethnic, linguistic and religious differences, and supporting peace efforts in the distressed parts of the world to minimize the resulting migration, which can contribute to the control of growing environmental racism.

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