Environmental Injustice

Institutional Affiliate

Date

Environmental racism, environmental justice, and environmental equity are distinct terms that define and explain key aspects of the environmental justice movement. The terms concentrate on the diverse effects of various forms of environmental pollution in impoverished neighborhoods characterized by economically disadvantaged populations and ethnic minorities. The City of Flint grappled with polluted water from the Flint River up to 2019 after the water supply was moved back to Lake Huron (Morckel, 2020). This led to many residents complaining about the taste and smell of the water they were using. At first, the administration thought the issue was caused by the Escherichia coli. Strategies like boiling water were encouraged, but the problem still persisted. The problem was that the water had corrosives that corroded the aging pipes. This led to substantial amounts of lead flowing through the taps. Different communities raised the issue, but the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality considered the risks negligent and ridiculed other professionals who felt the dangers to be real. During the time that the city got its water from the Flint River, studies show that the number of children with increased blood levels of lead grew to 4.9%. Some wards experienced a 15% increase in the number of children with increased lead levels.

The water contamination affects low-income communities and areas in which minorities form the dominant population. Research has shown reduced access to safe and clean water in these communities. Water pollution has severely impacted children of color who reside in rural areas, those from indigenous communities, and those who live on farms. Polluted water can result in increased health-related problems, particularly for young children. The health problems could range from water-borne infections, blood disorders, and cancer. The average income of those living in Flint is less than the State of Michigan's average, and more than 40% of the population lives below the poverty line. African Americans make up for 56% of the city's population compared to 14% of the entire state. The situation and the constant, inevitable effects of lead poisoning on children have been discussed based on environmental justice, the unfair exposure of poor and minority communities to environmental risks since they lack the political power and recognition to stand up for themselves.

The discussion on environmental justice cannot be legitimate without comprehending the historical aspects of capitalism and colonization. The government put minorities in areas they considered worthless, and years later, the land would turn out to be rich in resources. This makes the minorities stand in the way of making profits, and there are areas people are silenced or killed to intimidate others. Others are suffering from chronic diseases. The overrepresentation and concentration of minorities and poor people in a space that is plagued by environmental pollution is a classic representative of the discrimination minorities are subjected to since even during slavery, Blacks were forced to live a different life from Whites (Szasz, 1997). The Black settlements, which were mainly under the control of White supremacists, were pathetic. Their concerns were never heard, though in the Flint case, the communities could air out their complaints still, nothing was done until there were casualties.

There was also the violation of the concept of procedural justice since the Emergency Managers selected to handle the Flint Water Problem were not chosen by members of the community; thus, they could not be accountable to them despite them being the most affected. The lack of representation, not looking into resident's complaints, the disrespect residents and professions were subjected to when raising concerns on the water quality are evidence that the concept of procedural justice was violated. Immediately after the water pipes were moved from Lake Huron, residents started complaining about the smell, color, and taste of water and rashes that stemmed from the unsafe water. The General Motors assembly plant was among the first entities in the City to announce it was switching its water supply back to Lake Huron since the water from the Flint River had a negative impact on the company's engines. Assessments done by the University of Michigan in Flint showed increased concentrations of lead in the water. Researchers would later correlate the increase in Legionnaires disease to a drop in the chlorine levels to deal with the iron corrosion. The increasing complaints by residents on the water quality attracted various concerns from the EPA, journalists, and independent professionals.

One stakeholder that is trying to raise awareness on the environmental justice issue is the religious institutions. The institutions have worked together to get clean and safe water to the people while providing filters. The crisis made many families depressed since they felt they had failed the young people who had been affected by the contamination. The church had to encourage them that it was not their fault; rather, it was a situation they could not control. Since many people feel stigmatized whenever they say they are from Flint, the church has been active in teaching people why they should stand up for themselves, especially now when racial and economic discrimination is rampant in the country. In solving the environmental injustice experienced by those living in Flint, there is a lot of work to be done. Organizations should develop a space that allows marginalized individuals to feel comfortable when working or volunteering in any effort that serves to disintegrate the systems of oppression even when making environmentally sensitive decisions. Secondly, any changes or policies meant to serve the community should encourage proper representation of the different communities that make up the place.

References

Morckel, V. (2020). Flint (MI) Missed an Opportunity to “Right Size” With Its Water Crisis. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, *86*(3), 304-310.

Szasz, A., & Meuser, M. (1997). Environmental inequalities: Literature review and proposals for new directions in research and theory. *Current sociology*, *45*(3), 99-120.