

“An Obligation and a Conviction to Work for Women Less Fortunate than I Am”: Joan Dunlop, Women’s Reproductive Rights, and the Work of the Population Council

by Charlotte Lydia Riley

University of Southampton



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Abstract

This report details my research trip to the Rockefeller Archive Center in July 2016. My research agenda was to analyse the work of the Population Council, as a case study through which to explore the ways in which American non-governmental actors could negotiate a decolonising, Cold War world. I was interested in how philanthropic organisations work as spaces determined by “values” and how these “values” might both shape and be shaped by encounters with the wider world, especially actors and communities in the Global South. My focus on the Population Council also led me to explore particularly the work of Joan Dunlop, and her role in determining American NGO-led policy towards the role of women in the Global South, particularly focusing on the issue of reproductive rights.

My trip to the Rockefeller Archive Center in July 2016 was framed by my wider interests in the process of decolonisation, particularly of the British empire, and the way that this shaped the world of philanthropy and humanitarianism. In the British context, UK NGOs often focused their projects on newly independent nations, maintaining links between former metropole and former colonies, either sustaining a neo-colonial power imbalance between these regions, or rebuilding relationships along new lines that might sometimes be seen as a reparative project (including by people in the newly independent colonies). The period of decolonisation was one that therefore saw an enormous increase in the activities of British NGOs, which often drew explicitly on the personnel and knowledge structures of former colonial administrations. This has been a large element of recent scholarship in British history, humanitarianism, and decolonisation, as scholars such as Emily Baughan, Tehila Sasson, Anna Bocking Welch, Chris Jeppesen, and Elizabeth Buettner trace the connections between empire and post-empire, and between state and non-state actors.

My interest in conducting research at the Rockefeller Archive Center was in determining how these ideas affected American philanthropy and humanitarian work in the same period. I situated this concern in the context of research that I had already undertaken at NARA, exploring the early years of USAID and the ways that the American aid department navigated this period and process of decolonisation of European empires. I was particularly interested in how American actors positioned themselves in this period – as essentially a neo-colonial force akin to the European powers, as an “anti-colonial” partner, or as a neutral actor. Was there a difference between how they saw themselves and how they were perceived by others? I also wanted to explore how concentrating on American actors brought the Cold War more sharply into focus as a historical force in this decolonising/humanitarian moment: British historiography tends to underplay the Cold War in importance in this period, whilst arguably American historiography focuses on it to the detriment of all other factors.

My research also looks at the role of gender in international relations, using the pioneering work of Cynthia Enloe to examine both how women might either be

actors in IR or themselves sites of international politics, and more broadly to understand international relations through a gendered lens that prioritises questions about gender, identity, masculinity, femininity, and sex. In my work on Britain, this has meant exploring the International Women's Year events, as well as writing about the ways that social welfare development programmes in the late-colonial state and post-colonial context could be read through gendered analysis. This focus on gender led me to explore the work of the Population Council. An organisation explicitly committed to programmes engaged with women and girls in the developing world, it became more vocally committed to a focus on improving women's rights globally, especially with the appointment of Joan Dunlop. Dunlop is also an interesting figure for the purposes of my research as she herself was British; her connections both with British actors, and with the wider feminist movement (in America, Britain, Australia, and other countries and international spaces such as the UN and associated bodies and events) shaped the work of the Population Council. But John D. Rockefeller 3rd was not a passive partner here – he had long been interested in questions of family planning and became a much more vocal supporter of women's rights, especially women's rights around reproductive freedom, as his work with the Population Council developed.

My research at the RAC therefore focused primarily on Joan Dunlop's private papers, the papers of the Population Council, and associated archives (for example, the Ford Foundation records proved important in tracing some of the funding streams for activities regarding abortion, family planning, and women's rights activism more broadly). I was also able to explore some of the controversies around this work, particularly around the provision of abortion, and to start thinking through how this was situated against American domestic politics (especially *Roe v. Wade*, but also, for example, Jimmy Carter's personal stance against abortion) as well as within a global context of increased focus on "population control" and some critiques of this approach from some Global South actors.

The first topic I was interested in exploring was the role of Joan Dunlop herself. I wanted to build a picture of her personal politics, her position in wider debates

around NGOs and reproductive health, and her role in the Population Council. I was also interested in gaining a deeper understanding of how far her work connected with the activities of other prominent feminists. Dunlop had worked for the Ford Foundation between 1960 and 1967, before being hired by John D. Rockefeller 3rd in 1973; she worked for the Population Council until she left in 1984 to set up the International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC).

One striking thing about the Joan Dunlop papers is her interpersonal connections with other key actors, in particular her boss, John D. Rockefeller 3rd, and Adrienne Germain, who was at the Ford Foundation for fourteen years before leaving to collaborate with Dunlop at the IWHC. Dunlop's later close professional relationship with Germain is reflected in these earlier papers. The women clearly had an easy friendship built on a strong sense of shared values and a joint political mission, and this shaped the way that they worked together – Germain at the Ford Foundation, Dunlop at the Population Council, solidifying the ideological and financial connections between these two organisations. For example, one memorandum written by Germain for the Ford Foundation files recounts a lunch between Dunlop and Germain, along with Selinda Melnik and Robin Elliot, at which the women discussed a recent seminar on women and population, and expressed concern that “we don't need any more domination by an American female perspective which assumes all women in the world want the same thing.”¹ There is a sense of easy familiarity between the women as collaborators, as well as the clear indication that they are on the same page in terms of ideology and approach; this helped to underpin a close relationship between the Ford Foundation and the Population Council on this topic. Both women were deeply concerned that the field of population studies and population control work by the US government was “shot through with unintended sexism and racism, and there was a stranglehold on money and ideas” by USAID; building these interpersonal connections between politically like-minded feminist actors therefore was an act of interpersonal solidarity as well as something that helped to shift the political landscape in the field.²

Dunlop's relationship with John D. Rockefeller 3rd was also close, and notably frank; she was clearly a trusted advisor, whom Rockefeller held in high regard. Contrary to frequent assumptions that Dunlop radicalised Rockefeller on questions like abortion, it seems more likely that in fact the reason that she was so trusted by him was that their views on women's reproductive rights were aligned. For example, Rockefeller had delivered a speech in 1968 in which he had called for abortion law reform, and in doing so had criticised the abortion rights debate for focusing unduly on the rights of the foetus over the rights of the mother, and had argued that abortion was in many cases "the lesser evil" and "morally justified."³

It thus follows that Rockefeller took Dunlop's advice seriously on these and related issues. For example, when discussing the upcoming 1975 International Women's Year conference, Dunlop wrote to Rockefeller 3rd about her "ambivalence" about the idea of him making a speech in Mexico City, weighing up the importance of following up his statement at the Third World Population Conference in Bucharest in 1974 (which had been recognised at the time as an important intervention, described by Germain as "world-shaking"⁴) against the potential benefit of instead focusing on "speaking informally to top-level men who are not taking IWY very seriously."⁵ Dunlop was frank with Rockefeller that fishing for an invitation to speak might backfire – he could be "misunderstood" as trying to dominate a women's conference to pursue his own aims, he might not even be successful in gaining an invitation anyway. But she was also candid about her own feelings of burnout and frustration, and explicit about what motivated her in her work:

You commented on my lack of anger on this issue and we agreed I was "past it". This does not lessen my very serious concern for the issue and my substantial distaste at the prospect of a well-meaning speech which does not include a commitment from you for action. You hired me – that's a demonstration. I feel an obligation and a moral conviction to work for other women less fortunate than I am. If I do not do that, nothing I do is of value.⁶

The manner in which she wrote to Rockefeller 3rd indicated, firstly, the importance of her personal values in shaping her political work and, secondly,

the close and frank relationship between the two within the context of their shared values. And Dunlop won the argument; she and Adrienne Germain went to Mexico City alone, after Dunlop wrote directly to Elizabeth Reid, the Australian delegate to the conference and key organisational figure, professing her desire that the conference should “create bonds of friendship and mutual concern” among women working in the broad field of women’s rights.⁷

Dunlop was also critically important in shaping the way that the Population Council collaborated with smaller organisations. There are files and files of documents which demonstrate that it was Dunlop who decided what the Population Council should fund, and why; there is very little pushback from Rockefeller 3rd on any of these decisions, and his role often appears to simply be that of a facilitator who would fund the projects that Dunlop identified as fruitful or worthwhile. This might be large sums of money to organisations such as Planned Parenthood – to whom the Population Council granted over \$100,000 in 1974 – or smaller grants to community organisations for specific projects.⁸ So, for example, in June 1975, Dunlop recommended a comparatively small grant -- \$2,500 – to Merle Goldberg at the National Women’s Health Coalition, who wanted assistance in producing and distributing pamphlets on family planning, abortion, contraception, pre-natal care, gynaecology, and breastfeeding among “women in the developing world who have irregular and infrequent access to institutionalized healthcare.” In the margin of this report, Rockefeller 3rd has simply written “O.K.” in acquiescence, and the funding went ahead.⁹ Similarly, Dunlop was extremely enthusiastic about the funding of a British documentary film, produced between Scarlett Epstein, one of the earlier pioneers of development studies, and Sandra Nichols, a documentary film maker; she supported the film both financially, through Population Council grants, and practically, by advising on the general process of funding the film more widely (and stepping in at one point to make sure that Nichols paid herself a wage).¹⁰

Dunlop was also concerned that the Population Council should use its comfortable position, at a time when many abortion charities were coming under threat, to fund controversial topics or risky projects that might not

receive support from other avenues. In this, she was guided by the advice of David Lelewer, her predecessor at the organisation, who cautioned Rockefeller 3rd that the Population Council should focus on “areas currently considered controversial and which would get a special ‘life’ from your support, whatever the magnitude,” because “Right-to-Lifers” were making the general context for funding in this field far more difficult.¹¹ Because of this, Dunlop identified “abortion, sex education, and contraceptive services for minors” as the critical causes to support.¹² The context of *Roe v. Wade* for the work of the Population Council remains under-researched, and exploring Dunlop’s papers illustrates that the organisation was continually responding to the political context in America, as well as the global context for conversations about reproductive access in the developing world. For example, Dunlop recommended \$100,000 be set aside “to encourage and coordinate support for the retention and implementation of the recent Supreme Court decisions that ensure the legal option of abortion.”¹³ If anything, after *Roe v. Wade*, the American right’s opposition to abortion was crystallised and the Population Council had to fight harder domestically to justify its work. Dunlop remained absolutely steadfast in her support of access to abortion – “As you know, I am very wary of indicators from this office that could be interpreted (how ever much we wanted them not to be) as a ‘compromise’ or ‘backing off’ on your part on the abortion issue. There is no middle ground on abortion” – and so did the Population Council.¹⁴ But she was aware that this changing context had made the work of the organisation more difficult; as she ruefully remarked, there had been a dramatic shift in organised opposition on the issue: “In 1957, your only visible public opponent was the Pope.”¹⁵

More work needs to be done to explore Dunlop’s role within the Population Council’s and the development of her ideological and practical approach. An examination of her connections with other feminist thinkers and through them, her network of organisational contacts, is also worthy of attention (perhaps through the development of a prosopographical study around abortion rights in the 1970s). Also, a more in-depth study of the relationship between Germain and Dunlop would be illuminating to see how this fed into the wider development of an American approach to these issues in this period. I also

recognize that it would be fruitful to think more closely about the way that American NGOs were dealing with issues around abortion and contraception overseas in the context of *Roe v. Wade* and subsequent controversies domestically, and how their practitioners operated within this dual context. My own work will continue to develop along these lines, working to piece together a global history of abortion and reproductive rights in the context of decolonisation and the Cold War, exploring the role of figures such as Joan Dunlop in creating a global feminist intellectual and activist network, and examining how tensions around race, class and gender played out in this global debate.

¹ John D. Rockefeller 3rd Associates, Joan Dunlop Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center (hereafter RAC), Dunlop, Joan Series 4: John D. Rockefeller 3rd grants contributions and gifts. Box 15, Folder 182: IWY General Correspondence., Adrienne Germain to The Files (Ford Inter Office Memo), Memorandum: Lunch with J. Dunlop, S. Melnik and R. Elliot, 11/18, Information for International Women's Year, 20 November 1974.

² Joan Dunlop interviewed by Rebecca Sharples, Population and Reproductive Health Project, Smith College, 14-15 April 2004. Dunlop's personal papers in the Sophia Smith collection should be opened in 2028 and will be of great help in further exploring this personal connection.

³ John D. Rockefeller 3rd Papers, RAC, Series 3: Office and Homes Files: Subseries 4: Population Interests

Box 67, Folder 436: Population Interests: Abortion 1970-73 John D. Rockefeller 3rd, 'Abortion Law Reform: The Moral Basis' (Address Delivered at the International Conference on Abortion held by the Association for the Study of Abortion in November 1968 at Hot Springs, Virginia).

⁴ Adrienne Germain interviewed by Rebecca Sharples, Population and Reproductive Health Project, Smith College, June 19-20, September 25, 2003.

⁵ John D. Rockefeller 3rd Associates, Joan Dunlop Papers, RAC, Dunlop, Joan Series 4: John D. Rockefeller 3rd grants contributions and gifts. Box 15, Folder 182: IWY General Correspondence. -- Joan Dunlop to John D. Rockefeller 3rd, Memorandum: Participation in International Women's Year and the conference in Mexico City, 28 February 1975.

⁶ John D. Rockefeller 3rd Associates, Joan Dunlop Papers, RAC, Dunlop, Joan Series 4: John D. Rockefeller 3rd grants contributions and gifts. Box 15, Folder 182: IWY General Correspondence -- Joan Dunlop to John D. Rockefeller 3rd, Memorandum: Participation in International Women's Year and the conference in Mexico City, 28 February 1975.

⁷ John D. Rockefeller 3rd Associates, Joan Dunlop Papers, RAC, Dunlop, Joan Series 4: John D. Rockefeller 3rd grants contributions and gifts. Box 15, Folder 182: IWY General Correspondence -- Joan Dunlop to Elizabeth Reid, 12 March 1975.

⁸ John D. Rockefeller 3rd Associates, Joan Dunlop papers, RAC, Dunlop, Joan, Series 4: John D. Rockefeller 3rd grants, contributions and gifts, Folder 125, 'Giving Plan 1974', 'Population 1974 – Giving Plan – Already Committed', 23 May 1974.

⁹ John D. Rockefeller 3rd Associates Joan Dunlop Papers, RAC, Series 4: John D. Rockefeller 3rd grants, contributions and gifts. Box 9 Folder 90: National Women's Health Coalition: International Women's Year Project, 1974-5, Joan Dunlop to John D. Rockefeller 3rd, Memorandum: National Women's Health Coalition: International Women's Year Project, 5 June 1975.

¹⁰ John D. Rockefeller 3rd Associates, Joan Dunlop papers, RAC, Dunlop, Joan, Series 4: John D. Rockefeller 3rd grants, contributions and gifts, Box 12 Folder 142: Family Planning/Population, 1977, Dunlop to JDR, Memorandum: Sandra Nichols, Documentary Film, 9 February 1977; John D. Rockefeller 3rd Associates, Joan Dunlop papers, RAC, Dunlop, Joan, Series 4: John D. Rockefeller 3rd grants, contributions and gifts, Box 12 Folder 141: Women and Development, 1976, Joan Dunlop to JDR, Memorandum: A Cross Cultural Study of Population Growth and Rural Poverty. Project Director: Scarlett Epstein. A Documentary Film: "Where a Child is Needed": Investigating the Value of Children in Densely Populated Areas of the World, 13 November 1975.

¹¹ John D. Rockefeller 3rd Associates, Joan Dunlop papers, RAC, Dunlop, Joan, Series 4: John D. Rockefeller 3rd grants, contributions and gifts, Box 12, Folder 127, 'Contributions 1973,' David Lelewer to JDR, 'Memorandum: 1973 Giving Program for Population,' 5 January 1973.

¹² John D. Rockefeller 3rd Associates, Joan Dunlop papers, RAC, Dunlop, Joan, Series 4: John D. Rockefeller 3rd grants, contributions and gifts, Box 12, Folder 127, 'Contributions 1973,' Joan Dunlop to John D. Rockefeller, 'Memorandum: Giving Plan for 1973 – Projected Appropriation Level,' 25 July 1973.

¹³ John D. Rockefeller 3rd Associates, Joan Dunlop papers, RAC, Dunlop, Joan, Series 4: John D. Rockefeller 3rd grants, contributions and gifts, Box 12, Folder 127, 'Contributions 1973,' Joan Dunlop to John D. Rockefeller, 'Memorandum: Giving Plan for 1973 – Projected Appropriation Level,' 25 July 1973.

¹⁴ John D. Rockefeller 3rd Associates, Joan Dunlop papers, RAC, Dunlop, Joan, Series 4: John D. Rockefeller 3rd grants, contributions and gifts, Box 12, Folder 132, JDR 3rd Office Strategy, 1973-1977, Joan Dunlop to JDR, Memorandum: Strategy and Options for Abortion Staff Work and Giving in Fiscal Year 1977-78, 10 August 1977.

¹⁵ Ibid.