

Does the World Have a Population Problem? Go Ask 9 Billion People

The new documentary 'Misconception' explores how big numbers translate into social, political, and cultural repercussions, one person at a time.



Gladys Kalibbala, a Kampala, Uganda-based journalist, helps children abandoned by their impoverished parents. (Image: Participant Media/Nathan Golon)

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If there were fewer people on the planet, there'd be more resources to go around. That's one of the more common beliefs about population growth. But with 9 billion people set to live on the globe by 2050, is focusing on birthrate the best way to ensure peace and prosperity for all?

Answering that question often leads to debate—and sometimes violence—between activists, politicians, and policy makers. By giving viewers a personal look at the social and political ramifications of population growth,

the documentary [Misconception](#)—which opens on Friday—hopes to get people to consider the deeper issues at play.

“It really shows how these issues are emotional issues, they're political issues, and they're not going to be settled in one day with one piece of legislation happening,” the film's producer and director, Academy Award winner Jessica Yu, tells TakePart. The film follows three individuals whose experiences “are relatable in the way that they speak to our preconceptions and our fears” about population growth, says Yu.

We meet Bao Jianxin, a 29-year-old bachelor in China who is under the gun to get married before he turns 30; Canadian antiabortion activist Denise Mountenay, who heads to the United Nations for a conference in hopes of swaying diplomats to her cause; and Gladys Kalibbala, a Kampala, Uganda-based journalist who helps children

abandoned by their impoverished parents. Insights from Hans Rosling, a Swedish statistician and professor who has given several TED Talks on population growth, tie the stories together.

“Most people are not in the situation of Bao or Gladys and the kids that she works with—or they’re not necessarily like Denise, trying to make their voice heard at the level of the U.N.,” says Yu. “But we all have opinions about these issues. Certainly there are a lot of people with a lot of fear about the sheer number—the volume of humanity on Earth and that that is a threat.”

Thanks to China’s one-child policy, in place between the late 1970s and 2016—and the cultural preference for male children—there are now 30 million fewer girls in China. That makes it tough for Bao to find a bride, even after he attends a class that teaches guys how to be more appealing to women. “It doesn’t matter how much he wants a wife; he has the odds stacked against him,” says Yu.

Meanwhile, in Canada, Moutenay prepares for her trip to the United Nations by packing gift bags filled with chocolate, pro-life literature, and plastic figurines that represent aborted fetuses. Once in New York City, Moutenay engages cab drivers and diplomats in conversations about the need to eliminate poverty, not children. A conservative Christian, Moutenay supports natural family planning and believes that organizations purporting to provide reproductive health care are promoting abortion and the use of contraceptives.

The connection between poverty and the failure to provide women with family planning resources can be seen in the work Kalibbala does in Kampala with kids who have been abandoned by their families. Uganda has one of the highest birthrates in the world—nearly six children per woman—and the average per capita income is \$440.

Moms and dads overwhelmed by the financial cost of having so many children sometimes choose to leave a child at the side of the road. To help reconnect kids with their families, Kalibbala works with law enforcement and social service agencies and uses her newspaper column to tell their stories.

“Gladys is one person doing what she can,” says Yu. The complex social and economic circumstances Gladys faces keep the filmmaker up at night: “The thought of this cycle of women who are born into a situation where they don’t have control over their own fertility. They don’t have access to economic empowerment or education at the same level as men. The thought that that cycle is continuing and is not being disrupted.”

Yu began working on *Misconception* after filming the 2011 documentary *Last Call at the Oasis*, which

addresses the global water crisis. During question-and-answer sessions held after screenings, Yu says people kept asking about consumption and population growth. “They were thinking about countries and the allocation of water, or the pollution of water, and how the demand for water is affected by population,” she recalls.

But when people talk about resources and population numbers, they have to think about individual consumption, and that can look very different depending on the country, says Yu, adding that she appreciates Rosling’s approach to the issue. “He would always ask the room, ‘How many people [rode their bike here](#)? How many people don’t own a car? How can you say that someone in Brazil is not allowed to have electricity when you have two cars?’ ” she says.

Along with thinking about individual consumption, Yu hopes that after watching *Misconception*, viewers will consider how hot-button issues such as the refugee crisis are connected—or not—to population issues.

“There is such fear and reluctance on the part of a lot of countries about accepting refugees—a lot of these same countries where there is a decline in the fertility rate,” says Yu. “But we have to ask ourselves, how are we thinking about where people are coming from?”

“We have this fear of more people. There’s still this idea of ‘We need to keep people out,’ ” says Yu. “We forget that we need people to keep the economy going, to keep everything that propels society forward going.”

Misconception opens June 24 at the [Laemmle Music Hall](#) in Los Angeles for a weeklong engagement. It is also [available on Tugg](#), a theatrical-on-demand platform.