

# Understanding Reproductive Justice:

## *Transforming the Pro-Choice Movement*

By Loretta Ross

**R**eproductive Justice is the complete physical, mental, spiritual, political, social and economic well-being of women and girls, based on the full achievement and protection of women's human rights. It offers a new perspective on reproductive issue advocacy, pointing out that for Indigenous women and women of color it is important to fight equally for (1) the right to have a child; (2) the right not to have a child; and

(3) the right to parent the children we have, as well as to control our birthing options, such as midwifery. We also fight for the necessary enabling conditions to realize these rights. This is in contrast to the singular focus on abortion by the pro-choice movement.

Reproductive Justice says that the ability of any woman to determine her own reproductive destiny is linked directly to the conditions in her community—and these conditions are not just a matter of individual choice and access. Reproductive justice addresses the social reality of inequality, specifically, the inequality of opportunities that we have to control our reproductive destiny.

One of the key problems addressed by Reproductive Justice is the isolation of abortion from other social justice issues that concern communities of color: issues of economic justice, the environment, immigrants' rights, disability rights, discrimination based on race and sexual orientation, and a host of other community-centered concerns.

These issues directly affect an individual woman's decision-making process. By shifting the focus to *reproductive oppression*—the control and exploitation of women, girls and individuals through our bodies, sexuality, labor and reproduction—rather than a narrow focus on protecting the legal right to abortion, we are developing a more inclusive vision of how to build a new movement.

Because reproductive oppression affects women's lives in multiple ways, a multi-pronged approach is needed to fight this exploitation and advance the well-being of women and girls. There are three main frameworks for fighting reproductive oppression:

1. **REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH**, which deals with service delivery
2. **REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS**, which addresses legal issues, and
3. **REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE**, which focuses on movement building.

Although these frameworks are distinct in their approaches, they work together to provide a comprehensive solution. Ultimately, as in any movement, all three components—service, advocacy and organizing—are crucial.

Reproductive Justice focuses on organizing women, girls and their communities to challenge structural power inequalities in a comprehensive and transformative process of empowerment. The Reproductive Justice analysis offers a framework for empowering women and girls that is relevant to every American family. Instead of focusing on the means—a divisive debate on abortion and birth control that neglects the real-life experiences

---

It is important to fight for  
(1) the right to have a child; (2) the  
right not to have a child; and (3) the  
right to parent the children we have.

---



of women and girls—the reproductive justice analysis focuses on the ends: better lives for women, healthier families, and sustainable communities. This is a clear and consistent message for the movement. Using this analysis, we can integrate multiple issues and bring together constituencies that are multi-racial, multi-generational and multi-class in order to build a more powerful and relevant grassroots movement.

### How Reproductive Justice Can Transform the Pro-Choice Movement

There is virtually no city or town where local pro-choice women are not grappling with how to work together across fissures of race and class, especially white women working with women of color. Reproductive justice builds a theoretical bridge between these two forces. Despite the growing documentation and analysis of and by women of color and our role in the movement, the central question now is can women of color come from an autonomous space, work collectively together, and move beyond the “turmoil, confusion, and political struggle” (M. Fried) that characterizes the pro-choice movement? Can we avoid replicating these tensions among women of color? The forces of competition are much stronger than the forces of collaboration in this current funding and political climate. SisterSong is the fifth and longest-lived attempt since the 1980s to build a national coalition of women of color in the reproductive rights/health/justice movement.

It is not SisterSong’s role to be the only or even the primary vehicle for mobilizing women of color or transforming the mainstream for that matter, but we see a specific role we can play in helping to revitalize and unite the domestic movement. We organize from the margins to the center, rather than from the bottom to the top, to create long-term changes in ways people think about race, rights and reproduction. Our work will produce a specific benefit: connecting issues and working across social movements because issues that affect the reproductive health of women are large and varied. Reproductive justice is no universal solution, but it is a fresh approach to creating unifying and intersectional language with which to build bridges. It is SisterSong’s intent to start conversations about reproductive justice in political organizations, religious groups and marginal groups.

We expect the reproductive justice analysis to be controversial because it involves new patterns of thinking. Many people in the pro-choice movement

are understandably resistant to having the choice/privacy framework disputed within the movement. As explained by a woman of color organizer for the March for Women’s Lives: “When we try to explain how choice is an inappropriate term even for many white women, some allies—especially older feminists—take offense. They feel as though they had been fighting for “choice” for the past 30 years and that it was insulting to tell them that choice was not inclusive of many women of color, low-income, and gay and lesbian communities.” Some critics believe that by expanding to a more inclusive definition of Reproductive Justice, women of color are signaling reduced support for abortion rights. Nothing could be further from the truth. Expanding support for abortion rights can best be done by bringing in new voices and perspectives to the movement and connecting to other social justice issues—a process of inclusion, rather than the politics of exclusion women of color have experienced.

Reproductive justice is not an exclusive analysis that only applies to women of color. To achieve broad social change that drives the political and legal decision making in our country, it must be inclusive so that the mainstream and the marginalized find common ground. This is one of the slowest processes of social change, but is ultimately required. This is similar to how the Civil Rights movement required the participation in and acceptance by white society until the value of racial equality became normative. Reproductive justice draws attention to cultural and socio-economic inequalities because everyone does not have equal opportunity to participate in society’s cultural discourses or public policy decisions based on cultural and economic values, such as abortion, midwifery and mothering.

For example, SisterSong believes that one of the key elements driving restrictions on abortion is race-based thinking by opponents influenced by the white supremacist movement. They are visibly agitated about controlling the sexual and reproductive behaviors of white youth, with a special focus on young women. Their mixed messages of abstinence coupled with restrictions on abortion and access to contraception can lead to only one outcome: more children by uninformed

---

**Some critics believe that by expanding to a more inclusive definition of Reproductive Justice, women of color are signaling reduced support for abortion rights. Nothing could be further from the truth.**

---

young people that actually increases birth rates and the transmission of sexual diseases. The participation of white allies in SisterSong's base is not only desired, but required, to achieve the normative quality in American society we wish Reproductive Justice to achieve.

One of the tensions within the reproductive rights community is the uneasy alliance between those who support fertility control for women as a means of women's empowerment as their primary goal, and those who support fertility control for women as a means of controlling population growth. Both sectors are, of course, united in their opposition to those who oppose women's rights and family planning, albeit for different reasons. SisterSong is hoping for a political realignment of groups in the reproductive rights movement: those

supportive of fertility control vs. those supportive of reproductive justice. This may shift the boundaries of the debate from the pro-choice/anti-abortion divide because SisterSong is modeling how to gain and keep people who are personally opposed to abortion in the reproductive justice movement.

Significant changes in the pro-choice movement that will provide opportunities for SisterSong will probably be brought about by many factors that causally affect each other. It is beyond the scope of this article to detail all of these. It is equally difficult to predict any one theory or factor that will change the pro-choice movement. There is no singular or mono-causal explanation that can help SisterSong develop a predictive model that leads directly from training to transformation. Nor is there a magic bullet with which to bring

### SISTERSONG: WOMEN OF COLOR ORGANIZE AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

Beginning in 1973 with the *Roe v. Wade* decision, women of color (e.g., the National Council of Negro Women) saw some problems with the term "choice" popularized by the mainstream women's movement. "Choice has masked the ways that laws, policies and public officials punish or reward the reproductive activity of different groups of women differently," states historian Rickie Solinger, affirming the skepticism of women of color.

Prior to the 1980s, women of color reproductive health activists organized primarily against sterilization abuse and teen pregnancy, although many were involved in early activities to legalize abortion because of the disparate impact illegal abortion had in African American, Puerto Rican and Mexican communities.

The 1980s and 1990s was a period of explosive

autonomous organizing by women of color establishing their own reproductive health organizations. Women of color mostly refrained from joining mainstream pro-choice organizations, but preferred to organize autonomous women of color organizations more directly responsive to the needs of their communities.

Women of color searched for another conceptual framework that would convey our multiple values: the right to have and not to have a child—the many ways our rights to be mothers and parent our children are constantly threatened. We believed these intersectional values separated us from the liberal pro-choice movement in the U.S., which was preoccupied with maintaining the legality of abortion and privacy rights. We were also skeptical about the motivations of some in the

pro-choice movement who seemed to be more interested in population restrictions than in women's empowerment. They promoted dangerous contraceptives and coercive sterilizations, and were mostly silent about the economic inequalities and power imbalances between the developed and the developing worlds that constrain women's choices.

Women of color felt closest to the progressive wing of the women's movement that did articulate demands for abortion access who shared our class analysis, and even closer to the radical feminists who demanded an end to sterilization abuse and who shared our critique of population control. Yet we lacked a framework that aligned reproductive rights with social justice in an intersectional way, bridging the multiple domestic and global movements to which we belonged.

We found the answer in the global women's health movement through the voices of women from the Global South. Women of color from the U.S. participated in all of the international conferences and significant events of the global feminist movement. Often supported by the International Women's Health Coalition, the Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights, and visionary funders like Ford and the Ms. Foundation, women of color from the U.S. were able to form small but significant delegations to these meetings.

The SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective was formed in 1997 by sixteen autonomous women of color organizations, using human rights as a unifying framework for the Collective. Human rights

CONTINUED ON PAGE 18



about the changes quickly. It is also impossible to predict the precise processes and mechanisms of social transformation that will be achieved by using the reproductive justice framework.

Among the external and internal factors to be considered are (1) increased repression of the American public (the Patriot Act, the War Against Terror, domestic wiretapping, economic hardship); (2) pressure from the right (increasing restrictions on abortion and birth control); (3) pressure from within the movement (the Saletan articles on moving to the right); (4) leadership changes (Cecile Richards is now head of Planned Parenthood, replacing Gloria Feldt, while Nancy Keenan is now head of NARAL Pro-Choice America replacing Kate Michelman); (5) organizing by women of color such as through Incite!; and (6) organizing by young women, such as in the Young Women's Collaborative. Each of these factors deserves examination, but probably one of the most significant internal factors promising change in the pro-choice movement from SisterSong's point of view is the recent leadership transitions at the top of two pro-choice organizations because these are major developments within our base.

We are working in collaboration with several mainstream organizations, and many Planned Parenthood women of color leaders are also members of SisterSong. We believe that Planned Parenthood and NARAL are coming to their own conclusions about the limitations of the choice framework. That may be one of the reasons that the progressive wing of Planned Parenthood seized the opportunity to sponsor the "Reproductive Justice for All" public policy conference in November 2005 at Smith College.

Another primary precipitating pressure will be the advances made by opponents of women's rights, such as the confirmations of Samuel Alito and John Roberts to the Supreme Court. Legislative, judicial and electoral losses may act as catalysts to either further divide the pro-choice movement or unite it. Social change in the reproductive health/rights/justice movement can either move to the right or the left, toward further population control for targeted groups of people or increased freedom for more women. Factors such as politi-

cal repression, violence against abortion providers, restrictions on pregnant women and distractions such as the War on Terror will help decide both the direction and pace of these changes.

Another significant factor is the way technology is changing how we organize our base, particularly in terms of print vs. electronic communications. The 2003 SisterSong national conference was the first event we've ever organized that was mobilized nearly entirely by the Internet, and it produced more than 600 attendees. We were forced to use the Internet because of our limited resources for printing and mailing. We were very concerned that

we would not reach a significant portion of our base if we did not use more traditional forms of outreach because of the widely-proven digital divide in communities of color. In fact, we were mildly surprised at how electronic communications were augmented by local activists using the more traditional means of local meetings, telephone outreach, and printed mate-

---

**Instead of focusing on the means—a divisive debate on abortion and birth control that neglects the real-life experiences of women and girls—the reproductive justice analysis focuses on the ends: better lives for women, healthier families and sustainable communities.**

---

rial. Another technological aid was the use of free conference call services to host monthly national conference calls to mobilize for the March for Women's Lives. Although a great deal of resources were spent on travel and speaking tours as necessary, the Internet mobilized the overwhelming majority of the March participants. In fact, we were very nervous in the March national office because the phones were eerily silent in the days leading up to the March. Our staff did most of their organizing over the Internet, probably because they were relatively younger than the March leaders and more familiar with and dependent on the technology.

While this development was certainly effective, it does raise the question of whether we are losing anything in these ubiquitous enabling technologies in terms of face-to-face and spoken communications. Although technology is speeding up the changes we experience, it can't do it on its own. Building a base must have a spark—an idea—that is enormously appealing. That is the role we see the concept of Reproductive Justice playing. More than 25,000 Internet hits on the term "Reproductive Justice" is gratifyingly significant, but we are in the processing of determining precisely what that number means in terms of building movement. This may represent an insurgent political

movement without discrete stages of development or change. What is clear is that it will not be led by the elites of the pro-choice movement, but instead builds on our collective structural power as women of color—the fact that our locations are in the various socio-economic-political structures that lie at these intersections, along with our allies in the mainstream who understand that we are compelled to move forward with a new vision to guide our movement. While most resources are located in the hands of the mainstream pro-choice organizations (our own elite), it is grassroots organizations like SisterSong that offer the most promise for significant social change.

In the three years since our 2003 national conference, the phrase “Reproductive Justice” has undergone instant proliferation. An example is the previously mentioned Planned Parenthood Federation conference in November 2005 called “Reproductive Justice for All” which brought together 400 attendees. SisterSong was invited to give one of the

opening presentations at the conference to help set the defining platform for the deliberations, but we felt like conductors whose train had left the station without us because while we were offering our reproductive justice analysis for consideration by the movement, we are concerned about the unequal distribution of power and resources in the movement and the potential for co-opting our vision without respecting the leadership of women of color.

This conference, among other events, is compelling SisterSong to focus on providing Reproductive Justice trainings to both our base within SisterSong and to our allies among other women of color networks such as Incite! and our allies in the pro-choice movement because our fear is that they will not fully integrate the intersectional, human rights-based approach SisterSong promotes, but merely substitute the phrase “reproductive justice” where previously they said “pro-choice.” If this is allowed to happen, this will be a significant setback, because reproductive justice will be watered down to

### SISTERSONG (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 16)

education was provided to all collective members and integrated from the outset into SisterSong's work. We also integrated both self-help and community organizing into our foundation.

The phrase “Reproductive Justice” became prominent in our first national conference, which we held in November 2003 in Atlanta. The conference was called the SisterSong National Women of Color Reproductive Health and Sexual Rights Conference based on our experiences internationally, where the reproductive health and sexual rights framework was powerfully articulated. At that 2003 conference, we sponsored plenary and workshop sessions to explore the concept of Reproductive Justice. Among the great thinkers we were privileged

to have worked on this were Dorothy Roberts, Eveline Shen, Bylye Avery, Malika Saada Saar, Luz Alvarez Martinez, Jatrice Gaithers, Adriane Fugh Berman, Jael Silliman, Rosalinda Palacios, and Barbara Smith. After the conference, SisterSong decided to use the concept of Reproductive Justice as our central organizing strategy for work in the United States because it emerged as a unifying and popular framework among our base.

The current organizational structure of SisterSong reflects our origin as a union of pre-existing, autonomous women of color organizations. SisterSong does not have chapters as do NARAL and NOW, or linked affiliates the way Planned Parenthood does. Instead, SisterSong sparks new organizations,

such as Pittsburgh New Voices for Reproductive Justice and the Boston Women of Color Coalition for Reproductive Justice. Some groups have re-organized to reflect a reproductive justice focus, due to the influence of SisterSong: Asians and Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health re-named themselves Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, and the Los Angeles Reproductive Justice Coalition also changed its name and focus. However, newer activists within SisterSong who do not belong to an existing woman of color organization in their city are asking SisterSong to consider the development of a chapter structure to clone SisterSong locally. We are considering how to address this unmet need among our base.

SisterSong is pioneering the application of our intersectional analysis to the reproductive rights movement, and we are spreading our ideas to other social justice movements. This is familiar terrain for women of color because we have a long history of oppositional politics in terms of the mainstream pro-choice movement. We are also sparking new leadership in the reproductive justice movement that is challenging the paradigm of individualism and privacy that is sacred in the pro-choice movement. We are also creating bridges for the traditional civil rights movement to develop language affirming their support for women's rights. It is extremely significant that groups like the NAACP and MALDEF are now using reproductive justice language in their work.

where it is conflated with the previous pro-choice paradigm and lose its potential for building new movement. Thus, we are at a critical historical juncture—a teachable moment—for which SisterSong will work to develop the tools, the materials, and the resources to help guide this transformation.

### Conclusion

In order to address the needs and issues of a diverse group of women while acknowledging the layers of oppressions that our communities face, particularly those who do not have access to privilege, power, and resources, we must build a new movement for Reproductive Justice in the United States. This movement must work to protect everyone, including those who have more privilege. It also must integrate the needs of grassroots communities into policy and advocacy efforts and create opportunities for new leaders to emerge within our communities to increase the capacity, effectiveness and scope of our movement. Perhaps most importantly, SisterSong must infuse the movement with creativity, innovation and vision.

The key strategies for achieving this vision include supporting the leadership and power of the most excluded groups of women, girls and individuals within a culturally relevant context. This will require holding ourselves and our allies accountable to the integrity of this vision. We have to address directly the inequitable distribution of power and resources within the movement, holding our allies and ourselves responsible for constructing principled, collaborative relationships that end the exploitation and competition within our movement. We also have to build the social, political and economic power of low-income women, Indigenous women, women of color, and their communities so that they are full participating partners in building this new movement. This requires integrating grassroots issues and constituencies that are multi-racial, multi-generational and multi-class into the national policy arena, as well as into the organizations that represent the movement.

SisterSong is building a network of allied social justice and human rights organizations who integrate the reproductive justice analysis into their work. We have to use strategies of self-help and empowerment to help the women who receive our services understand that they are vital emerging leaders in the determining the scope and direction of the social change we wish to catalyze.

The next SisterSong national event for mobilizing women of color through the reproductive justice framework will be our second national

conference in celebration of our 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2007. Entitled "Let's Talk About Sex," the conference will be held May 31-June 2, 2007, in Chicago, Illinois hosted by African American Women Evolving, and more than 1,200 people are expected to attend.

Since the right to have sex is a topic rarely discussed when addressing reproductive health and rights issues, SisterSong believes that sexual prohibitions are not only promoted by moral conservatives in this country, but also by reproductive rights advocates who fail to promote a sex-positive culture. Sex is not just for pro-creation and sexual pleasure—it is a human right. We would like to create a *pro-sex space for the pro-choice movement* and we hope you will join us.

Reproductive justice is the result of 20 years of creative envisioning by women from around the world who understand that reproductive health issues cannot be separated from the interlocking systems of oppression women face globally. By bringing these lessons home to the United States, SisterSong is hoping to win concrete changes on the individual, community, institutional and societal levels that will improve the lives of women, our families and our communities. ●

**LORETTA J. ROSS** is a founder and the national coordinator of the SisterSong Women of Color—Reproductive Health Collective, composed of 70 women of color organizations across the country. She was the codirector of the April 25, 2004, National March for Women's Lives in Washington D.C., the largest protest in U.S. history. She is also the co-author of *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organizing for Reproductive Justice* (2004, South End Press), reviewed on page 82 of this issue.

### CONFERENCE

"Let's Talk About Sex" May 31-June 2, 2007

The next SisterSong national event for mobilizing women of color through the reproductive justice framework will be our second national conference in celebration of our 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

### TRAININGS

For information on SisterSong's Reproductive Justice trainings scheduled around the country, contact [trainings@sistersong.net](mailto:trainings@sistersong.net).