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## **Understanding Reproductive Justice**

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### **Introduction**

Since the early 1990s, a number of groups, primarily those led by women of color, were thinking about the intersections of class, race, and gender issues in reproductive politics. Women of color coined the term “Reproductive Justice” in 1994 after the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo. The first step towards the reproductive justice framework occurred two months after the September Cairo conference. A group of African-American women (some of whom became SisterSong co-founders) spontaneously organized an informal Black Women’s Caucus at a national pro-choice conference sponsored by the Illinois Pro-Choice Alliance in Chicago in 1994 and created the term “Reproductive Justice.”

Reproductive justice, at that time, was defined as “reproductive health integrated into social justice.” Reproductive justice was further developed as an intersectional theory emerging from the experiences of women of color whose communities experience reproductive oppression. It is based on the understanding that the impact on women of color of race, class and gender are not additive but integrative, producing this paradigm of intersectionality. The concept of reproductive justice was further elaborated in a seminal paper written by Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice in 2005. ACRJ strengthened the Reproductive Justice analysis by analyzing the three main frameworks for fighting reproductive oppression: 1) Reproductive Health which deals with service delivery, 2) Reproductive Rights which address the legal regime, and 3) Reproductive Justice which focuses on movement building.

This background paper will address the following topics to help the reader understand the concept of Reproductive Justice by addressing the following questions: 1) What is Reproductive Justice? 2) How did the Reproductive Justice framework evolve? 3) How does SisterSong popularize the Reproductive Justice framework? 4) How does Reproductive Justice connect U.S. issues to global issues? 5) How can Reproductive Justice transform the Pro-Choice Movement?

### **What is Reproductive Justice?**

Co-published by SisterSong and created by ACRJ, a new vision of *Reproductive Justice* is serving as the foundation for efforts to address *reproductive oppression* at the national, state and local level. The intersectional theory of Reproductive Justice is described as the complete physical, mental, spiritual, political, social, environmental 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 as 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 posits that the ability of any woman to determine her own reproductive destiny is directly linked to the conditions in her community and these conditions are not just a matter of individual choice and access. Reproductive justice is an intentional impulse to shape the competing ideals of equality and the social reality of inequality. Reproductive justice points out the inequality of opportunity in controlling our reproductive destiny.

Reproductive Justice helps make the connections between women and their families, and the conditions necessary for women to make reproductive decisions about their lives: opportunities to work at living wages, opportunities for affordable quality education, responsible and accessible public services such as good health care, quality schools, and accessible and affordable child care, freedom from personal and state violence, and environmentally safe communities.

One of the key problems addressed by Reproductive Justice is the isolation of abortion from other social justice issues that concern communities of color. Abortion isolated from other social justice/human rights issues neglects 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 directly affecting an individual woman's decision making process. By shifting the definition of the problem to one of *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 move forward in building 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 address the legal regime, and 3) Reproductive Justice which focuses on movement building. Although the frameworks are distinct in their approach, they work in tandem with each other to provide a complementary and comprehensive solution. Ultimately, as in any movement, all three components of service, advocacy and organizing are crucial to advancing the movement. (See Reproductive Justice report from Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice available at [www.reproductivejustice.org](http://www.reproductivejustice.org)).

Previous models do not adequately address the multiple systems that contribute to reproductive oppression, nor do they help develop strategies to engage all women and their communities in ending reproductive oppression. The reproductive health framework, a service delivery model which identifies the lack of access to reproductive health services as the core problem, does not address the root causes of health disparities. The reproductive rights framework, a legal and advocacy-based model that works to protect an individual woman's legal right to reproductive health care services, fails to take into account the social contexts in which individuals make choices and ignores communities that have historically been disenfranchised.

Reproductive Justice is a base-building analysis that 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 compelling and more defensible framework for empowering women and girls and 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 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 Did the Reproductive Justice Framework Evolve?**

The timeline below explains the evolution of the term “Reproductive Justice,” showing how it differs from the reproductive rights standards from the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994. Not only is Reproductive Justice a paradigm shift, it is also meant to be used as a bridge-building connector and applied only to the United States because of our history of American exceptionalism that has limited our national familiarity with the human rights framework, even among social justice movements. It is likely that this term (like the term women of color) will not have universal applicability beyond our borders. Reproductive justice is a U.S.-specific expression of the reproductive health and sexual rights standards from the Cairo conference and represents a more nuanced understanding of what the agreements from Cairo and Beijing did – and did not -- contain. It is more widely embraced in the United States because it most closely correlates with our familiarity with the terms reproductive rights and social justice.

**1984** The first International Women and Health Meeting (IWHM) was organized by feminists in 1975. Since then, the meeting held every three years has continued to provide women's health advocates a forum to develop and shape the international women's health agenda from the ground up. The IWHM has its roots in the global women's movement and includes a wide range of organizations, networks, and grassroots women's groups. The 1984 IWHM in Amsterdam developed the term “Reproductive Rights” to offer rights-based claims for gender equality and reproductive freedom. According to the Women’s Global Network for Reproductive Rights which grew out of the Amsterdam meeting, “reproductive rights are a series of rights that enable all women - without discrimination on the basis of nationality, class, ethnicity, race, age, religion, disability, sexuality or marital status - to decide whether or not to have children. This includes the right to have access to safe, legal abortion.” This articulation of a legal regime of reproductive rights was in opposition to the Mexico City Policy announced by President Reagan in 1984 that required nongovernmental organizations to agree as a condition of their receipt of Federal funds that such organizations would neither perform nor actively promote abortion as a method of family planning in other nations. This policy was in effect until it was rescinded on January 22, 1993 by President Clinton, and then re-instated by George W. Bush in January 2001, now called the Global Gag Rule. The relationship between international bans on abortion and domestic restrictions was painfully clear, particularly since at that time in the U.S., Reagan had promised to promote a Human Life Amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would have totally prohibited abortions. This definition of reproductive rights was popular in the United States because it emphasized individual rights (a concept familiar to Americans based on the U.S. Constitution), but it did not make the explicit connection between an individual woman and the status of her community.

**1993** Feminists at the 1993 Vienna Human Rights Conference declared that “Women’s Rights are Human Rights.” This was a phrase originally coined by Filipino activists in Gabriela in 1984 who were challenging the Marcos dictatorship in the mid-1980s. Feminists in Vienna organized by the Center for Women’s Global Leadership at Rutgers confronted the traditional Western-oriented human rights movement and its failure to understand gender-specific human rights violations. Feminists from the North and South understood that making claims for civil and political rights for women were not enough; they pointed out that social, economic and cultural subordination of women place women at greater risk of human rights violations than men. Gender inequality is the basis of sexual inequality and sexual inequality is a human rights violation. Through this declaration, feminists changed the course and basic paradigm of the human rights movement. First, civil and political rights were re-connected to economic, social and cultural rights (a linkage that was severed by Cold War politics and beyond the scope of this paper to address). The declaration also claimed that women deserve both public and private enjoyment of

human rights. It affirmed the power of collective or group rights. Women as a group are more vulnerable to human rights violations in the private sphere whereas men are more vulnerable in the public arena. They used as a powerfully unifying example the concept of domestic violence that historically had been exempted from human rights claims because the violence occurs at the hands of a private individual, not a state. Until then, the dominant perception was that human rights claims could only be made against state actors to address violations by the government. In declaring that human rights violations could occur in either public or private spheres, the Women's Rights as Human Rights declaration set the stage for fast-moving developments in both the human rights movement and the global women's movement.

**1994** The term "Sexual Rights" was created by the international women's health movement in preparations for the International Conference on Population and Development but was rejected for inclusion in the Cairo Programme of Action because of opposition by conservative and fundamentalist countries. Instead the term "Reproductive Rights" was included in the Programme as a way to reach consensus among the women's rights, health advocates, and the population establishment to counter the united opposition of conservatives and fundamentalists who feared the direct assault on gender inequality offered by the sexual rights claims of feminists. The primary consensus reached at Cairo was the link made between development, poverty and reproductive health. As many of the Cairo participants noted, the lack of sexual health for women results from poverty as well as gender inequality, particularly in sexual relationships, such as with HIV/AIDS and violence against women. This was another explicit acknowledgement of the connection between the achievement of individual human rights and community conditions that may limit or enhance those rights. Although some of the participants from the U.S. and Europe were more concerned about reducing population growth pressures, feminist reproductive health activists challenged them to take the concept of development as seriously as they expressed concerns about population reduction through managing the fertility of women. This exposed a serious rift within the reproductive rights movement between those who supported family planning as a woman's right and those who supported it as a population control strategy, a critical distinction women of color in particular pointed out. Cairo became an excellent example of how international conferences have a direct impact on the lives of women and girls in the United States. Because the ICPD took place during the Clinton Administration, it offered a rare and unprecedented opportunity for cooperation between grassroots activists and the federal government at an international conference. Feminists had significant input into the selection of the U.S. delegation to Cairo, as well as the opportunity to influence the language of the agreements. This debate on sexual rights in Cairo bore fruit one year later at the Beijing Conference.

**1995** The Beijing Fourth World Conference for Women catalyzed special prominence for Sexual Rights as a central issue by declaring that the achievement of sexual rights requires gender equality. The meanings of these concepts were hotly debated in Beijing. This was despite incredible pressure from fundamentalists around the world (including the United States) who were uncomfortable with discussing sex and sexuality. The central debate was whether women should be allowed to make independent sexual decisions. The fundamentalists did succeed, however, in keeping advocacy for sexual freedom, sexual pleasure and sexual orientation formally out of the Beijing agreements that focused instead on sexual health services. They were joined by representatives of the global South who were concerned that the progressive articulation and definition of sexual rights by feminists would undermine family relations, especially gender inequalities. They believed that debates on sexual orientation would divert attention from the link between sexual health and poverty. There were Global South groups that supported Sexual Rights at Beijing, and sexual orientation was initially included in the Beijing preparatory documents but eventually excluded from the Beijing agreement because of the concerns noted above. In another key concession, proponents of sexual rights claimed that affirming sexual rights did not mean creating a new set of rights, but they were contained and inferred from other existing human rights documents. They said that sexual rights are human rights already recognized in international agreements and national laws. They made this concession for fear of weakening support by Southern countries for the sexual rights

language. The final Beijing Platform for Action made no mention at all of sexual orientation and SisterSong considers this a major weakness of the agreements.

**1999** The Hong Kong Declaration of Sexual Rights at the 14<sup>th</sup> World Congress on Sexology included sexual orientation as a core definition of sexual rights and this was the primary beginning of the popularization of this language in the United States, mostly by the LGBT movement. Incidentally, the term “the right to choose” is becoming popular in Latin America to describe freedom of sexuality, according to Magaly Marquez of the Pacific Institute for Women’s Health, not the right to abortion or other reproductive health services. This echoes the progression in the United States and Europe in which sexual rights claims are primarily motivated by sexual orientation – the human right to control one’s sexuality, and the right for sexuality to be positively and autonomously expressed, with less emphasis on reproductive health. The phrase “Reproductive Health and Sexual Rights” emerged to both link and distinguish between the two sets of rights.

**How does SisterSong Popularize the Reproductive Justice Framework?**

Domestically, women of color urged the pro-choice movement to be more responsive to the needs and perspectives of women of color. Beginning in 1973 with the *Roe v. Wade* decision, women of color (e.g., the National Council of Negro Women) problematized the term “choice” popularized by the mainstream women’s movement based on the Supreme Court decision (See William Saletan, Bearing Right: How Conservatives Won the Abortion War for details of why the choice framework was selected by the liberal feminist movement). Affirming the skepticism of women of color, historian Rickie Solinger documents how “Choice” has masked the ways that laws, policies and public officials punish or reward the reproductive activity of different groups of women differently” in her new book, Pregnancy and Power: A Short History of Reproductive Politics in America.

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 (See Jennifer Nelson, Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement, for a detailed analysis of 1970s organizing by women of color in nationalist movements and early coalitions).

It was the rapid growth of women of color reproductive health organizations in the 1980s and 1990s that helped build the organizational strength (in relative terms) to generate an analysis and campaign for reproductive justice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We were not waiting for the resources to be mobilized, but proceeded forward based on the strength of our vision and the commitment of our organizations. We were also not waiting on attention or permission from others but were receiving support from significant feminist organizations. Marlene Fried captured the political background for these developments in her anthology: From Abortion to Reproductive Freedom: Transforming a Movement published in 1990. 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.

As detailed in the recent book, Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organizing for Reproductive Justice (written by Jael Silliman, Marlene Fried, Loretta Ross, and Elena Gutierrez), the 1980s and 1990s was a period of explosive autonomous organizing by women of color establishing their own reproductive health organizations.

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 myriad of 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. preoccupied with maintaining the legality of abortion and privacy rights. We were also skeptical about the motivations of some forces in the pro-choice movement who seemed to be more interested in population restrictions rather than 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 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.

As previously stated, the term Reproductive Justice was coined in 1994 by women of color shortly after Cairo. We were envisioning from the perspectives of women of color engaged in both domestic and international activism, and attempting to create a lens applicable to the United States with which to interpret and apply the normative (but not universally agreed) understandings reached at Cairo. In particular, we offered a critique of the way that opposition to the fundamentalists and misogynists strengthened the problematic alliance between feminists and the population control establishment. As activists in the U.S., we needed an analysis to connect our domestic issues to the global struggle for women's human rights that would call attention to our commitment to the link between women, their families, and their communities. Another impulse was our need to critically examine both neo-liberal and neo-conservative policies that threaten women's lives worldwide. We did not feel compelled to limit our vision to the confines imposed by fundamentalists and conservatives at Cairo.

The first step towards the reproductive justice framework occurred two months after the September Cairo conference. A group of African American women (some of whom became SisterSong co-founders) spontaneously organized an informal Black Women's Caucus at a national pro-choice conference sponsored by the Illinois Pro-Choice Alliance in Chicago in 1994. We were attempting to "Bring Cairo Home" by adapting agreements from the Cairo Programme of Action to a U.S.-specific context. In the immediate future, we were very concerned that the Clinton Administration's health care reform proposals were ominously silent about abortion rights, which appeared to renege on the promises the Administration made at Cairo. Even without a structured organization, we mobilized for a national signature ad in the Washington Post to express our concerns. (A similar tactic was successfully used by African American women in 1991 who placed a signature ad in the New York Times to support Anita Hill during the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings for the Supreme Court). We raised \$27,000 and collected 600 signatures from African American women to place the ad in the Post. After debating and rejecting the choice framework in our deliberations, we called ourselves "Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice." Reproductive justice, at that time, was defined as "reproductive health integrated into social justice" bespeaking our perception that reproductive health is a social justice issue for women of color because health care reform without a reproductive health component would do more harm than good for women of color.

Three years later, 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 education was provided to all Collective members and integrated from the

outset into SisterSong's work. We also integrated the disciplines of self-help and community organizing into our foundation.

The phrase "Reproductive Justice" lay dormant for another four years until we resurrected it 2001 in the planning for 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, Byllye 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. This became the second step in our plan to popularize Reproductive Justice.

Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (formerly Asian and Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health) became the first SisterSong member group to reorganize itself using Reproductive Justice as its principal framework in 2004. They wrote a briefing paper on Reproductive Justice debuted at SisterSong's 2005 national membership meeting, which is the third step in promoting the framework: capturing it in written form for people to understand the distinctions and progression from reproductive health, to reproductive rights, to reproductive justice.

The SisterSong proliferation of the reproductive justice framework is intentional, but some of the consequences are necessarily unplanned. Among our organizing challenges, 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. They want to form local multi-racial coalitions for reproductive justice. (An example is the Boston Women of Color Coalition for Reproductive Justice and we have similar requests from activists in Ohio, North Carolina and Washington). We are considering how to address this unmet need among our base, but our current structure was developed from pre-existing autonomous women of color organizations, not chapters such as NARAL or NOW, or linked affiliates such as Planned Parenthood. SisterSong sparks new organizing, such Pittsburgh New Voices for Reproductive Justice or the Boston Women of Color Coalition for Reproductive Justice. Asians and Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health re-named themselves Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, as did the Los Angeles Reproductive Justice Coalition.

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.

### **How Does Reproductive Justice Connect U.S. Issues to Global Issues?**

The principal task facing SisterSong is ensuring that the Reproductive Justice framework is understood beyond SisterSong's constituents. SisterSong believes we are at a cusp within the pro-choice and reproductive justice movements, a period of considerable possibilities for transformation. Among the many opportunities for influencing the direction of this change are the connections between domestic reproductive health advocacy and the global women's movement. The key benefits will come from not

what we offer women in other countries, but what we have to learn, specifically in the application of economic, social and cultural human rights to our organizing to address the issues faced here at home.

Beyond the obvious benefits of participating in international events like Cairo, Beijing, and the World Social Forums, U.S. women have had a chance to learn how other countries have used international standards to compel their countries to address human rights and gender-based violations in their domestic laws and policies. For example, the right to abortion is protected differently in Canada. The Supreme Court of Canada declared the old abortion section of their Criminal Code unconstitutional on January 28, 1988. This decision required the Canadian Constitution to be interpreted as protecting abortion as an affirmative right as part of eliminating gender discrimination. In other words, abortion rights are constitutionally protected in Canada. They learned from the painful trimester partitioning of pregnancy in *Roe*, and avoided that pitfall that chips away at abortion rights in the United States and they observed our country's disgraceful behavior at Mexico City four years earlier.

SisterSong believes that countries like the United States must pass the laws and make the changes necessary to live up to international commitments our government made at these international conferences. As a global women's movement, we were recently effective in preventing the current Bush Administration from rolling back the Cairo and Beijing agreements, but we have not brought our domestic policies in compliance with these agreements. We are concerned that without effective pressure through organizing women for fundamental social change, our country will continue to evade or betray its responsibilities towards women in the U.S. and around the world. The primary force that will compel the United States to end its policy of exceptionalism is a grassroots human rights movement that focuses on making our country more accountable. The Reproductive Justice framework has proven it is capable of mobilizing more than a million people for the April 2004 March for Women's Lives. Now can feminist activists appreciate the lessons of the March and join the growing U.S. human rights movement?

Connecting globally can bring immediate and tangible benefits to activists in the U.S., such as learning the global history of the movement, understanding how to adapt global understandings and agreements to U.S. contexts, and expanding the debate on abortion rights to include a more global analysis of economic and fundamentalist forces that aid to restrict abortion rights, sex education, and sexual rights in the U.S. For example, at the 10th International Women & Health Meeting in New Delhi, India in September 2005 (with 800 participants from 70 countries), global health activists contextualized their nations' reproductive health policies in a critique of neo-liberalism, privatization, fundamentalism, and structural adjustment policies. These are issues that affect domestic reproductive health policies in the United States as well, but few members of the mainstream abortion rights movement talk about these links between globalization, the denial of the human right to healthcare, and reproductive health policies.

Connecting the local activities to the global movement may also help embed an understanding of the role of poverty in constricting reproductive rights, just as the link between sexual health and poverty was expressed in Cairo and Beijing. For example, in October 2006 we are approaching the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Hyde Amendment that restricts the use of federal funds for abortions for poor women, among others. Yet, reversing the Hyde Amendment has never emerged as a priority for the mainstream pro-choice movement. Even under the Clinton Administration, women of color could make little progress in building an effective multi-racial coalition to challenge Hyde or prevent welfare reform. Accusations of class and racial biases within the mainstream are often illustrated by the deafening silence on the annual reauthorization of the Hyde Amendment by Congress.

Every domestic attack on women's rights has its global counterpart and vice versa. SisterSong believes that connecting our domestic issues to the global reproductive health and sexual rights movement will strengthen our domestic advocacy, help move the debate from the paralyzing pro- and anti-choice stalemate, and bring new voices into the reproductive justice movement. While this one strategy is not a



panacea for addressing all of the unresolved issues we face in the United States, it is a powerful platform for seeing beyond the self-absorption of a movement that reinforces – not deconstructs – American exceptionalism and rights-based individualism.

The reproductive justice movement must be part of the effort towards building a human rights culture in the United States. Human rights must be infused into the complex and multiple cultures in the United States – into our beliefs, outlooks and motivations. It offers a compelling counter to the “culture of life” rhetoric of the fundamentalists and Christian Reconstructionists that is a throwback to the days when people had to be religiously qualified white males, back to a paternalistic and authoritarian democracy. Human rights offer a vision of how to achieve equality to counter the traditions of inequality.

### **How Can Reproductive Justice 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, while SisterSong builds the practice. 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 up 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. As said earlier, 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 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 visible in Cairo and beyond 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 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 paper 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 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, towards further population control for targeted groups of people or increased freedom for more women. Factors such as political repression, violence against abortion providers, restrictions on pregnant women, 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 more traditional means of local meetings, telephone outreach, and printed material. 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 concepts 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, like an unchecked virus. 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 definitional 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 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. For information on SisterSong’s Reproductive Justice trainings scheduled around the country, contact [trainings@sistersong.net](mailto:trainings@sistersong.net).

### **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.