



1237 Ralph David Abernathy Blvd. SW
Atlanta, Georgia 30310-1731
Tel: 404.756.2680
Fax: 404.756.2684
Email: info@SisterSong.net
Website: www.SisterSong.net

Let's Talk About Sex! Post-Conference Report July 2007

"Let's talk about sex, baby / Let's talk about you and me...." In 1990, Salt 'n' Pepa excited the public with their provocative anthem about female sexuality. Seventeen years later, SisterSong revived the title, presenting our 2nd National Conference, **Let's Talk About Sex!** (LTAS). The conference, held from May 31 through June 3, 2007, celebrated our human right to sex and sexuality and provided an opportunity for Reproductive Justice advocates to talk about our work and our passions, and to strategize around integrating positive conversations and education about healthy sex and sexuality into the movement. LTAS united approximately 1,000 women and girls of color and allies in Chicago, Illinois to talk, laugh, cry, be enraged, sing and dance about sex!

As we had hoped, this gathering boldly introduced and emphasized the connection between sex, sexuality and the reproductive health and rights of our families and communities. Featured speakers addressed topics such as *Empowering Girls as Powerful Sexual Beings; Queerness, Disability and Reproductive Justice; Intersex Human Rights Issues; the Future of Sex and Reproductive Technologies; and Abortion Politics and Young Women's Sexual Rights*, among many others. These presentations set the tone for the 100 workshops and other activities that took place over the course of those four days. SisterSong intentionally made this conference a celebration of sex and sexuality, as well as an opportunity to share vital information for the health of women of color. In doing so, we ensured that we had some very non-traditional conference offerings including a 2-day film festival; a space for healing and reflection; a crafting room; and cultural activities, including a comedian, musicians, a pro-peace fashion show and a 10th anniversary dance party.

We were particularly pleased with the involvement and participation of youth in the planning and implementation, as well as attendance of the conference. SisterSong identified early on that we wanted young women to make up a significant number of the participants. To ensure this, we began in September of 2006 to meet with young women and organizations led by or serving young women to plan for the integration of youth into the design of the conference. These young women from across the nation developed a pool of workshops and activities that were led by young people and that targeted young women as the primary participants. In all, approximately 20% of LTAS attendees were young people, and many came accompanied by their mothers, aunts, community leaders or with school groups.

Overall, the conference was a success because we achieved the following objectives that we identified in the outset of our planning efforts:

- 1. Bringing women and girls of color together to create a community of support to talk about and strategize around sexual rights.** This conference, as with all of our meetings, showed us that for women of color, having the opportunity to gather, network and support each other is often the most valuable thing that they take away from the event. Overwhelmingly, conference participants indicated that they had come to LTAS hoping to connect with other women of color who are doing reproductive justice work, because as one woman stated, "Sometimes I feel kind of disconnected and lonely in Minneapolis, without a visible women of color space that does educational/organizing work." Others listed among their top 3 experiences: "the most honest conversation I've ever participated in regarding reproductive health/sex," and "Being immersed in a rich sea of beautiful, talented, articulate, intelligent, rhythmic, young, wise, confident, healing, accomplished, warrior, incredible, hopeful women of color!"

Approximately 1,000 people attended the conference, with representation from all regions of the United

States and Puerto Rico. Delegations traveled to the conference from Albuquerque, Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Denver, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, New Orleans, New York, Oakland, Pittsburgh, San Diego, San Francisco, San José, San Juan, Puerto Rico, Santa Fe, Toronto, the Virgin Islands, and Washington DC. Many of these delegations were made up of young men and women, or of mother-daughter delegations. Groups of midwives, community health workers, abortion providers, community organizers and women in the sex trade attended the conference and spent time networking and strategizing about work that they could do together. These groups discussed the intersections of their work with the themes of sex and sexuality, and examined the ways that a pro-sex perspective fits with different issues.

An important conversation took place during the *Whose Body Is This?* plenary, in which two panelists discussed Gardasil, the new HPV vaccine, and the importance of making it mandatory for all girls, in order to facilitate equal access. Conference participants challenged these statements, coming from representatives of the CDC and the American Social Health Association, asking about the safety of the vaccine and accountability issues in light of the deaths of several girls' being linked to it. This debate sparked more dialogue amongst conference participants and, in conjunction with other presentations on the safety of various birth control and STD prevention methods, brought new issues to the attention of many who may not have otherwise been given information to think critically and ask appropriate questions to protect their own and their families' health.

Finally, SisterSong is creating a Sexual Rights Advocacy Agenda, reflecting the principles of our membership around the issues of sex and sexuality. We began this process during the conference, recording important ideas, perspectives, opinions and strategies revealed during or after workshops, plenaries and other conference activities. We will use the Advocacy Agenda nationally to start conversations on various issues related to sex, sexuality and sexual rights, and we will launch strategic work in these areas. A draft of this agenda will be ready for review by our communities by the end of 2007, and for distribution in mid- to late 2008.

- 2. Providing our communities of color with healthy, accurate, and positive information about sex, sexuality, and sexual rights.** We met this objective most successfully with workshops including: "The Power of Stories: Experiences with Depo Provera and Birth Control; From Girl to Woman: Puberty, Teens and Monthly Cycles: Teaching Tool MyMoonCards; Panocha Pláticas: Healthy Sex and Sexuality in Community; I Touch Myself; The Power of Erotic Childbirth; Harm Reduction for Girls and Young Women in the Sex Trade, and; We Do It Too! Disabilities and Sex. In post-conference feedback, participants singled out many of the workshops, claiming: "This was very beneficial to the youth from our organization...since for most this is the first conference they ever attended and are learning about sex." One young woman emphasized: "I learned things that my school just won't teach me." Another woman shared: "I learned more about sexuality and the disabled which was very helpful to me because my nine year old has CP and is developing more and more everyday. I also learned that I was not the only parent of a disabled child that is going through tough decisions about my child's health and future. Martina (Robinson) really helped me feel more hopeful for my daughter's future and helped me see some things that I might have been doing to hinder her advancement."

We estimate that for many of our participants, this was the first time they attended a conference about sex and it "turned them on" to the importance of providing sex-positive health education and of talking to each other about issues of sex and sexuality. Plenaries and workshops were accompanied by cultural performances such as comedian Ali Wong, who dubbed the SisterSong conference attendees "Non-profit girls gone wild" and included comedic skits about Gardasil, masturbation, and other sex and sexuality related topics. Sharon K. McGhee presented "The Pocketbook Monologues", an African American version of the popular "Vagina Monologues" by Eve Ensler. Conference participants consistently listed these cultural activities among their top three experiences.

- 3. Introducing positive conversations about sex and sexuality into reproductive justice advocacy and other social justice movements.** From the beginning stages of planning, one of the main objectives of LTAS was to not only make sure conference attendees were engaged in important dialogues about sex and sexuality, but that these dialogues were put into the context of reproductive rights and social justice work. In planning for the conference, we strove to introduce many issues that have not traditionally been adopted by the reproductive health and rights movement such as comprehensive sex education, birthing rights, young motherhood, and teen sexuality. Additionally, we highlighted the connections between reproductive and sexual health and LGBTQQI issues, environmental and economic justice, prisoners' rights and immigration

reform and policy, among others. As mentioned above, we will continue this work by using our Sexual Rights Advocacy Agenda as a tool for taking this information out into the larger Reproductive Rights movement and into other social justice movements.

- 4. Creating space for intergenerational conversations that will allow younger and older women of color to learn how to effectively talk to each other about sex and sexuality.** We were very pleased with the attendance of young people at LTAS. Of equal importance to the fact that approximately 20% of conference attendees were youth, was the fact that they came with their mothers, aunts, teachers, and youth leaders, and were prepared to really engage in some important conversations about sex and sexuality and their own reproductive health.

The youth planning committee designed a Friday night youth reception in addition to sharing their ideas for youth friendly and youth-led workshops including: Wish You Were Queer Youth Workshop; Sista Cypher – Teens ‘n’ Sex – It Ain’t Nothing New; Building Liberated Zones with Young Women; Young Mothers Speakout!: Stories from Young Mothers Organizing in the South Bronx; as well as workshops on dating gang members, sexual harassment, sexual abstinence and youth access to abortion. In addition, young women on the Saturday opening plenary, “To Be Young, Gifted and Sexy: Affirming the Sexual Human Rights of Youth” talked about the successes and challenges of organizing young women around reproductive justice. As well, many of the cultural workers who performed at the conference (Ali Wong, Tribe Phoenix Poetry Collective, and Hip Hop Feminist Nation) were young women who shared their gifts with conference participants.

The intergenerational nature of the conference was beneficial to all participants. Consistently, the young women identified that they were excited, inspired and grateful for the information that they took home with them and the openness of the dialogues that they took part in. Some of the comments that we received on conference evaluations follow: “LTAS ... created an atmosphere that allowed girls/youth/women to begin a long overdue intergenerational public dialogue about our experiences, while presenting successful models that can be replicated in our communities”; “As an older woman activist of color, LTAS! was the first opportunity in a long time, for me to sit among a broad and diverse gathering of young women of color, and not only hear them, but take in what they were saying, embrace the passion with which they expressed their needs, and how they gave their opinions; to meet them more than half way”; “...there is a cadre of young dynamic, passionate, creative, powerful and beautiful women bringing up the rear to take this work to the next level.” LTAS provided an important moment and space to connect the women who have been in the struggle for more than 25 years with those who have only been organizing for five or fewer years, assess our shared goals, and identify strategies for moving forward together.

Since the conclusion of the conference, we have had time to reflect on our successes and review some important lessons learned. In the next year, SisterSong will take all of these lessons and put them to work as we produce our Sexual Rights Advocacy Agenda and as we continue to organize nationwide for reproductive justice.