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## **Building a Movement for Reproductive Justice SisterSong Gathers Women of Color to Strategize for 2005**

© Loretta Ross, SisterSong National Coordinator

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Since the April 2004 March for Women's Lives where women of color had a visibly large presence and a significant impact on the March, SisterSong has been spending the last eight months contemplating the question; "How do we build a movement for women of color for reproductive justice in the United States?" Basically, reproductive justice is to ensure that the human rights of women of color are protected, which includes reproductive rights. In this issue, we'll explain in detail exactly what reproductive justice is. A shorthand definition of reproductive justice is reproductive rights married to social justice. That is our ideal of reproductive justice.

In order to build this movement, first of all, we need a unifying framework of ideas. We feel the reproductive justice analysis embodies our ideas because the analysis addresses all threats to reproductive health for women of color. It deals with white supremacy and racism and economic injustices, as well as the biological issues and that's different from looking at any other pro-choice framework. We need that unifying set of ideas to build the movement, but we also have to do an analysis of where are the members are who are the cadres of this movement.

In 1997, SisterSong was founded to organize autonomous women of color organizations into a network. With our 2003 SisterSong Reproductive Health & Sexual Rights National Conference, we discovered more people want to join SisterSong than just women of color in autonomous organizations. We have women of color in mainstream organizations that are a part of network. As a matter of fact, there may be more women of color working in mainstream organizations than autonomous organizations because mainstream organizations like Planned Parenthood and its 866 affiliates hire more women of color than we have employed ourselves in autonomous organizations. These women are vital parts of our constituency. There are also women of color in the health care field who aren't in any activist organization, but are providing reproductive health services. We have to reach out to organize them. They see the reality; we can help them understand the politics of the reproductive health movement.

A survey released July 2004 from Washington State's Feminist Women's Health Center revealed a vast majority of women who use public health care services for their reproductive health care, particularly abortion services, don't know about the movement which represents them and protect their interests. The survey showed the majority of the women visiting the clinics for abortion services knew nothing about the abortion rights movement. As a matter of fact, they don't even use the term pro-choice to describe a social change movement. They think of pro-choice is something very personal and only pertaining to their lives. The only pro-choice organization they could name was Planned Parenthood, which means much of the work done by women of color is invisible. During the March, one of the phrases I used stated, 'Since *Roe vs. Wade* was passed in 1973, the decision to legalize abortion, we made it safer to women to have an abortion while the anti-abortion movement has made it less safer to talk about it.' We see that impact now in our clinics. The women of color who use abortion services do not feel empowered to talk about their experiences or know how to connect to an organization like SisterSong which works on their behalf.

Part of SisterSong's task is to focus on national events that affect women of color. Thankfully, the anti-abortion movement has suffered a few losses. Senator Arlen Specter, a prochoice Republican from Pennsylvania, was confirmed as chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Even under the Bush Administration, the anti's are not getting everything all their way.

SisterSong has a very complicated task. Research studies that show women of color who use emergency contraception are no more promiscuous and likely to engage in risky behavior than people who don't use emergency contraception. Women of color need this information. Emergency contraception is being stigmatized like abortion. We also have to challenge the courts' tendency to criminalize pregnancy. We are already dealing with the criminalization of substance abusing women who are pregnant like Regina McKnight who currently in prison for murder because she gave birth to a stillborn baby. Now in Michigan, a teenage boy is being charged with murder of his unborn child because he helped his girlfriend to have an abortion by using a baseball bat to beat her in the stomach. Whether it's the conspiracy of violence around abortion, restrictive laws requiring parental consent for abortion or financial obstacles, these teenagers didn't know there are safe and available services. Consequently, they resorted to dramatic and draconian ways of resolving



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their problems. However, no one should be charged with murder for helping someone have an abortion. This is also a part of SisterSong's mission.

Additionally, there are judges still trying to tell people whether they can or cannot have children. Following the lead established in Wisconsin in which a man was ordered not to have children because he was delinquent in paying child support, a New York judge is trying to order a woman not to have kids because she already has seven kids in foster care. Courts should not determine who can and cannot procreate. That is a human right, even when it is a less desirable decision. The state of South Dakota is also trying to ban all abortions by using statewide ban to overturn *Roe vs. Wade*. It's still ongoing. This is important because SisterSong member Charon Asetoyer is there in the leadership of that fight. She's struggling to get mainstream organizations to engage with women of color organizations. Mainstream organizations responded to the call by women of color by claiming if the state tried to ban abortion, it wouldn't be held constitutional, so there's no need to fight. The analysis SisterSong offered is that you fight all the attacks on women's human rights by empowering grassroots women and women of color to fight any 'chipping away' of our reproductive rights.

During the March organizing, we noticed sharp differences among the four major organizers: Planned Parenthood Federation of America, The Feminist Majority Foundation, NARAL and NOW. At the outset, The Feminist Majority and NOW understood and resonated with our reproductive justice analysis better than NARAL or Planned Parenthood. Since the March, I've had conversations with representatives with both, NARAL and Planned Parenthood. They are starting to understand the reproductive justice analysis. Our success, in terms of the March, is the impact our analysis has on the mainstream and getting that analysis of reproductive justice moved into conversations. We've learned that Planned Parenthood is planning a conference at Smith College in the fall that's going to look at reproductive justice from a legislative perspective. NARAL's new president Nancy Keenan is also very interested in its members learning the reproductive justice analysis. In addition, Lea Gilmore at the National Abortion Federation just released a new curriculum on cultural competency about providing reproductive health services for women of color. Only time will tell will their practices change. Will there be more women of color in power within the organizations? Will there be a redistribution of how they spend their resources and power? SisterSong was originally founded to organize women of color. It was not founded to alter the mainstream's collective mentality on reproductive rights. It's attractive, seductive, and maybe even vitally necessary that we work with the mainstream. But as women of color with 30 years' experience in the movement, we have learned that working with the mainstream comes with its costs. It diverts you from working on your own agenda, created by your own community needs. There are very little rewards for it because the mainstream organizations are awarded with all the big grants, resources, public exposure and credit. SisterSong has to carefully define our relationship with the mainstream movement as we move forward.

The year 2005 is the year of infrastructure building for SisterSong. We're establishing our office in Atlanta. We're hiring full-time staff. We've decided to adopt a moderated federation structure to be a network of autonomous reproductive health organizations that work with a common purpose and share a common brand name. We're also using this year to improve our membership structure. For example, we have women in Boston who want to set up their own SisterSong chapter. Right now, we don't have an easy answer for women who want to start at the ground. Our conference proved that women of color not affiliated with any organization or women of color in mainstream organizations are doing more work than we recognize in traditional ways of identifying reproductive health work by women of color. They might be in a church or a hospital, but not in activist formations. Our membership structure, therefore, is crucial in building our national movement of women of color. We will also revamp our website ([www.SisterSong.net](http://www.SisterSong.net)) so joining SisterSong will be easy. We also are launching our MentorNet program for women of color who want to do reproductive justice work. It's for seasoned activists to mentor emerging ones and conduct online and in-person training. We're establishing a research database where people can get information on women of color and reproductive health.

SisterSong will still continue our public activities. Our annual membership meeting is in July again. As stated in this issue, our articles are coming out in the National Women's Studies Association Journal on women of color and reproductive health issues as well as the CD Rom of speakers at our 2003 SisterSong Reproductive Health & Sexual Rights National Conference in Atlanta. Additionally, there are some significant international events coming up: The World Social Forum in Brazil in January, the International Women in Health Meeting in India in September, and the Beijing Plus 10 Activities in New York. In 2006, we'll be working with the Center for Genetics and Society to co-sponsor a conference on racism and neo-eugenics and their impact on women of color.



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As its core mission, SisterSong is striving to make the work of women of color more visible and our perspectives understood, both in terms of national politics and in our local communities. We want to provide a voice to women both individually, who feel they are dealing with their reproductive issues alone, but also collectively to women of color who feel marginalized because the mainstream doesn't incorporate or pay attention to our needs. You don't have to go to that clinic by yourself because there's a sisterhood to support you. You don't have to deal with racism in the reproductive health movement by yourself because there's a sisterhood to support you. We want women of color to know they are not alone.