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## **Sister Sucker Punches**

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Originally Published in *Collective Voices*, Vol. 2 Issue 5, Summer 2006

*“It’s particularly hard to take being stabbed in the back close to home. There’s always a feeling of betrayal when people of your own group oppose you. It’s mainly a few elite women who benefit greatly from standing with the forces that keep women down.”* —Catherine MacKinnon

As women of color in the reproductive justice movement, we often find that fighting battles within our movement are even more exhausting than fighting people outside. In SisterSong, we call this phenomenon *Sister Sucker Punches*. It is so hard to fight personalities, corruption and opportunism within our movement that many good people leave the work, not willing to compromise their principles for a paycheck. SisterSong sponsored a workshop at our membership meeting in October 2005 in Oakland, California on the topic of **Demystifying Conflict: Dealing with Sister Sucker Punches** featuring Merina Sapolu of Kokua Kalihi Valley Comprehensive Family Services; Juanita Williams, an individual member; and Loretta Ross, National Coordinator.

We organized this workshop because many of us had difficult stories to share about how hard it can be to work with women of color who practice internalized oppression on each other. We decided to share a summary of that workshop with other sisters who may be blindsided by the surprising ruthlessness, cynicism, and personal ambitiousness of some of our colleagues. While we cannot permanently avoid Sister Sucker Punches, we wanted to identify some patterns and learn how to minimize the toxic damage.

Sometimes conflict arises because there are genuine political disagreements. Political disagreements are okay within a movement because when many different people think the *same* thing and move in the *same* direction, that dynamic could be called a cult. When many people think *different* things and move in the *same* direction, that intellectual diversity is movement building.

One of the problems we’ve observed is that people sometimes take political disagreements personally. They cannot separate disagreement from personal dislike. Women’s organizations actually may suppress political conflict because we are sometimes uncomfortable with the intense passions generated by discussing differences. Often we believe we are creating safe spaces. In fact, we are creating *silent spaces*. As Audre Lorde says, “Your silence will not protect you.” What frequently emerges from these settings is a form of “group-think” that quashes marginalized voices and is impervious to alternative viewpoints.

But many times conflicts are based on other issues such as personalities, hidden agendas, power dynamics, competition, and passive/aggressive behavior. These can be complicated to decipher and

much more challenging to counter. Our ability to pro-actively identify and change these destructive patterns frequently determines if we do this work with joy or cynicism.

SisterSong uses Self-Help to have difficult dialogues and address conflicts as well as to celebrate ourselves and our delight in being together. Self-Help is a process by which the telling of personal stories creates bonds of understanding and unity. It explores internalized racism, sexism, homophobia and class oppression, while it breaks down patterns of isolation that we have been taught through societal institutions. It allows us to peel back layers in a conflict to understand the underlying causes.

While the many cultures within SisterSong practice Self-Help in diverse ways, we collectively recognize its ancient wisdom in creating unity among women. As SisterSong reaches our 10th anniversary of working together, we are thankful we have a process inherited from the National Black Women's Health Project and the National Latina Health Organization with which to resolve our conflicts. This does not mean we never "argue, fuss and fight," as the song goes. Instead, we know that disagreements should not be used as excuses to attack, gossip about, or disrespect each other.

New women join SisterSong all the time so we explain Self-Help to them. Often they are wary, assuming it is "touchy-feely" stuff that takes away from the REAL work. But once they experience it, they often wish they had it or a similar process with which to deal with conflicts in a healing way in their own organizations. We use it in all our meetings, so the next time you're asked to engage in Self Help at a SisterSong gathering, remember it serves a larger purpose than simply making you feel good.

### **Presentation Summaries:**

Merina: We first have to understand that no one is an expert on everything. My experience is based on dealing with different Asian and Pacific Islander groups in Hawaii who all have a way of looking at things differently. In looking at conflict, we need to find out where it is coming from and what are the causes within the organization?

In my experience, the reason why conflicts erupt within an organization is because of misunderstandings of culture and age. Sometimes it's younger women against older women. Older women look to younger women with the idea that they should respect their elders. Sometimes people who come later into the organization have conflicts with people who have been there longer because of resistance by the older people saying, "I've been here before, so I know more than you." Also, I get the feeling that older people are problematic when they say, "You must do it my way and I don't welcome changes." The problem is that we begin to feel comfortable about what we've been doing for so long that we try not to accept new ideas.

In terms of culture, we often look for a person that people from dominant cultures feel comfortable working with instead of looking at all the different cultures within the organization and accepting them as equally valid. We have to become willing to learn and to respect each other.

My most recent Sister Sucker Punch occurred when co-workers were talking about a supervisor, stating she's not teaching anything and talking about the supervisor behind her back. My decision was to sit down and discuss the problem. I told the supervisor what was going on and stated that she needed to chat with her co-workers. The supervisor became confrontational when she approached them, and then the story became "Merina gossips." I explained to the supervisor that when I brought the problem to her I was looking for her help in finding a solution. I realize that all cultures have their own way of solving their problems. Instead of confronting and blaming, we need to discuss what our problems are with each other.

Gossip is one of the worst things that can happen and causes a lot of conflict in the workplace. We also suffer from the "Crab Syndrome," in which crabs in a barrel try to get out by dragging each other down.

A supervisor must really look at the causes of the conflict and see if there is anything that can be done within a little setting or in a larger group, rather than using confrontation and power to silence people.

Resolving conflict can be tiring at times for both parties. We all have to be clear about what we want, what the root cause is, and the route we will take to arrive at a solution. I usually suggest to people to look at yourself because unconsciously you may be the cause. We need to ask ourselves: What is the conflict? What is your idea of the conflict? Your idea of the conflict may be different from mine. How do I resolve a conflict within the workplace? We also need to ask, is the person bringing in conflict from their home?

**Juanita:** The purpose of this workshop is to help us realize that we are not alone in this battle and that we can pull together. Sometimes we sucker punch each other and we're not aware of it. Until we understand the problem and how to resolve it, these things will continue and women of color will continue to victimize each other.

Founders and CEOs have the "My Baby Syndrome" a lot of times. They see their agency as their "baby," and feel that no one else can understand it and that no one else can help them do the work because they keep a lot of vital information only in their heads. It is understandable, but when you're talking about an agency that is serving 200 women and 100 children, you can't do it alone. This was my experience as a woman with AIDS on the board of directors of an AIDS service organization.

Mistake #1: Be careful who you put on your board of directors. Sometimes we want our friends on the board and we begin to protect them. Instead of them serving the organization, the organization ends up serving them. I worked with an organization in which the founder unexpectedly died and no one on the board or the staff knew how to run the organization because a leadership transition was never discussed. The founder's family became involved because they felt it was their organization now since their daughter launched it and was overly-identified with it. Needless to say, that organization has now folded and the women it served have been abandoned.

It is important to pick your battles and to know when to walk away. Know your willingness and how far you want to go and when to let go. As women, it is sometimes hard to let go, especially in terms of abusive relationships, but sometimes we hurt each other so viciously it's crazy. Women are being beaten, robbed, raped, killed, and infected every two seconds while we are fighting with each other. While we are fighting, nothing gets done. We need to learn to work with each other and respect each other.

It is not glamorous to do this work. When we volunteer for leadership, we need to have on full armor because it will sometimes be a battle, both inside and outside. Leaders sometimes feel like they have a red target on their chests. Women who have suffered trauma sometimes have serious issues with authority. They sometimes act out their issues with authority on other women perceived as re-creating their feelings of powerlessness.

We have to look at ourselves and ask why we are battling each other like this. What is the real reason? How can we stop this? If we look past ourselves and center our attention on the women we need to serve, then some of us can come back to reality. But until we take the evil out of ourselves and stop fighting over the little money in this work, we'll be in trouble. Instead of constantly criticizing other sisters about what they should or should not do, we need to be self-critical first, examine ourselves to see if we're being positive and giving all that we can towards moving forward.

These poisonous situations affect our families as well when we're sucker punched. I have to be healthy emotionally, physically and spiritually in order to help people. That's why it's important to know your battles and understand that it's okay to walk away when the battle is killing you and your loved ones. As

women we hate to give up because we're nurturers of the world. When we walk away we feel like we're giving up a lot of power, but in fact, we're giving ourselves power by refusing to be abused.

**Loretta:** All sucker punches do not have to be bad. Once when I was organizing a women of color conference on rape and domestic violence in 1980, Latina women accused the black women of oppressing them because there were many more black women than Latinas visible. This conflict lifted the voices and perspectives of Latinas in the anti-rape movement and led to increased sensitivity for everyone about practicing politics of inclusion.

Another sucker punch situation that was painful though, was speaking out to a supervisor about things the staff was saying behind her back. Like Merina, not only did the supervisor not appreciate hearing these things, but also the staff denied they had said them, leaving me in the lurch because their issues were not my issues. I now measure how I represent the voiceless now. I want to make sure that they have my back when I have their back, and I won't engage in discussions with folks who won't confront the source of their distress.

It's sometimes hard not to be judgmental about the work people do. I've learned that there is plenty of oppression to go around and everyone does not have to do the work the same way. Some of us prefer to work in the mainstream; some are more comfortable in the margins. Some of us want to build bridges to work with white women; some of us prefer not to. Either way is okay. When I criticize others, I try to criticize destructive behaviors and not personalities or people. I tend to think the best of others until proven otherwise. This can make me appear naïve and too trusting and I have been burned a couple of times by trusting the wrong people. But I choose to live with hope and optimism rather than with dread and fear. I figure karmic justice will take care of negative folks – in other words, what comes around, goes around. The key task for me is to not spread my own negative energy that will rebound exponentially.

As an older woman in the movement, I have a special responsibility to ensure that space for the leadership of young women is provided. This can have mixed results. I have met and worked with many young women deserving of leadership because they put their lives on the line and work in a principled and collegial way. These are the ones I probably identify with most because I began my political work when I was 15 years old. I had wonderful mentors who helped – and continue to help – me. Many of my mentors were old enough to have actually worked with Mary McCleod Bethune, founder of the National Council of Negro Women. In my twenties, these blue-haired soft-voiced Black women were kind enough to help me navigate the murky waters of politics and they now serve as my role models for working with younger women. They helped me understand that how you do the work is as important as the work you do. You can't do principled work in an unprincipled way.

I have also encountered some younger women who believe they have learned all they need to know in a women's studies course. These are the ones who believe leadership is something that is owed to them simply because they are young, degreed and new, not because they have earned it or paid their dues. They see leadership as a throne, not an opportunity to serve. They are disrespectful of others who don't have college degrees or their privileges. They are patronizing to those they see as their subordinates, but they can be personally charming and completely phony.

Often their role models for leadership are older women who practice the worse kind of competitive backbiting. Young women sometimes learn from these role models in successful mainstream organizations and they replicate these destructive tendencies in the women of color movement. The real sucker punch happens when they want to promote their own leadership by putting someone else down.

I've coined a term for something negative I've experienced: Management-by-clear-cutting. The fastest way to be the tallest tree in the forest is to cut everybody else down and only allow shrubs and bushes to grow. I've seen women of color use this tactic to hide their own mediocrity. They tend to only hire

people who won't challenge their lack of competence, and fire or process out people they fear. They place a higher value on personal loyalty rather than competence. They have little tolerance for disagreement, taking it very personally, and surround themselves with sycophants. When a new idea works, they claim it. When an idea fails, they blame it (on someone else). The quality of the entire agency always goes down under their leadership, but I am often surprised at how long they hold on before they are exposed.

Another symptom is that people visit assumptions on you, which are the things they would do themselves. For example, I once had a co-worker who assumed everyone was a potential thief, if given the opportunity. She was very distrustful and always assumed the worst about others. She locked up office supplies and installed individual locks on office doors. Not surprisingly, she was the one who was caught embezzling funds.

What most people seeking leadership don't understand is that leadership, most of all, is an opportunity to serve others. It's not about fame, glory, or celebrity. It's about hard work and constant self-examination to see if one is worthy and doing the best you can. It's about creating the space for everyone to be a star. When lots of stars shine together, the skies are ablaze!

### **What can we do?**

It is probably impossible to avoid all negative and destructive behaviors in our work. We are engaged in ameliorating the horrible things people do to each other. In the human rights movement, we call this looking at humanity's vomit. Despite the fact that we are engaged in fighting oppression, we have to remember that being oppressed is not fun, but fighting it should be. We have to do this work with joy, compassion, and honesty.

There are practical steps offered from the workshop that may help you identify Sister Sucker Punches and protect yourself and your agency from them. The most important thing to remember is that you are not alone and others may be experiencing the same things without being able to identify and name them.

### **Following are a few suggestions:**

- **Learn techniques and processes to identify why we practice internalized oppression on each other.**
- **Create a safe space for people to talk about how they feel and how they feel in relationship to each other.**
- **Separate behaviors from the person to whom we offer criticism. We should not offer criticism in a way that makes the person feel humiliated, belittled, disbelieved.**
- **State honestly how we feel and take responsibility for our own feelings, not blame others.**
- **Discuss feminist ethics and determine what is – and is not – acceptable among women of color and offer guidance to others.**
- **Identify tangible tools that help us recognize the class, race, color, homophobic, ageist, and ableist issues to challenge.**
- **Recognize that we compete for funding because of the way foundations and donors work. We should try to share resources, not get in each other's way, and not put each other down because we want a grant.**
- **Acknowledge the class and color issues divides within ourselves, such as dark skin vs. light skin or East Asian vs. Southeast Asian, etc.**
- **Learn to work together in humility. We need to pull each other up when we are working on the same issues.**
- **Write articles about coalition building. Work with people who have expertise about these issues and share the knowledge.**
- **If we see other sisters sucker punch someone, we need to let them know this is unacceptable and we're willing to work with them to find a way to be healthier in the movement.**

- **Continue this discussion within our organizations and help identify those behaviors for others in a way that is useful for people coming after us and for the people with whom we are currently engaged in work.**

Unfortunately, all the advice in the world does not help sometimes. Some people don't know they are hurting and the only thing they know is how to spread pain to others. Some people are just malicious. Unfortunately you don't get to choose who you work with and you may have to struggle with all types. Please understand that no matter what you do, there are some people you cannot work with. These are people you have to work around.

The question is how can you protect yourself from people who are trying to steal your joy, and keep you from being happy and successful? The best way is to be able to surround yourself with people who are not going to offer you Sister Sucker Punches. This may not be possible, so consider organizing a peer support group outside of your organization to create a safe space to vent, find support and solidarity, and discuss helpful ways to resolve conflicts.

There are resources both in print and on the internet that can help you learn more about resolving conflicts. Among the best recommended is *The Mediator's Handbook* by Jennifer Beer or you can check out the Conflict Resolution Information website at <http://www.crinfo.org/>.

For information on practicing self-help, contact SisterSong at [info@sistersong.net](mailto:info@sistersong.net).