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**AFTER TEN YEARS OF MOVEMENT-BUILDING,  
SISTERSONG PREPARES FOR THE 2008 ELECTIONS  
AT THE “LET’S TALK ABOUT SEX” CONFERENCE**  
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It’s been a long time coming, but we are finally here! Ten years ago, an idea emerged, where sisters – from autonomous organizations – African American, Latina, Asian, Arab American, and Indigenous – would gather together to organize, strategize and advocate for reproductive health and sexual rights on the behalf of women of color. What only began as a three-year initiative to report reproductive health issues for women of color for the Ford Foundation, has now developed into an internationally recognized organization that is the architect of and foremost expert in the Reproductive Justice movement.

While “choice” has dominated the mainstream women’s movement since the decision of *Roe vs. Wade* in 1973, women of color have always been and are currently fixated on one choice – survival. Without choices, women of color have not been able to go to the doctor, pay for daycare, educate their children, afford adequate housing, as well as exercise control over their bodies. And before the inception of SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective, the mainstream movement didn’t connect a woman’s body with her community and environment. Now with SisterSong’s Reproductive Justice analysis, civil rights, immigration and environmental organizations, as well as mainstream women’s rights organizations, understand that social injustices affect women’s reproductive rights. We believe in the mental, physical, spiritual and economical empowerment of women of color. During SisterSong’s first national conference, in November 2003, over 600 women from all walks of life gathered to substantiate this new movement and its continued mission to uplift the voices of women of color.

Ten years is a milestone, for no other women of color coalition has been able to maintain our existence since the National Black Women’s Health Project (NBWHP), the first women of color reproductive justice organization was established in 1983. Over the years SisterSong has sustained funding in order to expand our infrastructure, build capacity, and simply, do the work. And while “working,” five women of color communities (African American, Latina, Asian/Pacific Islander, Arab American, Indigenous) represented by 19 board of directors who advocate for thousands of members and millions of women of color across the nation, have successfully (miraculously) worked through our internal disagreements in order to become the only multi-cultural national coalition for women of color by women of color, advocating for reproductive health and sexual rights in the United States. And what better way to celebrate than sex!

Although just about everybody is having sex (those who aren’t, eventually will, and definitely want to), it is such a taboo subject matter in our society. Even this year’s conference theme, “Let’s Talk About Sex,” made some board members nervous. “*How will our funders respond? “Will people show up?”* It is this very reason SisterSong chose to tackle the stigmatism behind sex and sexuality through workshops and plenary sessions focused on safety, health, well-being, and our human right to positive sex and

sexuality. These dialogues ultimately will create a healthy attitude towards sex and encourage healthy sexual practices. With a sexpositive environment, we can begin to create a society that supports women's sexual rights. Our funders agreed and women from around the country signed up to make this conference a historical moment in time.

Among the many highlights throughout the three-day weekend is keynote speaker, former U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Joycelyn Elders, the first African American woman to hold the post. Dr. Elders didn't have her first doctor's visit until she was in college. As a pediatric endocrinologist, she is committed to providing quality healthcare for the poor and powerless. In 1994, she was attacked, and subsequently fired, for speaking candidly about sexuality. At the World AIDS Day conference, she stated that masturbation is "something that is a part of human sexuality." Today, she is a high-profiled speaker advocating for women's health. It is only befitting for her to not only impart her wisdom with "Let's Talk About Sex" attendees, but also movement-build with SisterSong.

The conference also has the support of over 60 sponsors – the first time in history where major corporations and organizations finance an event organized by women of color dedicated solely to address our reproductive health issues. With substantial sponsorships, SisterSong established the Mother-Daughter Scholarship Fund and provided \$75,000 in scholarships for mothers and daughters and others to attend the conference. We anticipate at least 1,200 women to come celebrate and strengthen the voices of women of color.

There will be plenty of fun activities throughout the weekend like a Sister's Village of alternative activities, spoken word, belly dancing, and youth-organized events, but there is a methodology behind this conference. In anticipation of the upcoming 2008 presidential election, "Let's Talk About Sex" will provide some guidelines to establish an advocacy agenda on reproductive justice and sexual rights and an opportunity to movement-build among activists and advocates.

It is imperative for women of color to establish an agenda because, for so long, we have been misrepresented. In the past, too few women of color have been invited to the table to discuss our issues concerning sexual rights. And before the voices of women of color were heard, our sexual rights issues were thought to be abuses. The real "abuse" was the marginalizing of our issues in the mainstream women's movement and our homes, churches and communities. Women don't have the social support they need in order to be sexually responsible. Women, for example, are reluctant to require their male partners to wear condoms because of society's attitudes towards sex. There is a general belief that condoms counteract sexual pleasure, and therefore, are an undesirable form of contraception. This belief not only burdens a woman with the responsibility and makes sexual pleasure for him a priority, but it also puts her health at risk for STDs.

Now more than ever women of color need an agenda for reproductive health and sexual rights because there is a continued attack on women through public policies and legislation. Title V abstinence education grant program – a federally-funded program, which distributes \$50 million in funds to state based on the percentage of low-income children, bars any discussion about contraception and teaches "sexual activity outside the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects" – has updated its guidelines to target unmarried women ages 19 to 29. California, Maine, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Ohio, however, rejected the grant. SisterSong believes abstinence-only education is ineffective and inhumane. Public health policies should provide *all* information on sex, including pleasure and responsibility in order to empower individuals to make well-informed decisions for their lives. Legislation (HB 2553 and SB 368) was introduced March 22nd, which promotes a sex-positive society. The REAL act (Responsible Education About Life), authored by Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA), Rep. Christopher Shays (R-CT) and Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ), introduces a grant program for comprehensive sexuality education that provides states with federal funding through the Department of Health and Human Services. Hopefully, this is the beginning of accurate and effective programs. But,

when we are having discussions about sex, we need to know what to say. An advocacy agenda on reproductive justice and sexual rights provides this information.

The advocacy agenda must include SisterSong's three core principles, which are: (1) the right to have a child; (2) the right not to have a child; and (3) the right to parent our children. These principles move us beyond identity and pleasure. They marry social justice and human rights. This new reproductive justice framework will create a society where women are able to exercise self-determination. She would be socially supported with institutions that provide economic empowerment for whatever decision she makes and adequate and culturally-comprehensive healthcare. She would also have the support of an environment that understands and respects the fact that her body is connected to her cultural practices.

Once the conference produces a clear and concise agenda as well as bring more members to the organization, SisterSong is strengthened enough to influence national conversations about sex and sexuality. We are able to communicate our beliefs and guidelines to the 2008 presidential candidates that speak to our immediate needs, other than the end of the war and universal healthcare. While the CEDAW treaty (Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women) did not pass in the House of Representatives and isn't on the Democrats' agenda, SisterSong believes that our government is obligated to use our tax dollars to support women's private decisions by eliminating the Hyde Amendment. For example, an individual is empowered to choose any airline. The government is responsible to make sure the airline is safe, affordable and accessible. Likewise, we believe the government is obligated to make sex safe and healthy for all people, including teens. SisterSong charges the government with the responsibility to take care of all children because children are the future. Incidences like Deamonte Driver should never occur. Driver, a 12-year-old homeless African American boy from Washington D.C., had an infection in his tooth. His family had difficulties finding a doctor who would accept their Medicaid coverage. The infection spread to his brain, killing him. Children shouldn't die because of poor healthcare.

There is strength in numbers. We are now 80-plus organizations. Together, with diverse races, classes, sexualities, and cultures working on one collective vision with comprehensive strategies, SisterSong is able to ensure the complete physical, mental, spiritual, political, social, and economic well-being of women and girls around the country.