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## **Documenting Our Herstory: Voices of Feminism Project at Smith College Collaborates with SisterSong**

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Oral histories are an important method for documenting and preserving the valuable contributions women of color have made to the reproductive justice movement. As activists we are often too busy serving our communities and sustaining our organizations to stop and think about the preservation of our historical records and stories about the lives of the women who have made a significant difference building our movement. SisterSong is therefore quite excited to be part of the Voices of Feminism Project of the Sophia Smith Collection (SSC) of Smith College in Northampton, MA through which oral histories and archival records of some of SisterSong's leaders are being preserved for posterity.

The SSC is the oldest women's history archive in the country. Its collections are especially strong in the areas of women's rights and women's liberation, birth control, U.S. women's international work, and peace. The primary sources document women's activities and ideas from the colonial era to the present, from anti-slavery and socialism to present-day struggles around welfare rights and sexual autonomy. Movements for social change, particularly those that emphasize feminist activity and thought, are the central focus of the collections. SSC launched the Voices of Feminism Project in 2002 with support from Gloria Steinem and the Ford Foundation to preserve oral histories of approximately 50 women who have made important contributions to the feminist movement. The oral histories are videotaped and transcribed so that the images and the words of the women are forever archived. A documentary on the history of women of color in the reproductive justice movement will also be completed by the Project's director, Joyce Follet.

Because the documented history of the reproductive rights movement does not sufficiently represent the contributions of women of color, the Voices of Feminism Project seeks to correct this imbalance by ensuring that the stories and the records of women of color leaders and their organizations are preserved at the SSC. The purpose of the Voices of Feminism Project is to add historical knowledge of women's movement, but especially to investigate historical and historiographical silences. Whose stories have been left out? What experiences are difficult to discuss and how should they be approached?

Oral histories provide information about people or social groups whose written history is either missing or distorted. They are an excellent way to empower activists to speak for themselves, to be the active agents in telling their own stories to avoid the colonizing impulses of anthropological and historical research. They allow an examination of the exploration of meanings in people's lives because oral histories challenge and investigate existing power structures and reveal a wealth of information not available from written sources, such as family relationships. Oral histories help people narrate their own lives, recording the voices that don't fit into the traditional discourses on history that have frequently neglected the lives of women of color.

SisterSong members included as of August 2005 in the Voices of Feminism Project are Luz Alvarez Martinez, Nkenge Toure, and Loretta Ross. Other women of color included in the project to date are Geraldine Miller, Graciela Sanchez, Linda Chavez-Thompson, Betty Powell, Barbara Smith, Linda Burnham, Fran Beal, Byllye Avery, Charon Asetoyer, and Rosario Morales. The SSC is seeking to enlarge this list even more, seeking interviews with more women of color to add to the archives over the next several years of the project.

Joyce Follet approached Loretta Ross in the summer of 2002 to ask if she would consider donating her personal records to the SSC and participate in the Voices of Feminism Project. Loretta asked, "Who were the other women of color included in the Project?" With that question, she transitioned from being a subject in the collection into an oral historian, working as a consultant with the SSC to collect oral histories on other women of color in the reproductive justice movement.

The importance of the project was quickly demonstrated. In December 2004, Loretta interviewed 83-year old Geraldine Miller, a long-time African American NOW activist who founded a union for domestic workers in New York City in the 1960s and succeeded in getting domestic workers included in federal minimum wage laws. Three months after the



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interview, Geraldine died of cancer. That oral history interview is now the only videotaped documentation of her life story and her important contributions to feminist history.

Feminists embrace oral history by recognizing that traditional sources have often neglected the lives of women, and that oral history offers a means of integrating women into historical scholarship. Women's voices are put in the center of history and oral histories allows the exploration of subjects often shrouded in secrecy such as experiences with abortion, sexual assault, and sexual relationships – things that normally would not come out in written accounts. While not violating confidentiality because the narrator remains in control of the interview, it allows the woman to share the history she is comfortable in revealing, and to analyze her life through the prism of the social events in which her activism is embedded. During the oral history, women sometimes interpret for the first time some of the connections in their lives by exploring what they think about their lives instead of just the facts.

SisterSong advises all of its members to think carefully about preserving the records of the work you do and the voices of the people doing that work. Oral histories can be done by nearly anyone with a little bit of training, a video camera, and a passion for documenting the struggles of women of color. Preserving your personal and organizational archival records is extremely important. You can contact a local university or a national collection to work with them to preserve your precious materials. If you would like more information on the Voices of Feminism Project, please contact Joyce Follet at Smith College at [jfollet@smith.edu](mailto:jfollet@smith.edu).