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Where do We go from Here?

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In 1997, SisterSong was founded because individual women of color organizations working on reproductive health and sexual rights issues were fairly weak, marginalized, and lacked individual power. We came together as a national network to do collectively what we can't do individually. Subsequently, we have changed the funding climate for women of color organizations and federal and state public policies. Most importantly, we have changed how the mainstream pro-choice and reproductive rights movement marginalizes women of color issues.

When Ford Foundation first offered us funding to do external work on reproductive tract infections, we devised a better working relationship. We insisted on receiving capacity building dollars for our first three years before we even began doing any external work. They agreed and we immediately started working on strengthening our organizations.

In the beginning, we had 16 organizations, half of which didn't have their 501-(C)(3) status, a paid staff, financial control, infrastructure, and personnel policies. Phase One of strengthening our organizations is institutionalizing capacity building for new members while older members move to Phase Two—external work. In addition, we sponsored the SisterSong Reproductive Health & Sexual Rights National Conference in November 2003. Our goal was to expose the hundreds of women of color organizations out there doing reproductive health and sexual rights work, but isn't easily recognized by the media or pro-choice movement. There were 600 women of color present and over 100 speakers—solidifying women of color as experts in genetic engineering, midwifery, legislative issues, etc. There are women who work at mainstream reproductive rights organizations, autonomous organizations and civil rights, immigration or anti-poverty organizations who are all a part of our movement. We exist in all of these layers.

There are so many unique elements of SisterSong, which distinguishes it from any other women of color organization. One very important facet is selfhelp. Popularized by the National Black Women's Health Project in the early 1980's, it addresses internalized oppression. Recently, it has evolved to becoming an instrumental process for SisterSong members so they can address how their personal internalized oppression affect their relationships with each other. It not only effects how we take care of ourselves, but also how we behave in organizations and social movements. SisterSong looks internalized oppression in the face and tackles it personally, politically and professionally, in all of its manifestations.

Another SisterSong distinction is how we use the human rights framework to move from individual oppression and the 'blame the victim' analysis to investigating the social and structural issues that affect each individual's decision-making process. In other words, the human rights framework connects the dots. For example, Mary is a single working mother with no family nearby. Mary is unable to go to the doctor because she doesn't have any childcare. For fear of neglecting her children, she doesn't leave them home, so she ultimately neglects her own health. When human rights are denied, it creates a condition in which human beings are incapable of properly caring for themselves and their families. The human rights framework shows that most people are denied many human rights entitlements. It addresses the right to healthcare, adequate housing, childcare, education, and social services. SisterSong's mission is to connect reproductive rights to human rights.

SisterSong is also working to establish measurements of accountability for women of color who work within the mainstream movement. We're working to provide resources, which will advise our sisters about what to expect from their prospective employers. Over the years I have found that a great deal of these



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mainstream organizations have revolving doors for women of color. A woman of color will work there for one or two years in a marginalized position, become frustrated by the racist environment and quit only for the organization to replace her with another young and inexperienced woman of color. Yet, these same organizations are receiving funds for “women of color” programs. This predicament allows them to evade any accountability and consume resources away from autonomous women of color organizations. SisterSong will intervene and help not only the women of color in these positions, but also the organizations, as well, to set up peer to peer relationships, suggest creating libraries with specific information in order to empower them. This is a system desperately needed.

Today, our collective has 36 organizations and 289 individual members. We are already receiving requests from members to open SisterSong chapters in various cities. We are victims of our own success. But, this is an exciting and historical time. I love every minute it.

*Sincerely,
Loretta Ross
SisterSong National Coordinator*