



PO Box 311020
Atlanta, Georgia 31131
404.344.9629 (Office)
404.346.7517 (Fax)
Email: info@SisterSong.net
Website: www.SisterSong.net

SisterSong: Herstory

© SisterSong, by Loretta Ross, SisterSong National Coordinator
Originally published in *Collective Voices* Vol. 1 Issue 2, Spring 2005

Our Roots. Throughout our herstory in the United States, women of color have been engaged in individual and collective struggles to protect our human rights. Our reproductive and sexual rights have always been an integral part of this movement. Now, newer generations of women are continuing this legacy. It's important for them to understand their "herstory" and on whose shoulders they walk. Despite evidence of our resistance, women of color in the United States remain disproportionately affected by reproductive health concerns and related human rights violations. The *SisterSong* Collective emerged at a crucial time in this herstory, a time when the civil rights and feminists movements were both experiencing critical backlash. *SisterSong* is the fifth and longest-lived attempt to organize a national coalition of women of color health organizations. The previous efforts were in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but did not last due to lack of funding to build the capacity of the women of color organizations to support a national collaboration.

SisterSong is committed to a human rights framework. This framework is based on the early recognition among women of color organizers that we have the right to control our own bodies simply because we are human, and as social justice activists we have the obligation to ensure that those rights be protected. *SisterSong* continues in the footsteps of our foremothers by building a national movement of women of color that is self-determining and non-hierarchical. We use self-help to organize in a different way by addressing internalized oppression, and so that we stay healthy within the organizing. We are committed to not hurting each and walking away when things get hard.

Our Beginning. *SisterSong* emerged out of a series of symposiums that took place from 1997-1998 in New York City and Atlanta. The exploratory symposiums were convened by Reena Marcelo, then a program officer in the Reproductive Health Program at the Ford Foundation and Luz Rodriguez, then the Executive Director of the Latina Roundtable on Health and Reproductive Rights. The symposiums were funded by the Ford Foundation with the intent to draw from women of color reproductive health educators, activists and policy makers what key issues and challenges were confronting grassroots organizations doing reproductive health work. A series of discussions were created to explore the socio-economic, socio-political and cultural norms that impeded the work towards adequate access to reproductive health services, information and resources that are culturally and linguistically appropriate for women of color. Ms. Marcelo had a particular interest in drawing attention to reproductive tract infections (RTIs) and to the broader more international perspective of the global health needs of women of color. As a woman of color funder, Ms. Marcelo wanted to use reproductive tract infections (RTIs) as a way of looking differently at women of color reproductive health needs because RTIs are less stigmatized than sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) in communities of color and encompass a broader range of health care concerns.

The Ford Foundation sponsored a delegation to attend the 4th Annual International Congress on AIDS in the Asia and the Pacific Rim, which took place in Manila, Philippines in October 1997. Four delegates were chosen to represent U.S. women of color: Dazon Dixon of SisterLove Women's AIDS Project, Mary Chung of the National Asian Women's Health Organization, Luz Rodriguez of the Latina Roundtable on Health and Reproductive Rights, and Skytears Moore (Apache) of the Moon Lodge Native American Women's Outreach Project. With the other international participants they discussed the modern day sex-slave trade of women throughout the world, sky-rocketing rates of HIV infection in Africa, and an epidemic of HPV in young girls throughout the world. The delegation returned to the emerging *SisterSong* Collective with a more global perspective of how human rights are intertwined with reproductive health and sexual rights of women of color, and how the grassroots sisterhood of activists in the United States is forever connected to the plight of women and girls of color throughout the world.

The final symposium, held in Savannah, Georgia in March 1998, convened sixteen women's organizations (both direct service providers and advocates) representing four groups from each of the major ethnic groups in the U.S. (Indigenous/Native American, Asian and Pacific Islander, Latina/Puerto Rican, and African American). The Ford Foundation's agenda at this meeting was to offer a three-year funding plan to develop a coalition of women of color organizations that would focus on capacity building of their grassroots organizations to strengthen their efforts in making an impact locally and nationally with respect to the issue of RTIs, access to adequate health care, and create a voice for grassroots women of color to be heard in national and international policy arenas.



PO Box 311020
Atlanta, Georgia 31131
404.344.9629 (Office)
404.346.7517 (Fax)
Email: info@SisterSong.net
Website: www.SisterSong.net

These original sixteen organizations formed the original *SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective*. The Ford Foundation selected the participating organizations with input and advice from organizers who work on reproductive health issues. The activists suggested about ½ of the participants; the Foundation selected the balance. Each of the members possessed a long herstory of organizing in their respective racial/ethnic communities as well as addressing reproductive health issues such as midwifery, HIV/AIDS, abortion and contraceptive services, self-help, clinical research, health rights and advocacy, sexually transmitted diseases, and reproductive tract infections. They were offered an opportunity to apply for three years' of capacity building funding.

The Ford Foundation informed the group that the capacity building grants could not include the purchase of equipment such as computers and fax machines. As activists, we challenged Ford to understand that changing our program priorities to suit funder expectations was not a feasible strategy for our movement; that many of us at the table were small, under-funded and lacked stability to ensure continued existence. Capacity building work could actually imperil our organizations instead of strengthening them if it did not include what we knew we needed to build administrative infrastructures in our organizations (which included office equipment for some). In short, we said, "This was not acceptable." This moment reflected a significant paradigm shift in the relationship between a major foundation (which normally did not fund small grassroots organizations) and its prospective grantees. We were empowered to be honest and assertive with the foundation representatives, and in response, they did not use our honesty against us. The "paradigm shift" actually extended to change the internal policies of the Ford Foundation and any capacity building grants to approved SisterSong or any other grantee in the future would allow the purchase of office equipment. This interaction characterized the power of a Collective to make an impact on policies, and the self-determination of *SisterSong* to have our voices heard.

We formed a Collective so that we could strengthen each other's organizations, partnering more established organizations with emerging groups. A Collective structure would also enable us to have a greater impact in our communities and within the broader reproductive rights movement. Thus, SisterSong was born as a partnership between activist organizations and the Ford Foundation with a shared vision of building a national movement of women of color working on reproductive health issues.

Our Achievements.

- Through its capacity-building efforts, *SisterSong* members provided and benefited from training on Self-Help, human rights education, leadership development, board development, and fiscal management.
- All original 16 *SisterSong* organizations now have 501 © (3) status.
- Took the RTI agenda and broadened it into a Sexual/Reproductive Health/Human Rights Framework.
- Established international connections (Cuba, Puerto Rico, South Africa, Jamaica, Canada).
- Introduced Self-Help principles and practice to our constituencies.
- Published Native American and Latina Advocacy Agendas.
- Integrated spirituality into our work.
- Provided and received mentoring across and within organizations.
- Produced a SisterSong Video.
- Produced the 2001 SisterSong Advocacy Agenda
- Sent a delegation to International Women and Health Meeting in Toronto, August 2002
- Sent a delegation to Amanitare African Women's Reproductive Health and Sexual Rights Conference, February 2003

Transitions. Since its inception, *SisterSong* has undergone re-structuring and has expanded its membership to include additional organizations and individual members. In Phase I from 1997-2001, *SisterSong* formed four mini-communities each representing African American, Asian, Latina, and Native American organizations. Within each mini-community, (comprised of one national, one state and two local organizations) an "anchor organization" was identified to coordinate communications, activities, reporting and documentation. Together the four anchor organizations performed the administrative functions of the collective.

Through a collaborative process of consultation, these initial sixteen members of *SisterSong* identified common and particular reproductive health concerns and needs and formulated a prevention plan for each of their respective communities. *SisterSong* members also met with researchers from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Office of Minority Health and the National Institutes of Health to obtain more accurate and specific health data on ethnic minority communities and to identify the research and advocacy needs of women of color. This offered



PO Box 311020
Atlanta, Georgia 31131
404.344.9629 (Office)
404.346.7517 (Fax)
Email: info@SisterSong.net
Website: www.SisterSong.net

grassroots women a direct opportunity to impact public health research, and most importantly, to understand how to make publicly funded research more relevant to our community work. The findings from the several meetings convened by *SisterSong* during this phase were published in several health journals and books, and compiled in our own *SisterSong* Advocacy Agenda and a promotional video, both published in 2001. By the end of Phase I, three of the four anchor organizations that received the largest grants from Ford decided not to remain with the collective, while most of the organizations that received the smaller grants continued.

In Phase II, a pivotal planning meeting was held in Savannah, GA in the Fall of 2001. Once again, we recognized the dangers of responding to funder-driven priorities at the expense of our own agendas. *SisterSong* became self-financing with funding provided by the member organizations. A national coordinator was hired and the anchor structure was abandoned and replaced by a Management Circle with representatives from each of the mini-communities. *SisterSong* rededicated itself to continuing to build capacity of women of color reproductive health organizations around the country while also becoming more engaged in public activities within the global women's health movement to bring attention to the needs of women of color in the U.S.

Thousands of copies of the *SisterSong* Advocacy Agenda and promotional video were distributed to women of color organizations across the country. In April 2003, *SisterSong* convened a meeting in Atlanta to bring together the organizations funded by the two women of color initiatives at Ford. The goal was to plan a national conference that would bring together hundreds of activists and practitioners to build an expanded and more inclusive network of women of color working on reproductive health and sexual rights issues. In November 2003, the historic *SisterSong* Reproductive Health & Sexual Rights Conference took place with 600 attendees. Today, *SisterSong* is a sponsored project of the National Center for Human Rights Education and our focus remains on expanding the national network, working together on common issues, and helping other emerging women of color reproductive health organizations.