

### Understanding Reproductive Justice

Loretta Ross, National Coordinator

©SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective

November 2006 (Updated March 2011)

Since SisterSong nationally debuted the term “Reproductive Justice” at our first national conference in November 2003, the term has blossomed in the consciousness of the reproductive rights movement, including activists, funders, researchers, academics, and advocates. Many individuals, groups and organizations find the term helpful in moving beyond the singular focus on abortion that dominates the pro-choice movement. People in other social justice movements find it useful in incorporating an understanding of reproductive health issues in organizations not primarily concerned with women’s rights. It also provides a way to link groups concerned about sexual rights and gender identity issues with those working on reproductive issues. A Google search in November 2006 on the term produced 76,000 hits, proving the wide acceptance and usefulness for a term coined in 1994 by African American women after the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt. According to Marlene Fried of the Civil Liberties and Public Policy Program at Hampshire College, reproductive justice provides a political home for a set of ideas, aspirations and visions in language that encompasses all the social justice and human rights issues.

Because of the popularity and viability of the term Reproductive Justice, or RJ as we call it, SisterSong is concerned that people who use the term with our free and open permission understand what we mean by this language, because it is not merely a substitute for the terms “pro-choice,” “reproductive rights,” or even “sexual rights.” While we are encouraged at how quickly the term was adopted and adapted by so many allies in our movements, we hope that those who use the term fully appreciate its breadth, depth and strength.

Reproductive Justice is, in fact, a paradigm shift beyond demanding gender equality or

attaching abortion rights to a broader reproductive health agenda. All of these concepts are, in fact, encompassed by the Reproductive Justice framework. RJ is an expansion of the theory of intersectionality developed by women of color and the practice of self-help from the Black women's health movement to the reproductive rights movement, based on the application of the human rights framework to the United States. Reproductive justice is in essence an intersectional theory emerging from the experiences of women of color whose multiple communities experience a complex set of reproductive oppressions. It is based on the understanding that the impacts of race, class, gender and sexual identity oppressions are not additive but integrative, producing this paradigm of intersectionality. For each individual and each community, the effects will be different, but they share some of the basic characteristics of intersectionality – universality, simultaneity and interdependence.

Reproductive Justice is a positive approach that links sexuality, health, and human rights to social justice movements by placing abortion and reproductive health issues in the larger context of the well-being and health of women, families and communities because reproductive justice seamlessly integrates those individual and group human rights particularly important to marginalized communities. We believe that the ability of any woman to determine her own reproductive destiny is directly linked to the conditions in her community and these conditions are not just a matter of individual choice and access. For example, a woman cannot make an individual decision about her body if she is part of a community whose human rights as a group are violated, such as through environmental dangers or insufficient quality health care. Reproductive justice addresses issues of population control, bodily self-determination, immigrants' rights, economic and environmental justice, sovereignty, and militarism and criminal injustices that limit individual human rights because of group or community oppressions.

Reproductive justice does not replace other language used by our movement, but invites us to examine reproductive issues through the women's human rights framework. Reproductive justice is simultaneously a new theory, a new practice and a new strategy that has quickly proven effective in providing a common language and broader unity in our movement. For this progress to continue, we believe that our movement must share a deepened understanding of the potential power of this framework for moving beyond the congealed debates on abortion in reproductive politics.

The theory of reproductive justice was created because women of color were looking for a way to articulate the needs of our communities. SisterSong's three core reproductive justice principles developed since our founding in 1997 reflect the theory and practice we collectively learned and shared. We believe that every woman has the human right to:

Decide if and when she will have a baby and the conditions under which she will give birth

Decide if she will not have a baby and her options for preventing or ending a pregnancy

Parent the children she already has with the necessary social supports in safe environments and healthy communities, and without fear of violence from individuals or the government

In short, reproductive justice is an intersectional theoretical analysis defined by the human rights framework applicable to everyone, and based on concepts of intersectionality and the practice of self-help, discussed later. It is also a base-building strategy for our movement that requires multi-issue, cross-sector collaborations. Reproductive justice also offers a different perspective on human rights violations that challenge us in controlling our bodies and determining the destiny of our families and communities: Reproductive Oppression.

The Core Problem is Reproductive Oppression

Reproductive oppression is the control and exploitation of women, girls, and individuals through our bodies, sexuality, labor, and reproduction. The regulation of women and individuals thus becomes a powerful strategic pathway to controlling entire communities. It involves systems of oppression that are based on race, ability, class, gender, sexuality, age and immigration status.

(Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice-- ACRJ)

Women of color have historically and are now still experiencing “reproductive punishment” described by Dorothy Roberts, or “reproductive oppression” defined by ACRJ. Both terms summarize the way that the state and others refuse to support us with quality services and resources, but at the same time interfere in our lives and decisions. Reproductive oppression is implemented, for example, through discriminatory foster care enforcement, criminalizing pregnancy, immigration restrictions, preventing LGBTQ individuals from parenting, and forced abortions for incarcerated women. As stated above, reproductive oppression is a means of selectively controlling the destiny of entire communities through the bodies of women and individuals, a newer and more subtle form of negative eugenics. In fact, according to the United

Nations' Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, reproductive oppression meets genocidal standards because it can be characterized as: "Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group, and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group." As a society, we can endlessly argue intent versus outcome, but the facts remain that women of color – and our children – experience oppressive reproductive politics leading to harmful outcomes by state and non-state actors.

It is equally important to understand how the U.S. system of white supremacy facilitates reproductive oppression, an aspect understated by the mainstream movement. The concept of reproductive justice works similarly for white women as well because their individual decisions are directly tied to their communities – in particular, racist fears triggered by the decreasing percentage of white children born in the United States. Many of the restrictions on abortion, contraception, scientifically-accurate sex education, and stem cell research are directly related to an unsubtle campaign of positive eugenics to force heterosexual white women to have more babies. In contrast, children of color are often deemed unwanted, excessive and perceived as a threat to the body politic of the United States by being described as a "youth bulge" creating a dysfunctional education system, economic chaos, environmental degradation, and a criminal underclass.

The isolation of abortion from other social justice issues that concern all our communities contributes to, rather than counters, reproductive oppression. Abortion isolated from other social justice/human rights issues neglects issues of economic justice, the environment, criminal justice, immigrants' rights, militarism, discrimination based on race and sexual identity, and a host of other concerns directly affecting an individual woman's decision-making process. Of equal concern, support for abortion rights is even frequently isolated from other reproductive health issues because abortion is deeply stigmatized by both sides of the debate rather than being seen as part of the continuum of women's lived reproductive health experiences and part of their human rights entitlements.

We must end the separation of abortion rights from other social justice, reproductive rights and human rights issues because it is difficult – if not impossible – to mobilize communities in defense of abortion rights if abortion is taken out of the context of empowering women, creating healthier families, and promoting sustainable communities. By shifting the definition of the problem to one of reproductive oppression rather than a singular focus on protecting the legal right to abortion, SisterSong offers a more inclusive and catalytic vision of how to move forward in building a new movement for women's human rights.

In order to better understand the way that SisterSong intends the reproductive justice

analysis to be used in conjunction with the human rights framework, it is important to review the current eight categories of human rights to get a sense of their relevance to everyone's lives. These categories have developed and expanded since the writing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

### 8 Categories of Human Rights

Civil Rights – Non-Discrimination, Equality

Political Rights – Voting, Speech, Assembly

Economic Rights – Living Wage, Workers' Rights

Social Rights – Health Care, Food, Shelter, Education

Cultural Rights – Religion, Language, Dress

Environmental Rights – Clean Air, Water, and Land. No Toxic Neighborhoods

Developmental Rights – Control Own Natural Resources

Sexual Rights – Right to Have or Not Have Children, Right to Marry & When, Same-Sex

Rights, Trans-gender Rights, Right to Birth Control and Abortion, Right to Sexual Pleasure and Define Families

It is important to understand that the spurious claims of “human rights for the unborn” (in actual violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) are used by those who manipulate the framework rather than uphold it. This strategy seeks to deny all of our human rights to privacy, bodily self-determination, and justice, but especially the rights of women. In fact, the first article of the UDHR states that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights [emphasis added].” The UDHR does not confer human rights to those who are not here yet, but does demand that the rights of people already born be respected and protected. Human rights are not negotiable – they are inalienable. Human rights are our birthright as human beings. To achieve our human rights, we seek reproductive justice for ourselves, our families, and our communities.

### Three Frameworks for Our Activism

Reproductive Justice is the complete physical, mental, spiritual, political, social, and economic well-being of women and girls, based on the full achievement and protection of women’s human rights.  
(Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice)

In its 2005 discussion paper, Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice expanded on the original SisterSong analysis by evaluating the three main frameworks for fighting reproductive oppression: 1) Reproductive Health which deals with service delivery, 2) Reproductive Rights which address the legal regime, and 3) Reproductive Justice which focuses on movement building. (See A New Vision for Reproductive Justice Paper by ACRJ at [www.reproductivejustice.org](http://www.reproductivejustice.org).) These three frameworks provide a complimentary and comprehensive response to reproductive oppression, as well as a pro-active vision articulating what we are fighting for and how build a new movement to advance women’s human rights.

Reproductive Health is a service delivery model, which addresses the reproductive health needs of women. It focuses on lack of healthcare, services, information, as well as research and health data. The goals are to improve and expand services, research and access, particularly in prevention, and provide culturally competent care for communities of color.

Reproductive Rights is a legal and advocacy-based model that serves to protect an individual woman’s legal right to reproductive health care services. It addresses the lack of legal protection or enforcement of laws implemented to protect an individual woman’s legal right to

reproductive health care services. The goal is to have universal legal protection for all individuals and claim these protections as constitutional rights.

Reproductive Justice is a movement-building framework that identifies how reproductive oppression is the result of the intersections of multiple oppressions and is inherently connected to the struggle for social justice and human rights. A woman's societal institutions, environment, economics and culture affect her reproductive life.

Each of these frameworks has strengths and limitations, but together they form the matrix of reproductive activism in our movement. Reproductive justice calls for an integrated analysis, a holistic vision and comprehensive strategies that push against the structural and societal conditions that control our communities by regulating our bodies, sexuality, labor and reproduction. It demands that we work across social justice movements to build a united struggle for universal human rights. It allows us to pursue a vision that will protect and determine our complete physical, mental, spiritual, political, economic, and social well-being. In order to turn reproductive justice into action, we must develop new leaders, organize our youth, and educate our community leaders.

Reproductive Justice is achieved when women, girls and individuals have the social, economic, and political power and resources to make healthy decisions about our bodies, sexuality and reproduction for ourselves, our families and our communities. – Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice

### Why Do We Need a New Framework?

Reproductive justice also speaks to the shortcomings of the “choice” movement. There are primarily eight inadequacies with the choice framework countered by the reproductive justice framework, according to Marlene Fried:

Choice does not speak to the complexities of women's lives. It excludes the lack of access women face and the depth of women's experiences. No woman seeking an abortion ever has just one human rights issue confronting her.

Choice leaves out opposition to population control. Reproductive choice in the United States only speaks to the right not to have a child, but it doesn't address a woman's right to have as many children as she wants.

Choice is a politically conservative concept. In order to fight conservative politics in the 1970s, the movement made "choice" a libertarian anti-government concept that would appeal to larger segments of the population, which de-emphasized women's rights, sex rights and sexual pleasure, and failed to support women as moral decision-makers.

Choice is a consumerist or marketplace concept. Abortion is a reproductive right that is only available to those who can afford it. The marketplace privatizes the governmental obligation not only to protect choice but to ensure that choices are achievable for all.

Choice is an individual concept that does not address the social problems that prohibit women from exercising their rights. Unplanned pregnancies and poverty aren't an individual woman's problems.

Choice primarily resonates with those who feel they can make choices in other areas of their lives, those whose human rights are less likely to be violated.

Choice is not a sufficiently powerful moral argument, especially when you have to challenge the "life" framework of those opposed to women's rights.

Choice is not a compelling vision. It's not the vision needed to mobilize the kind of movement capable of winning clear and consistent victories.

The pro-choice movement is deeply demoralized in many ways because of the incessant attacks on services, funding, providers and individual women seeking abortions as part of their reproductive health services. The most significantly exciting growth areas for our movement are the new generations of activists attracted by the reproductive justice framework that includes strong emerging leadership by women of color.



### The Future of our Reproductive Justice Movement

SisterSong believes that our Reproductive Justice analysis offers a compelling and more defensible framework for empowering women and individuals to create healthier families, and sustainable communities. This is a clear and consistent message for the movement. We believe we collectively have the potential to motivate an admittedly disheartened pro-choice movement by bringing in new voices to expand our base, reframe our vision, and connect to other social justice movements. The Reproductive Justice analysis helps reposition the public debate on reproductive health from one dominated by abortion to broader issues of reproductive health, rights and justice. Using this analysis, we can integrate multiple issues and bring together constituencies that are multi-racial, multi-generational, and multi-class in order to build a more powerful and relevant grassroots movement that can create systemic social change.

As an example of the reproductive justice framework in action, more than 1.15 million people participated in the April 25, 2004 March for Women's Lives, making it the largest protest march in U.S. history. "The March for Women's Lives was a perfect example of using reproductive justice to create a bigger movement," according to Kathy Spillar, Vice President of the Feminist Majority Foundation, one of the principal organizations that first called and provided some of the resources, staff and office space for the March. Spillar spoke at a Funders' Briefing on Reproductive Justice that SisterSong sponsored in October 2005. March organizers linked the domestic assault on abortion with the global gag rule, the spread of HIV/AIDS through faulty abstinence-only education, the debt crisis that impoverishes developing countries, the war against Iraq, the undermining of privacy and citizenship rights, the attacks on gay marriage, the contempt for international mechanisms like the United Nations and human rights treaties, and the corruption of our political system that selects rather than elects presidents while denying direct democracy to all of us. The success of the March was a testament to the power of human rights to mobilize and unite diverse sectors of the social justice movement to support women's human rights in the United States and abroad. In short, the March proved that when the reproductive justice analysis was used, it became a winning strategy.

We stand at a critical time in which to consider the pro-choice movement's future direction. The implications for women's lives are increasingly acute in light of the extreme political conservatism sweeping the nation from all quarters and affecting reproductive and sexual health policies on all levels – ranging from the U.S. President and the Supreme Court, to state legislatures and local school boards and foreign policies. Moreover, assaults upon the civil and human rights of communities of color and other disenfranchised members of our society continue to rise within our nation's policies and the rapidly changing political climate. As such,

we believe it is essential to utilize the reproductive justice frame as a means to unite women and their communities, be relevant to communities of color, and link to advocates from the nation's capitol to the grassroots in order to develop proactive strategies to protect and preserve our lives.

It is beyond the scope of this article to fully discuss SisterSong's use of self-help techniques in our practice of applying the reproductive justice framework to our movement and building unity among our Collective. Self-help is described in detail in *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice* published in 2004 by South End Press. It is vital, however, to mention that reproductive justice demands a process by which differences among women and individuals can be transcended in order to build a united movement for reproductive justice. Self-help addresses issues of internalized oppression and empowerment that are critical to confront when working across divisions of race, class, age, ethnicity, religion, sexual identity, gender identity, disabilities, and immigration status. Multi-issue and multi-sectoral work is extremely difficult without a proven process for maintaining unity while addressing complex, intersectional oppressions. The reproductive justice framework is incomplete and only partially understood without incorporating the principles and practices of self-help pioneered by the National Black Women's Health Project and the National Latina Health Organization in the 1980s.

SisterSong provides Reproductive Justice 101 trainings for organizations, groups and individuals who wish to explore the reproductive justice framework in more depth, learning more about its component parts of intersectionality, human rights, self-help and empowerment. To schedule training, call us at 404-756-2680 or [writeLoretta@sistersong.net](mailto:writeLoretta@sistersong.net).

SisterSong offers these trainings so that we can help ensure that the meaning of Reproductive Justice is not compromised or limited as people embrace and adjust the framework to fit their own needs. While we cannot and do not wish to prohibit anyone from using this language because we recognize its enormous appeal, we hope that the theoretical origins and its concomitant movement building practices originating in the experiences of women of color will be respected with the same integrity and generosity with which we offer our perspectives.