

Reproductive Justice: Towards a Comprehensive Movement

© Eveline Shen, Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, SisterSong Management Circle
Published in *Collective Voices* Vol. 1 Issue 4, Spring 2006

On the 33rd anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, reproductive rights activists, the media, and legislators are focusing on how the confirmation of Samuel Alito will affect reproductive rights of women in the United States. Indeed, Alito's previous record raises serious concerns for those who support reproductive rights and civil rights. Historically and currently, many reproductive rights leaders and activists have viewed *Roe v. Wade* as being at the center of the fight for reproductive rights and abortion access.

However, a constitutional right to abortion is not enough to protect the reproductive health of women, or even abortion access for all women. In fact, even with *Roe* on the books, many women currently have limited, if any access to abortion services. The majority of poor and low-income women in the United States are denied access for a variety of reasons including abortion funding bans, bans on the provision of abortion services by government health care facilities, a shortage of abortion providers, and parental involvement laws.

We must cultivate a more comprehensive analysis and strategy to protect reproductive rights because women of color and poor women's reproductive options and self-determination are restricted in so many ways beyond abortion. For example, Asian women who live in low-income neighborhoods with high levels of environmental contaminants such as dioxins are disproportionately affected by these chemicals. Dioxins are linked to endometriosis and Asian women have some of the highest rates of endometriosis, which can lead to infertility. Of further concern is the cervical cancer rate among Asian women in California, which is 10% higher than women overall. In fact, the highest incidence of cervical cancer of all ethnic groups is among Vietnamese women, which is five times higher than in White women. While the best way to prevent cervical cancer is through regular screening, Asian women have the lowest rates of Pap exams of all ethnic groups. Limited English proficiency, mistrust of the US medical system, immigration status, and cultural taboos prevent necessary early detection and diagnosis.

This variety of challenges demands a multi-dimensional approach to fight reproductive oppression and advance the well-being of women and girls.

Currently, there are three main frameworks for fighting reproductive oppression: 1) Reproductive Health, 2) Reproductive Rights, and 3) Reproductive Justice. Although the frameworks are distinct, together they provide a complementary and comprehensive solution. The Reproductive Health framework emphasizes the necessary reproductive health services that women need. The Reproductive Rights framework is based on Constitutionally-framed legal protections for women, such as *Roe v. Wade*. And the Reproductive Justice framework stipulates that reproductive oppression is the result of the intersections of multiple oppressions and is inherently connected to the struggle for social justice and human rights.

The Reproductive Justice framework envisions the complete physical, mental, and spiritual well-being of women and girls. It stipulates that reproductive justice will be achieved when women and girls have the economic, social, and political power and resources to make healthy decisions about our bodies, sexuality, and reproduction for ourselves, our families, and our communities in all areas of our lives.

Reproductive Justice is an intersectional theory emerging from the experiences of women of color. The concept of intersectionality has a long history, beginning with the writings of Fran Beale and Toni Cade Bambara in the 1970s, and re-articulated by Kimberle Crenshaw in the 1990s. They argue that the experiences of women of color vis-à-vis race, class and gender are not additive but integrative, producing a different paradigm called Intersectionality. What is fresh about SisterSong's approach is that we have applied theories of Intersectionality to the human rights framework, made a strong connection between



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

individual and group rights, and built a growing movement for Reproductive Justice. 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. Reproductive Justice stresses both individuality and group rights. We all have the same human rights, but may need different things to achieve them based on our intersectional location in life - our race, class, gender, sexual orientation and immigration status. The ability of a woman to determine her reproductive destiny is directly tied to conditions in her community. The emphasis is on individuality without sacrificing collective or group identity. As with the human rights framework, it does not grant privileges to some at the expense of others.

We need a movement with a vision of addressing women comprehensively so that we do not single out pieces of a woman's body but see our bodies as whole. Similarly, we cannot focus solely on one aspect of a woman's life, whether at work, at school, at home, or on the streets. We need to understand how reproductive oppression may exist in all arenas of her life and recognize that she may have to walk through all of these arenas in a single day.

Reproductive Justice aims to invigorate the movement by:

- Addressing the needs and issues of a diverse group of women while acknowledging the layers of oppression that our communities face, particularly those who have little access to power and resources;
- Encouraging women and girls to be active agents of change and realize their full potential;
- Creating opportunities for new leaders to emerge within our communities and increase the sustainability of our movement;
- Integrating the needs of grassroots communities into policy and advocacy efforts;
- Infusing the movement with creativity, innovation, and vision;
- Providing opportunities to work at the intersection of many social justice issues while forging cross-sector relationships; and
- Connecting the local to the global by integrating the human rights framework.

As we are currently experiencing an escalated assault on women's rights as well as a shrinking of the mainstream reproductive health and rights movement, it is critical that we include a Reproductive Justice framework in our collective work. By integrating the reproductive justice needs of our communities at local, state, national, and international levels, we will be able to activate and mobilize larger constituencies. Furthermore, working in alliance with other social justice movements will infuse freshness and relevance into our own movement.

Reproductive Justice calls for integrated analysis, holistic vision, and comprehensive strategies that push against the structural and societal conditions that control our communities by regulating our bodies, sexuality, and reproduction. This is the time to come together across issue areas, across separate change efforts, and across identities to achieve the vision where all women, girls, and our communities can truly transform our world.

Eveline Shen is the Executive Director of Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (ACRJ). ACRJ works for the liberation of Asian women, girls and our communities through the lens of Reproductive Justice.

A more detailed description of the reproductive health, rights, and justice frameworks is given in ACRJ's new paper, *A New Vision for Advancing our Movement for Reproductive Health, Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Justice*. To download a copy of *A New Vision*, please visit www.reproductivejustice.org.