

SISTERSONG WOMEN OF COLOR REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE COLLECTIVE

COLLECTIVE VOICES

VOLUME 5 ISSUE 11

FALL 2010

**Get Ready for the 2011
Let's Talk About Sex!
Conference**

**Sexually
Transmitted Beliefs:**
The High Cost of Silence

**Thoughts About
Sex-Selective
Abortion Legislation**

Trust Black Women:
The Politics of Race
and Abortion

**Smiling on the Outside,
But Crying on the Inside**
Living Positive



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SisterSong

COLLECTIVE VOICES

“The real power, as you and I well know, is collective. I can’t afford to be afraid of you, nor of me. If it takes head-on collisions, let’s do it. This polite timidity is killing us.”

-Cherrie Moraga

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NOBODY does it better!

Causes in Common: Reproductive Justice and LGBT Liberation, a national movement building program of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center salutes SisterSong as a founding Causes in Common coalition partner and congratulates SisterSong on a spectacular National Membership Meeting! Thank you for your tireless work to promote and defend all of our human rights.



Thank you to everyone that supported Trust Black Women and the advance screening of *For Colored Girls* nationwide.

janet thandie whoopi phylicia anika noni loretta kimberly kerry
 JACKSON NEWTON GOLDBERG RASHAD ROSE DEVINE ELISE WASHINGTON



Many voices. One poem.

FOR COLORED GIRLS

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Get **Ready** for the **Let's Talk About Sex!** Conference



Loretta Ross, SisterSong's National Coordinator

Join SisterSong in Miami, July 14-17, 2011. It will definitely be fun and we encourage you to bring your family to enjoy the experience. Each day of the conference will feature free time for you to enjoy the South Beach amenities, as well as participate in educational sessions. Workshops will be age-appropriate for young people 13 years or older. Free childcare will be provided.

The call for papers and presentations will be posted on our website by November 30, 2010 at www.sistersong.net. If you are a SisterSong member and have an idea for a workshop or presentation, please let us know. We won't be able to accept all proposals, but we will do our best.

We encourage you to register early for this conference because space is extremely limited. We had more than 1,000 people at the last one, and even more are expected to want to join us on the beach in Miami. *While everyone is welcome to join us, unfortunately, we may have to turn away folks who show up unregistered and exceed the safety capacity of the rooms.* Pre-registration is now open. Visit the SisterSong website at www.sistersong.net for special discounts only available until December 31, 2010.

Partial scholarships for SisterSong members will be available. Remember, we offer special family "Mother/Daughter" scholarships so if the mother or daughter is attending the conference, they can apply for a scholarship to bring the other. These scholarships are gender-neutral, so if it's a niece/uncle or whatever – we believe that conversations about sex, safety, health and sexuality must happen *within* families to protect our futures.

We also offer special scholarships for women with disabilities, young women, and members of Indigenous nations, so please visit our website at www.sistersong.net for more information.

We proudly present our 2011 National Conference

Let's Talk About Sex

Love, Legislation and Leadership

July 14-17, 2011
Eden Roc Hotel
Miami, FL

Sexual Rights Are Human Rights

register today!
www.sistersong.net
404.756.2680
info@sistersong.net

Black Abortion Issue

An upcoming controversial issue for January 2011. Our writers will expose the ant-abortion attack on Black women and the co-optation of the civil rights legacy to shame women for making our choices about our bodies. Collective Voices will share the facts around Black women and conditions for abortion. This issue is an opportunity to provide exposure for your organization or company in one of our most talked about issues.

Let's Talk About Sex Conference Issue

Premiering at our Let's Talk About Sex Conference, July 14-17, 2011 in Miami, Florida, this issue will serve as a behind the scenes look at SisterSong's much anticipated national conference. Speakers, workshop tracks, plenary sessions, and more will be the focus of the July issue. Collective Voices will reach tens of thousands of our regular readers and nearly 2,000 more conference attendees.

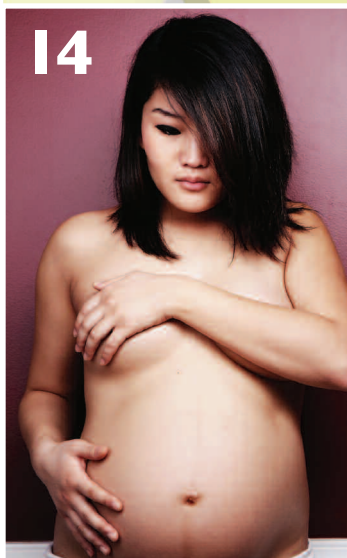
Give us a call to reserve your ad space. SisterSong is offering special advertisement pricing for the reservation of two ad spaces for the Black Abortion and Let's Talk About Sex Conference issues.

Contact Serena Garcia, SisterSong's Communications Coordinator at 404-756-2680 or serena@sistersong.net for details.

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By Serena Garcia,
Communications Coordinator, SisterSong

We are having Sex on the Beach! No, really we are. SisterSong is sponsoring its next **Let's Talk About Sex! Conference July 14-17, 2011** at the Eden Roc Hotel in Miami Beach, Florida. We'll be on the world famous South Beach with food, friends, and families. We know that Sex on the Beach is a drink, but it's also an opportunity to have a great time at a fabulous beach resort where will have serious conversations vital to our lives.

Why do women of color need to talk about sex some more? Since SisterSong hosted our national conference Let's Talk About Sex! in Chicago in 2007, we've been asked, "Why do THAT again?" and "Can't SisterSong think of another theme?"

Well, the answer is simple. We don't believe that one 3-day conversation about sex – even among 1,000 women – completes the many conversations we need to have as reproductive justice activists. So SisterSong's Management Circle decided last year that we need to keep having this conversation as many times as it takes to help our communities – and the women in them – lead happier, safer, and healthier lives.

This issue of *Collective Voices* re-ignites our conversations about sex and sexuality for women of color. The articles discuss sex from a variety of important perspectives as immigrants, young women, gender non-conforming, and HIV positive SisterSong members, among others. We believe these diverse perspectives are important because sex is natural. Not talking about sex is unnatural – and dangerous!

Consider the following statistics:

The teen pregnancy rate in the U.S. is now increasing as both births and abortions increase, according to the Guttmacher Institute.

For the first time in more than a decade, the teen pregnancy rate rose 3% in 2006, reflecting increases in teen birth and abortion rates of 4% and 1% respectively. Despite the drop in teen pregnancy rates in the 1990s, the advent of abstinence-only programs under the Bush Administration replacing comprehensive sex education programs had a predictable result: more teens became pregnant.

For Latinas and African Americans, the teen pregnancy rates were even more alarming.

Among Hispanic teens, the pregnancy rates rose



Talking SEX On the BEACH

A SisterSong conference on South Beach

to 126.6 per 1000 in 2006 after decreasing by 26% (from 169.7 per 1,000 in 1992 to 124.9 in 2005). Among African American teens, the pregnancy rate increased to 126.3 in 2006, after declining by 45% (from 223.8 per 1,000 in 1990 to 122.7 in 2005).

Young people are not having crucial conversations with their parents about sex and sexuality.

While 89% of parents believe it's important to talk to their children about sex, many do not actually do so. In a survey in *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 39% of parents said they were uncomfortable; 37% thought someone else would do it better; and 32% thought it might encourage their children to have sex.

Young people are not aware of the risks of sexual behaviors

Another research study in the same journal revealed that only about 20% of university students

agreed that oral-genital contact constituted sex, yet the majority believed that penile-vaginal and penile-anal intercourse did (98% and 78%, respectively). Young people simply believe that oral sex is more acceptable and safer as a less-risky alternative to intercourse, despite the risk of transmitting HIV/AIDS, herpes, syphilis, gonorrhea, Chlamydia, human papillomavirus, and hepatitis A through oral sex.

We live in a sexually violent society.

15% of sexual assault and rape victims are under age 12
29% are age 12-17
44% are under age 18
80% are under age 30
12-34 are the highest risk years
Girls ages 16-19 are 4 times more likely than the general population to be victims of rape, attempted rape, or sexual assault
About 3% of American men — or 1 in 33 — have

experienced an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime.

In 2003, 1 in every ten rape victims was male.
2.78 million men in the U.S. have been victims of sexual assault or rape

It's not strangers only who threaten our children.

93% of young sexual assault victims know their attacker
34.2% of attackers were family members
58.7% were acquaintances
Only 7% of the perpetrators were strangers to the victim

There is a relationship between reproductive oppression and sexual violence.

1 in 10 rapes are reported
In 2004-2005, 64,080 women reported rape. According to medical reports, the incidence of pregnancy for one-time unprotected sexual intercourse is 5%. By applying the pregnancy rate to 64,080 women, experts estimate that there were 3,204 pregnancies as a result of rape during that period
An estimated 32,000 pregnancies result from rape each year, both reported and unreported.

Not talking about sex is deadly.

Every 9 1/2 minutes, someone in the U.S is infected with HIV.

Hispanics/Latinos comprise 15% of the U.S. population but accounted for 17% of all new HIV infections occurring in the United States in 2006

AIDS is the leading cause of death among Black women aged 25-34

One in 30 Black women will be diagnosed with HIV at some point in her lifetime

American Indians and Alaska Natives in 2005 ranked 3rd in rates of HIV/AIDS diagnosis, after Blacks (including African Americans) and Hispanics

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders account for approximately 1% of the total number of HIV/AIDS cases

Do you really need more reasons? These alarming statistics are only the beginning. What about older women of color? People with disabilities? Lesbians? Gender non-conforming? Men? Why have we made it safer for women to have an abortion than to talk about abortion? Why don't we support sexually active young people and young parents? Why are women made to feel ashamed of their sexuality and punished for their sexual activities? Why does our society use sexual images of young people to seduce consumers? Why are we not talking about healthy relationships at every age?

All of us have compelling reasons to talk about sex. What we don't have is many opportunities to do so collectively – in safe spaces – that affirm our human right to sex and sexuality. But according to the World Health Organization, sexual rights are human rights that include the right of all persons, free of coercion, discrimination and violence to:

- the highest attainable standard of health in relation to sexuality, including access to sexual and reproductive health care services;
- seek, receive and impart information in relation to sexuality;
- sexuality education;
- respect for bodily integrity;
- choice of partner;
- decide to be sexually active or not;
- consensual sexual relations;
- consensual marriage; and
- pursue a satisfying, safe and pleasurable sexual life.

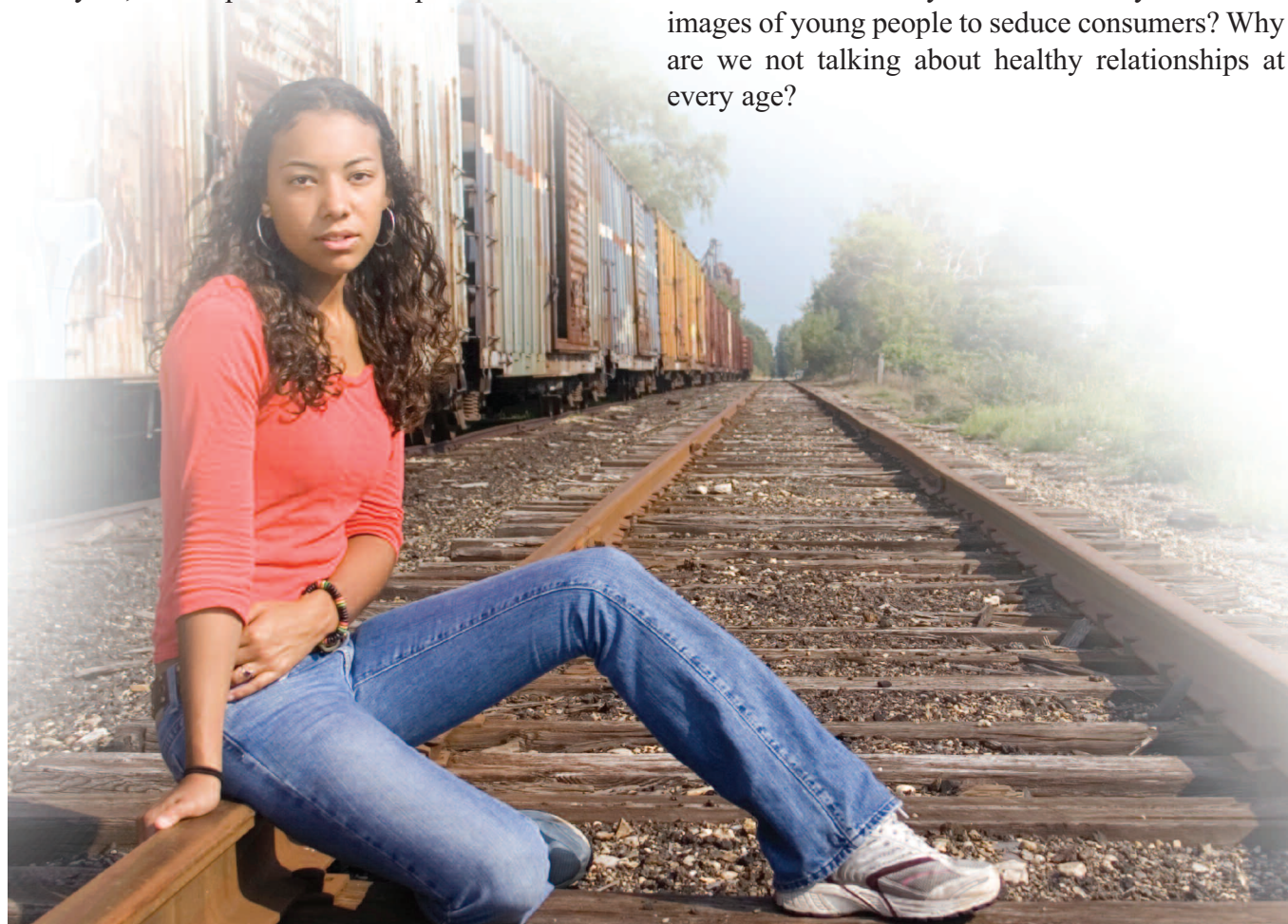
What Can We Do?

We need to come together to end the silence around sex and sexuality in communities of color. We need to be better advocates for sexuality education, sexual and reproductive health, and ensure the inclusion of LGBTQ people in these conversations. Sexual human rights should be included in all social justice movements. We just can't demand improved parenting in communities of color, we have to work together to achieve it. We must work with people of faith, community leaders, elected officials – everyone is needed in this conversation!

SisterSong will always work towards building healthy futures for ourselves, our families and our communities using the Reproductive Justice lens. Healthy futures start with healthy love.

As our guest writer on Indigenous Reproductive Justice issues, Jessica Yee says in her article in this issue, women of color need to be “strong, sexy, powerful, and unapologetic.” See you on the beach!

For Latinas and African Americans, the teen pregnancy rates were even more alarming.



Bringing Latinas Together for Social Justice

SisterSong Creates Southeastern Regional Encuentro

By Laura Jimenez, Deputy Coordinator, SisterSong



Each person shared ideas about how the new configuration would address organizational and individual needs.

Background

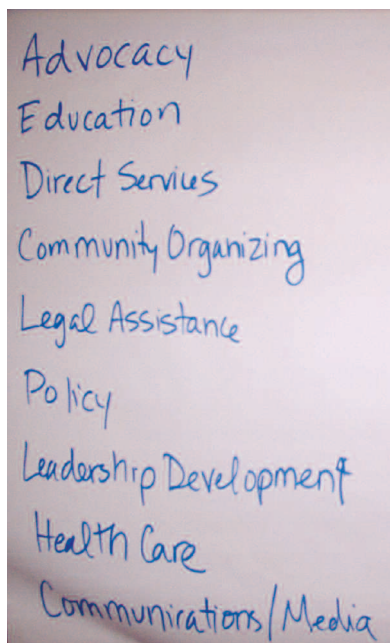
In early 2009, a team of multiracial Latinas in Atlanta began to plan and implement the first ever Southeastern Regional Encuentro to bring together Latinas living and working in the Southeastern United States. The purpose was to get to know each other, discuss the issues that we are addressing in our respective communities, and strategize about ways that we might be able to work together to build the leadership of Latinas working in the South. The idea for this gathering came not only from the desire to strategize on how to support each other's work regionally, but also from our own sense of isolation in doing this work in the Southeast. On September 30, 2009, 13 Latinas from Kentucky, North Carolina, Virginia, Washington DC, Florida, and Georgia met at SisterSong's Mother House in Atlanta, Georgia and discussed the possibilities of working collaboratively in our work and support each other as individual leaders in our communities. This was an event that led up to the Urban Initiative for Reproductive Health - Southeastern Regional Summit that was held the following two days.

What we know

The Southeastern region of the United States has experienced amazing growth in the Latino population in between the censuses taken in 1990 and 2000. In fact, of the 10 states in the country with the fastest growth in their Latino populations, seven were in the Southeast (North Carolina, Arkansas, Georgia,

Tennessee, South Carolina, Alabama, and Kentucky). Together, they registered an average growth rate of 308%, according to the Pew Hispanic Center's article, "The New Latino South: The Context and Consequences of Rapid Population Growth." Additionally, in some counties, the growth rate was even more astonishing, between 500% and 1000%. The communities that have experienced this rapid growth have experienced a corresponding increase in demand for support services, as well as advocacy in the areas of health care, immigration, education, and workers' rights. As this demand has grown, various organizations, associations, coalitions and other community groups have been created, and some of the national advocacy organizations have initiated projects or opened offices in cities in the South. However, many are led by men, and very few, if any, are dedicated to women's issues. Leadership development of both men and women in the communities is sorely needed. In addition, expanding partnerships between local law enforcement agencies and Immigration and Customs Enforcement has created a climate of fear and forced many of our community members into hiding,

causing health and safety hazards, in addition to the systemic separation of



SisterSong created a Southeastern Regional Reproductive Justice Encuentro for relationship building and information sharing.

families through detention and deportation. The women we brought together work in these same communities, organizing for human rights in the areas of immigrant rights, health care, violence against women, reproductive health, and workers' rights.

Our work and our commitments

At the Encuentro, the group affirmed our interest in forming a network which will use a human rights framework to work towards racial and gender justice within our communities. Our overarching goal would be to build the leadership of multiracial women of the Latin American Diaspora and we have identified the following as preliminary objectives for the network: 1) Relationship building and 2) Information sharing. During the Encuentro, we started by charting our own family migrations from other countries to our present location as a way recognizing our racial and ethnic backgrounds and providing a context for our collaborative work. We also contributed significant events and our own migrations to the South to a timeline of the Latina community in the Southeastern Region as a way of understanding the history that we have here in this region and how we have each contributed to that history. Additionally, as a way of planning outreach and potential leadership development activities, we collectively mapped out the region, noting where we work and what we work on, and including others doing similar work, but not present in the room. Finally, we spent time working in small groups to come up with shared ideas about how our new configuration would address our organizational and individual needs. We ended the day with commitments to provide informational resources and work towards regular annual gatherings.

What we have to say about it

"The Encuentro was the first opportunity for many of us to connect and bond with other Latinas working in the Southeast on social justice issues. It was at this Encuentro that I realized how few opportunities I have to bond with other women working on these issues. The fact that there were only a few of us was great! As a person who is relatively shy, I sometimes forget the value of getting to know personally the people with whom I work but realize how powerful it can be to bond on with other Latinas on a personal/different level."

"I came back to work re-energized and more committed to securing funding to continue doing reproductive justice work. I now have more resources and connections to others doing this work."

If you are a Latina living and working in the South and are interested in connecting with this network, or you know someone who might be interested, please contact Laura at laura@sistersong.net or 404-756-2680.



During the Encuentro, the group charted their own family migrations from other countries to our present location to provide a context to our collaborative work.

Loving and Living ACCORDING TO MY OWN SEXUAL FREEDOM

By M Adams

“When I get that feeliiinnn’, I want a sexual healin, *sexual*” – Marvin Gaye.

This well known line was the extent of advice I received on sex and sexuality while growing up. You may wonder, “Why was this it? Why wasn’t there more?” There were no formal cultural spaces for Black folks, collectively, to be sex positive and liberating in a healthy way—there is generally a struggle for cultural and physical spaces for Black folks in Wisconsin due to several oppressions. Given this dynamic, in sharing my experience, I am not intending to give blame to the Black community or culture. These are my personal experiences and I would like to use and appreciate them as a meaningful tool in understanding and thinking about sexual orientation and its subjects. So, here is my context.

My family and community were never direct about giving advice on healthy sexually intimate relationships; my knowledge of sex came from the media and too little well kept secrets from friends. Though the language and cultural rules of sexuality were not verbally overt, it was actively clear what sexual behaviors were acceptable and who the participants were. Sex was supposed to happen between cisgender—someone whose gender identity and expression line up with the biological sex they were assigned to at birth—men, and cisgender women, and they were supposed to be African American. There were also clear messages of gender in these sorts of messages, more specifically, who could be the aggressors of sex, and how would each person behave? Anything that didn’t fit inside the societal framework of these messages was and still is subject to social shaming. So where would people like me fit in? I needed answers.

I turned to the media. The media’s publicized ideas and discourse of gender and sexuality didn’t fit my community, and we were never the queer folks talked about in the pictures or ads. Hell, we were not even like the *successful* images of heterosexuals. So what did this mean for us, our relationships, and our families? Our other cultural strikes kept us from even being able to collectively or politically see and organize ourselves as sex positive and liberated peoples. I am gender non-conforming, but before someone even wonders, “Is that a boy or a girl?” I’m seen as Black. So how do we make sense of ourselves when models of gender and relationships between them, and sexuality, have been skewed in our African communities?

I am a Black, gender non-conforming, born “female” and woman loving. This is a lot to unpack and understand, but basically I was thought of as the tomboy who probably liked girls. I wasn’t able to articulate “gay” until my adolescence, but as a child I knew this was something I wasn’t supposed to be. Nor was I able to articulate my gender identity in a way that made sense given some of the cultural information I had received. For example, I went from calling myself a girl and arguing about why pink was such a great color, to defending all the masculine things that a girl can be (perhaps a seed of my early feminism) to not feeling like any of those things in ways. Assumptions about my sexual orientation came directly from this, my gender expression and development—the way I behaved contradicted what society expected from me, specifically how was I supposed to behave as a girl? I remember hearing, “Quit actin’ like a boy.” “You ain’t one of them, are ya?” And most notoriously, “You need a man!” What did all of this mean, and what did it mean for my development and my life?

So, I learned to look to find people like me, queer black folks, and I turned to people like Angela Davis, James Baldwin, and Bayard Rustin. This has helped me make sense of who I am. I understood that all of our liberations were linked, and that being gender non-conforming and woman loving were as integral to my identity as being Black. Here I found other cultural ways to think and develop myself such as being a womanist, same gender loving, and other ways to make sense of these very euro words juxtaposed on my Black body. There were some people who were all along supportive of me like my aunt, though she didn’t necessarily have the same language and perhaps tools to articulate and understand all of me and what society imposed on me, she’d create a safe cultural space in saying, “No matter what you still my baby.” She and others in the community who supported me were able to unite with me using the lens of liberation. She would later say, “We got so many strikes against us already, it don’t make sense to add mo’.”

Given my experiences and thoughts here are some ideas I would like for the readers to think about in terms of what it means for us as individuals, a community and the ways that we do work:

- 1) **Sexual activity does not necessarily equal sexual orientation, it is an identity**—there are several components to sexual orientation including emotional, mental, and perhaps spiritual implications depending on one’s cultural references.
- 2) **Gender is not biology**—it is socially constructed. This is particularly critical because there are so many other factors that tell us how to play our gender, including but not limited to race, class, and generation. It may look very different in some ways in different cultures, though some things may be salient and/or. As community leaders, how do we make a place for all folks of all and no genders in our work, while acknowledging that “women”, “men” are *real* political and personal identities, whatever they mean. How do we hold all of those things, while challenging and equalizing power?
- 3) **Gender does not imply sexual orientation**—based on a gender or anti-gender identity, you cannot determine whom a person is attracted to! There are tons of genders and sexual orientations, how do we make room for them while holding and grappling with the also *real* identities of straight, gay, lesbian, and others?



SisterSong NYC: *Making Impact*

SisterSong NYC started out as an idea. I'm an Indiana native who relocated to Brooklyn, NY and wanted to build community year-round with SisterSong members in my local community. I attended the 2009 SisterSong National Membership Meeting held in Washington, D.C. and reached out to Loretta by looking at ways to stay connected with membership throughout the year. While at the meeting, I met with sisters in New York City, which includes Brooklyn, Queens, Manhattan, Bronx, and Staten Island, strangely enough, many of the women I connected with were from Brooklyn.

The first meeting of SisterSong NYC was held December 6, 2009. We came together as an intergenerational local collective, to get to know each other, talk about what we do individually, and how we can organize our individual talents collectively under the SisterSong umbrella. We decided that since we are already invested in the work, we identified some of the needs such as convening women to engage in participatory policy through creating holistic wellness spaces for women that provide them with a Reproductive Justice vocabulary, as well as supportive spaces to translate the framework.

As we worked to establish our identity, we created a SisterSong NYC email sistersongnyc@gmail.com and Google group's [sistersong-nyc@googlegroups.com](https://groups.google.com/group/sistersong-nyc) as a method to share documents, events, and resources. This has proven to be the most effective way for us to stay in the loop. The group has participated and convened Reproductive Justice activities that span wellness, policy, advocacy, and mobilization.

Our participation in the Reproductive Justice community in New York



Jasmine Burnett,
Regional
Coordinator,
SisterSong NY

City has been evidenced in our participation in activities, individual and collective organizing, and community education and outreach. Members have attended events that reflect diversity in the boroughs that we reach and the topics, all of which are related to promoting healthy identities around race, sexuality, gender identity, and overall wellness for women of color.

To name a few, monthly RJ Happy Hour; Silent Choices movie screening and community discussions with Lynn Roberts and Faith Pennick (Brooklyn, NY); Daughter's of Oshun: An Institute for Black Women's Reproduction, Motherhood and Sexual Health, founder Taja Lindley. Our policy and legislative platforms have been geared toward the Comprehensive Sex Education Act which supports sex education in schools and we've partnered with NARAL-NYC in getting the Reproductive Health Act overturned. This guarantees a woman's right to control her reproductive health through ensuring that a woman will be able to have an abortion if her life is endangered, treats the regulation of abortion as an issue of public health and medical practice and guarantees the right to use or refuse contraception. Our wellness and mobilization includes working with local RJ service providers and organizations to support their understanding of RJ and providing workshops on sexual health and reproductive justice.

This is our pilot year as an organized group of SisterSong members in New York City. I believe we can say that our base and capacity has been strengthened by creating a space to convene our collective and individual talents and strengths as leaders fighting for the sexual and reproductive rights of women of color in New York City.

“Positive emotions are a better motivating factor than negative ones.”



Sexually Transmitted Beliefs:

The High Cost of Silence

We must affirm women's agency, sexuality, and radiant contributions.

By Heidi Williamson, National Advocacy Coordinator, SisterSong

In this summer's best film, "Inception," Leonardo DiCaprio's character opens this amazing film with a question, "What is the most resilient parasite?" The answer: "An idea. A single idea from the human brain...can transform the world and rewrite all the rules." It raised a critical question, not only about ideas, but how ideas survive and grow. At the end of the day our beliefs, our ideas, and ultimately our actions are based on raw, unfiltered emotions that are attached to intimate relationships and experiences in our subconscious.

Without over thinking the film, I was compelled to explore this idea in a realm of sex and sexuality. In the United States, images of sex are everywhere - movies, TV, bus stops, clubs, news, and colleges - yet it is still too taboo to discuss publicly, either with teens on the verge of discovering their bodies or adults on the cusps of parenthood, or grandparenthood, for that matter. How is that? It is simultaneously the object of our affection and ire of darkest yearnings. Sex and sexuality are simultaneously misunderstood and rejected, but desired and unattainable.

Yet the idea that the general public holds, is driven by, guilty by, and defaults to is simple and familiar. Sex outside a hetero-normative marriage equates to promiscuity (immorality, deviant, not-normal behavior).

You may be thinking, "That is not what I think/believe/fear. I am a Reproductive Justice activist!" Ok. But the reality is you don't need to believe in such ideas if your silence bolsters those who hold this value to be true. Truth is, many of us embolden the people who do hold this value by our silence or compromising "or" offer solutions, that work within the accepted 'norm' such as, mirroring either hetero-normative standards (monogamous relationship between two partners, kids, dogs, mortgage, and debt) or marriage (religious-legal validation). And as we saw with health care, compromises got women of color almost everything we never wanted.

My point speaks to our over-sexualization of almost everyone for commercial purposes

while a seemingly oppositional thinking pattern drives almost every family, church, school, legislature, and yes, our progressive leadership...hint, hint.

So the question is, "What do beliefs like this really cost us?" Or better stated, "What does not talking about positive sex, sexuality, and subsequent pleasure cost women of color and our communities?"

The health care disparities in our communities tell a specific story about costs in the physical sense. We see women suffering or dying because we received sub-standard health care, limited education, or limited-to-no-justice for the social needs in our lives. Our religious institutions in communities of color compound our medical disenfranchisement by shaming women. These realities impact not only how we see ourselves and our sexuality, but how we teach our children and communities. In policy, draconian measures are introduced to further exploit our communities on both the federal and state level by those who claim they have a desire to protect women and children. In the end they mean to protect us from ourselves...our bodies, our choices, our humanity.

It becomes a sexually transmitted idea that drives our actions and our ability to liberate ourselves. And while advocates, lobbyists, and organizers defend women by defeating punitive legislation, we perpetually fall back into the conservative messaging and logic to make our case, further validating their belief system and indirectly silencing our own.

I am declaring today that the cost of sexually transmitted silence is too high. And that identifying the problem is not enough. We must identify messages for ourselves and affirm women's agency, sexuality, and radiant contributions. We must be the conscientious and knowledgeable speakers on these subjects to the world or we will be spoken for.

The movie "Inception" had another concept that I must share. "Positive emotions are a better motivating factor than negative ones." And I feel that way about SEX. Let's Talk about it, **be** about it, and transmit healthy ideas to our sisters, daughters, and communities concerning it. But the best message starts FIRST from within.



BLACK WOMEN FOR REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE NEEDS YOUR HELP!!!

Black Women for Reproductive Justice (BWRJ) runs the only abortion fund in the country founded by and for Black women. While our funding is available to all eligible women, Black women represent the majority of our clients. This has been an especially challenging period for BWRJ, as our funds have almost been depleted to help women get the safe abortions they need. I am asking for your financial support to help us continue funding women.

The Hyde Amendment prohibits the use of public funds for abortion only in cases of rape, incest, or life of the woman. Our phone has been literally ringing off the hook with calls from women and girls needing as much as \$6,800 to obtain a safe abortion. We normally receive between 20-30 calls per month. On average, BWRJ is able to help with \$100-\$150 towards the cost of the abortion. Over the past year, that number has almost doubled with women needing upwards of \$200. The women who call us have already exhausted every possible resource and still are unable to raise the money they need. The average cost of a first trimester abortion in Illinois is \$400. Raising this amount is next to impossible for a woman trying to survive off a low-waged job or a meager amount of public assistance. Many of the women who call have no income at all.

The current economic climate has had a devastating impact on low-income women, especially women of color. Far too many have fell victim to employer downsizing and are struggling to keep a roof over their head and food on the table. Forcing a woman with little to no income to put her family's housing at risk or take food off of her table to get an abortion is one of the worst kinds of human degradation. The women who call BWRJ do not make the decision to terminate a pregnancy lightly. They have weighed all the possibilities and arrived at the decision that is the best one for themselves and their families. BWRJ works to support a woman in that decision by making it financially possible.

This past summer, we have received almost 150 calls from women and girls looking to us as their last hope. Their stories are heart wrenching. Consider the following women and girls:

Anita, 23 years old, with three children ages 2, 6, and 4. She had no income, was 5 weeks pregnant, and needed \$246.

Odessa, 18 years old, was a college freshman who had been gang raped by a fraternity. She was 25 weeks pregnant and could not obtain an abortion in Illinois because she was past the legal point of viability (the point at which she could legally get an abortion in Illinois). Odessa and her mother were forced to travel to Nebraska and needed \$6,800 for the abortion, plus money for transportation and housing.

LaTeshia, 33 years old, had two children ages 4 and 2. She became pregnant as a result of rape. LaTeshia was 7 weeks pregnant and needed \$400 for her abortion. Recently laid-off, she could only come up with \$100.

Cheryl, 27 years old, had two children ages 6 and 3. They were homeless, living from one house to another. Cheryl was 9 weeks pregnant and needed \$400. She barely had money to provide food for her children.

For the first time in my 18+ years working in the reproductive health, rights, and justice movement, I was brought to tears over **14 year-old Brianna's story**. Her mother, Clarissa, called us desperate and frustrated. She had just found out that Brianna was pregnant the previous day. Thinking that she could still legally get an abortion in Illinois, she found out that Brianna was too far along. Continuing the pregnancy was out of the question because Clarissa, only 28 years old, already had eight children! Brianna was the oldest and the youngest was only two months old. Working with another fund, we were able to find a clinic in Atlanta who would perform the abortion for almost \$3,800. They also needed plane tickets, a hotel room for two nights, and money for meals.

Thanks to the generous support and hospitality of SisterSong, based in Atlanta, Brianna and Clarissa received a warm welcome, transportation to and from the clinic, and money for meals. These are just some of the calls we have had over the past three months.

Unfortunately, the calls and circumstances don't get any better, only worse.

Our work at BWRJ is truly working in the trenches. We are deeply rooted in the communities that we serve. While we also do health education and policy/advocacy work, ensuring that women have access to the funding they need for safe abortions is an important piece of our work. That's why your financial gift can make a world of difference.

I know we are all bombarded by requests for worthy causes, but before you turn the page, stop for a moment. Think about what it would feel like to be pregnant and want an abortion, but be unable to get one because you could not pay for it. What would it mean to have to risk your housing, eat less food for the month, or forgo paying the light or heating bill? How would you manage? I know firsthand what that feels like having become pregnant at 12 years old, the year after the Hyde Amendment was passed. I watched my mother do all of the above. We struggled for months because she took money from the rent and other bills to pay for my abortion. My mother was committed to making sure her daughter got a fair chance at life.

Won't you please help us give the women who call us the money they need?

I know you believe as I do that every woman and girl deserves another chance, another opportunity. No one should be forced to carry an unwanted pregnancy to term. I'm asking you to dig deep and give your best gift. Be as generous as you possibly can. Every amount you give helps a woman or girl get closer to the amount she needs to get a safe abortion and another chance.

Many thanks in advance for your generous contribution.

In Solidarity,

Toni M. Bond Leonard, President/CEO
<http://www.bwrj.org>

Native +
SEX =

**strong,
SEXY,
powerful
and unapologetic**

By Jessica Yee
Founder, Native Youth Sexual Health Network

I'm going to tell you something.

I'm proud to be Native/Aboriginal/First Nations/Indigenous.

I'm proud not only because I have a legacy of ancestors who have stood up against some of the truest tests of time so that this great culture of ours still remains today, but because I need look no further *than in my own culture* to do the work that I've wanted to do my entire life: talk about sex!

Before the invention of clinics, *anatomy* textbooks, or even this fantastic organization, **my people were TALKING ABOUT SEX. We were practicing sexual education, living as feminists, and utilizing reproductive justice to live as a healthy, strong, autonomous nation.**

We might not have called it sexual health, or labeled it with any sort of clinicized connotation, but we sure as hell have always believed in our rights over our own bodies, and how foundational that is to our continued existence.

I mean, what do people really think we used to do? *Wait* for the colonizers to come and teach us about sex?!

You would think, however, that we would get the recognition for starting the concepts and frameworks that many non-Native academic movers and shakers have been internationally hailed for, but alas, we do not. In fact, my people have been so forcibly removed from practicing our authentic ways that a lot of us don't even want to identify with any of our former sex-positive existence.

It's a sad but true reality that defines the work I do each and every day, that I'm not about to give up on doing, no matter how much people either cannot remember or want to wilfully forget, both in and out of my community.

Sex was upheld in our culture as not only a sacred and powerful part of human life, but as a very normal part of it, too. Sexual education began in the ancient huts, longhouses, and teepees of our ancestors, where young people would learn from selected family or community members all about their body, how to care for it, and the inviolability of their sex. Many of our ancestral teachings show us that many of our societies were matriarchal and this included healthy, educated decisions over matters of childbearing and sexuality. We have different ceremonies and traditions that we've been practicing for centuries to back this up.

Our long history of genocidal oppression whether through colonization, Christianization, residential/mission/boarding schools, or just blatant *racism* has drastically severed the ties where traditionally we might have received the knowledge that would enable us to make informed choices about our sexual health and relationships. The fact is that many of our communities are reluctant to go anywhere near the topic of sexual health because it is now viewed as "dirty", "wrong", or a "Whiteman's thing."

We have also carried a long history of being sexually exploited; which can be seen anywhere from the early Pocahontas and Squaw days, right up until the modern over-sexualization of "easy" Native women, which still permeates much of the media.

But things were different for me. As a young Mohawk woman, I was fortunate enough to be raised in a family where I received these teachings about the power of my sexuality; my mother, grandmother, and aunts were always the first to answer any questions I had about sex. I was encouraged to

get as much information as I could to protect myself, and it was not until later on in my life did I really draw on the connection between my culture and how much it related to the very principals of healthy sexuality.

I founded the Native Youth Sexual Health Network three years ago. Being involved in sexual and reproductive health and justice affirms that we are now taking back what has been so harshly exploited, and letting it out on our own terms. I believe it is all of our responsibilities to put it out there as it once was: strong, sexy, powerful, and unapologetic.

My work has blessed me with diverse opportunities to meet amazing youth from coast-to-coast — from leading task forces in South Dakota to protect Native women's reproductive rights to busting sex myths in Inuvik, Northwest Territories and training teachers college students on the essentials of culturally competent, peer-based sexual education.

Utilizing cultural competency in this work means using what we already have in our culture to empower our youth to lead healthy, strong lives. "SEX" has become such a dirty word in our communities, when, in fact, it is the foundation of all humanity and is related to every social issue on some level. The time has come to bring it back to the basics and strengthen our identities from the ground up. As I have listened to my grandmothers explain to me, sex used to be sacred and even upheld as an enjoyable part of our life as Indigenous people.

So what is our reality today? Indigenous youth are among the fastest growing populations across North America. At 15 to 24 years, we are the most impacted by sexual violence, as well as having some of the highest rate of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and so-called "teen pregnancy" Culturally-insensitive, "one-size-fits all," or nonexistent sexuality education programs do not use relevant traditional knowledge in teaching Native youth about their own bodies. These programs fail to equip youth to set and respect limits when it comes to relationships and conflict, or to give them the language to report sexual violence when it occurs.

At the Native Youth Sexual Health Network, we strongly encourage youth to self-determine their rights over their own bodies and spaces by understanding

their inherent connection to both land and spirituality. It is then that empowerment, both self and social, can happen. There is so much knowledge and strength to draw on in our past that is directly related to what we now term as "healthy sexuality." We must become the stewards of the information going out about us, and not allow anybody to take claim on what our people actually started.

The truth is that the positive strides being made far outweigh the negative in our First Nations communities, and we need to celebrate our achievements as much as we possibly can. In generic sexual health campaigns, I often hear the slogan "Respect Yourself, Protect Yourself" — which I have always found to be incomplete. These programs fail to equip youth to set and respect limits when it comes to relationships and conflict, or to give them the language to report sexual violence when it occurs.

Get in touch with Jessica Yee at the Native Youth Sexual Health Network website: <http://nativeyouthsexualhealth.com/>.





Thoughts About Sex-Selective Abortion LEGISLATION

By Generations Ahead

This year has brought a wave of legislation aimed at banning sex-selective abortion, sometimes in combination with bans on “race selection.” The political and media circus around the racial issues and the “Black Children are an Endangered Species” billboard campaign in Georgia have been the main event lately, but it is worth understanding the specific issues around sex-selective abortion.

“Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass Prenatal Nondiscrimination Act of 2009,” which is Rep. Trent Franks’ (R-AZ) proposed legislation to ban sex-selective and “race-selective” abortions.

Sex-selective abortion occurs when a pregnancy is terminated because of the sex of the fetus. While no medical test can determine the race of a fetus, the sex of a fetus may be determined by ultrasound or genetic testing such as amniocentesis. While some evidence suggests that sex selective abortions do occur in the United States, little is known about how often they occur, and whether boy or girl children are more likely to be preferred and by whom.

Many reproductive health, rights, and justice advocates find the idea of sex-selective abortion troubling. From Generations Ahead’s perspective, the use of sex selection to have a child of the sex the parent or parents prefer seems inexorably linked to gendered expectations about what it means to have—or be—a boy or a girl. Such practices may reinforce gender discrimination and the preference for one gender, as well as a belief that sex and gender exist only in two forms, male and female, rejecting the idea that gender is fluid.

However, we believe our best goal is to discourage the practice of sex selection while protecting access to abortion and reproductive autonomy. Efforts to ban sex-selective abortion are a threat, plain, and simple. Conservative anti-abortion groups in the United States are increasingly raising the specter of sex selection as a wedge issue to attempt to divide progressive communities. At the federal level is the “Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass Prenatal Nondiscrimination Act of 2009,” which is Rep. Trent Franks’ (R-AZ) proposed legislation to ban sex-selective and “race-selective” abortions. State legislators have also introduced similar legislation to ban such abortions in many states.

Legislators proposing these bills have reached out to the ethnic communities most affected by sex selection and have used the language of gender equality, human rights, and preventing violence against women. State legislation presents a real political dilemma: how to oppose gender and race discrimination without aligning with explicitly anti-abortion legislators with no track record on supporting the health and well-being of women and communities of color.

When Representative Franks first introduced the Susan B. Anthony Prenatal Nondiscrimination Act,

Generations Ahead, SisterSong, and National Asian Pacific American Women’s Organization (NAPAWF) organized a response effort that included dozens of organizations. Many groups feared that taking a position on sex selection would undermine women’s reproductive choices and identified the need for additional resources to help advocates understand the issue and be prepared for future legislative battles. When Georgia legislators introduced their own sex- and race-selective abortion legislation, accompanied by the billboard campaign, it became clear that race and sex would be closely interconnected in these fights.

While claiming to be proponents of civil rights, racial and gender equality, proponents of the legislation are relying on racist stereotypes to suggest that Black women are either so ignorant that they can be solicited to get abortions against their wills or so lacking in humanity as to be complicit in the genocide of their own people. And anti-choice advocates are activating different racist stereotypes with regards to Asian women – that they are submissive, obedient victims of their families and being coerced into abortions, or that they are so lacking in humanity to be complicit in infanticide and girl killing.

This issue has created an uncomfortable moment for the reproductive health, rights, and justice movements. The critical race and gender equality issues we have raised are now being raised by anti-choice advocates, who mean to use these issues against us. However, this is an opportunity for reproductive health, rights and justice groups to work together to address health disparities, fight racism and sexism, and ensure the right and access to abortion for all women.

In the coming months, we will all be called upon to continue to wrestle with important questions about sex and gender discrimination and stereotypes, reproductive autonomy, and the ethics and wisdom of parents attempting to choose children with specific characteristics. We can’t do it without building strong relationships within our own movements and with other movements – those fighting for women’s rights, racial justice, human rights, and against violence against women. It is an opportunity for leadership in building new alliances and developing inclusive messages and strategies as we face this political challenge together.

Discussions on **SEX AND SEXUALITY** as Young Somali Women

By Farhiya Ahmed,
Staff Assistant, SisterSong

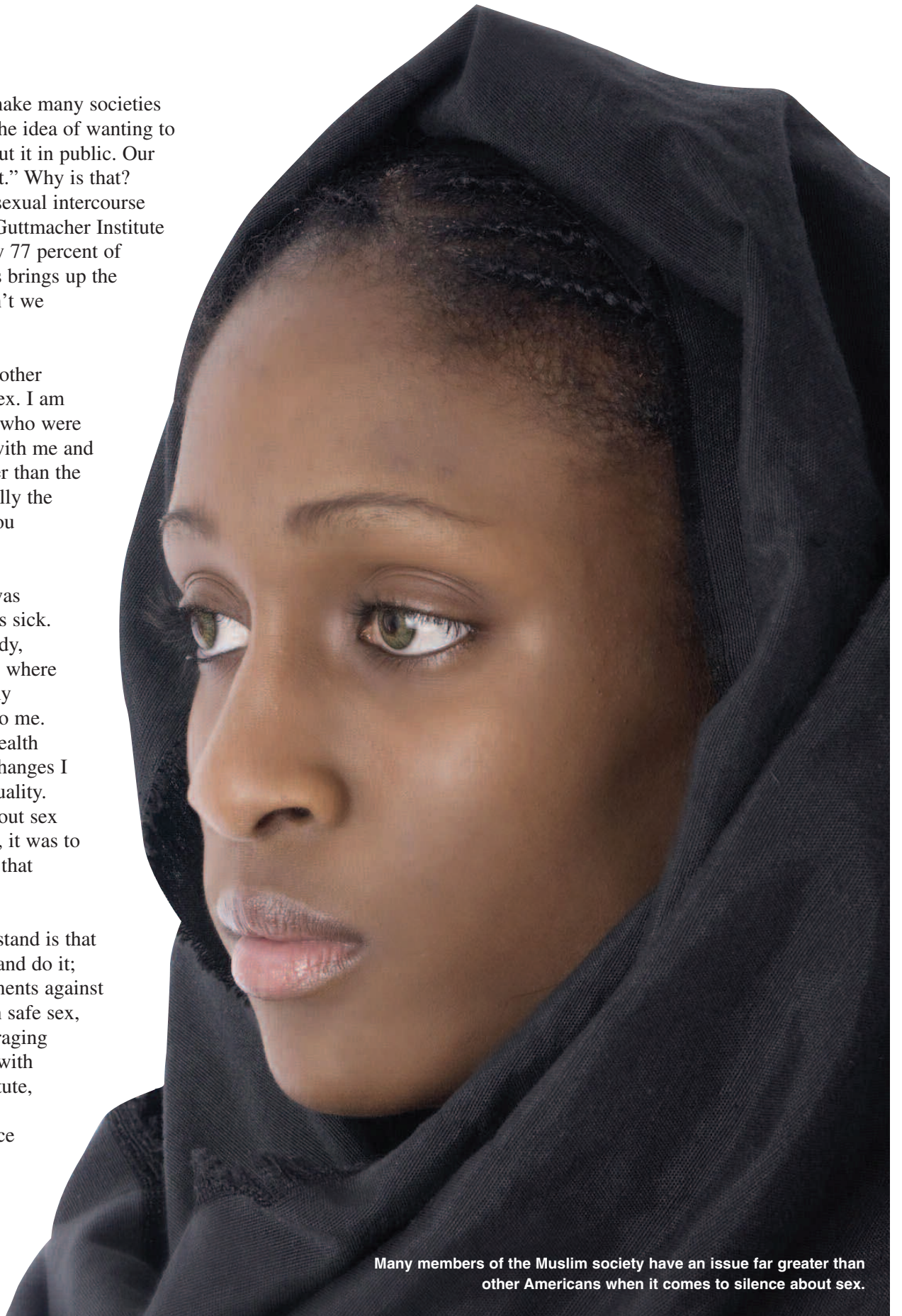
Why does the topic or discussion of sexuality make many societies fearful? We have put such a huge stigma on the idea of wanting to explore our sexuality or even simply talk about it in public. Our society is known for being “sex saturated and sex silent.” Why is that? Statistics say, “The average American first engages in sexual intercourse around the ages of 16 and 17.” Furthermore, the Alan Guttmacher Institute reports that by the time we reach the age of 19, roughly 77 percent of women and 85 percent of men are sexually active. This brings up the thought, “if we are comfortable doing it, then why aren’t we comfortable talking about it?”

My Muslim society has an issue far greater than other Americans when it comes to how silent we are about sex. I am considered a 1.5 generation American and my parents, who were born and raised in Somalia, have never discussed sex with me and my siblings. It is taboo to discuss sex with anyone other than the doctor, and even then it’s embarrassing. This is especially the case for women; knowing anything about sex makes you promiscuous and loose.

When I was 12 years old I got my period and I was terrified. I really thought that I hurt myself or that I was sick. When I finally shared what was happening with my body, my mother just brushed me off and then directed me to where I could get a pad. I was shocked and a little hurt that my mother was not concerned about what was happening to me. Since my mother wouldn’t allow me to participate in health class where I could have been better prepared for the changes I would be experiencing, I had to educate myself on sexuality. After that, my mother and I would have discussions about sex and she was always shocked. If the topic ever came up, it was to inform me to be aware about and live my life in a way that protects me against sexual assault.

The thing that parents of all cultures don’t understand is that learning about sex does not give people the idea to go and do it; they already have those ideas. “One of the major arguments against comprehensive sex education is that the information on safe sex, STDs and pregnancy will be counterproductive, encouraging young people to become promiscuous and experiment with sexual activity,” yet, according to the Guttmacher Institute, “evidence shows that comprehensive sex education programs that provide information about both abstinence and contraception can help delay the onset of sexual activity among teens; reduce their number of sexual partners; and increase contraceptive use when they become sexually active.”

Many members of the Muslim society have an issue far greater than other Americans when it comes to silence about sex.



Black Women Make News in HIV & STI Prevention

By Dázon Dixon Diallo, MPH
Founder/President, SisterLove Inc.

This past summer, two distinct studies revealed positive results for effective prevention of HIV and Sexually Transmitted Infections. Both studies were conducted by researchers of color, in partnership with Black women as participants.

Proof of Concept Proven! The combined moods of anticipation and hope hung thick over the crowds packed into the Plenary Hall, the Overflow Room and on the floors outside the doors of both rooms of the convention center. Thousands of HIV/AIDS researchers, providers, advocates, activists and affected people seemed to be holding their collective breath as the husband-wife research team Drs. Salim and Quarriasha Abdool Salim, director and associate director of the Centre for AIDS Programme of Research in South Africa (CAPRISA), presented the long-awaited results of the first successful microbicide trial.



Healthy Love Parties may be on their way to your community soon.

On July 20, 2010 at the International AIDS Conference in Vienna, the world learned that a gel with 1% Tenofovir (anti-retroviral drug used by people with HIV) used topically inside the vagina, was safe for use and showed protection against HIV infection and genital Herpes (HSV2). Spontaneously, in an action that many have noted as unprecedented, the audiences jumped to their feet clapping and shouting in ovation to the positive trial results. The CAPRISA 004 study, showed that with moderate adherence to using the gel before and after sexual intercourse, women in South Africa demonstrated a 39% effectiveness rate for the gel, and up to 54% protection in women who were highly adherent to its use. The trial also showed that women were protected against HSV2 by as much as 51%. There are many details to the study that included 889 women in two communities, one rural and one urban in the greater Cape Town Municipality. A key striking characteristic of this clinical trial, is the community engagement approach taken by the research team, which many believe resulted in helping maintain a 95% retention rate of participation. Most importantly, the trial showed that a microbicide can work in protecting some of the most vulnerable women from contracting HIV, and that future studies are warranted.

According to Dr. Salim “Slim” Abdool Karim, “For every 20 women using the gel, we’ve prevented one HIV infection.” He goes on to say, “That’s a pretty good rate of return. If we implement this gel and see at a community level a similar profile of efficacy, we would prevent about 1.3 million HIV infections over 20 years in South Africa alone.” While microbicides advocates and skeptics are probing the deeper meaning of the outcomes of the CAPRISA trial, women’s human rights advocates are cautioning the enthusiasts to not expect this medical intervention to be the key to ending women’s and girls’ inequality and increased vulnerability to HIV and STI’s. Much more discussion and debate are sure to help advance the proof of concept of “women’s prevention in women’s hands,” and to re-energize the prevention advocacy community, along with reproductive justice and human rights activists, to fight that much harder for the greater sums of money and resources that future studies will require.

Healthy Loving is Healthy Living! Over 22 years ago, a group of women of color that I led in Atlanta, Georgia created a self-help support and education session to help Black women learn about HIV, AIDS and other Sexually Transmitted Infections. The workshop, full of interactive exercises and up-to-date information, was named the “Healthy Love Party,” (HLP) and was implemented in familiar and personal venues all over town – homes, neighborhood centers, churches, college campuses, shelters, and jails. This “home-grown” prevention intervention and reproductive justice organization became the hallmark program of SisterLove, Inc., a founding member of SisterSong.

The HLP has always been wildly popular, and anecdotally, the creators and implementers knew that it was effective. We knew that providing education on HIV and STI prevention with a rights-based approach to women’s sexuality in a sex-positive atmosphere would enable women to focus on themselves and invest differently in their sexual decision making. We just didn’t know how to prove that it was effective. In 2004, SisterLove was awarded a grant by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to conduct an evaluation study to demonstrate the HLP’s innovation and effectiveness in changing risk behaviors associated with HIV and other Sexually Transmitted Infections.



Full of interactive exercises and up-to-date information, signature Healthy Love Parties are a two-decade hallmark for SisterLove.

Between 2006 and 2009, SisterLove along with partners at the CDC and Clark Atlanta University, conducted a randomized control trial with over 300 Black women participants, and compared the HLP with a basic HIV 101 workshop session. The study included participation in one Healthy Love Party, with follow-up interviews and assessments at 3- and 6-month intervals. We retained an average of 75% participation and worked with intact social groups of women – dorm mates, sororities, civic and social clubs, and church groups. The outcomes of the study showed that the Healthy Love Party is significantly more effective than the HIV 101 sessions in achieving the following behavior changes: increase in condom use with any male partner and primary male partner during vaginal sex; increase in condom use at last sex with primary male partner; increased rates of HIV testing and receiving results.

The HLP also demonstrated the effect of improving HIV knowledge, attitudes toward condoms, and intentions to use condoms. The outcomes of the study were published in the peer review journal AIDS & Behavior, and the Healthy Love Party was approved and included in the CDC’s National Compendium of Evidence-based HIV Prevention Programs that Work. This is a significant accomplishment for a grassroots women of color organization, and helps SisterLove build capacity to conduct community-based participatory research. We also now have the next steps to package and disseminate the Healthy Love Party to other communities of women interested in women of color created interventions for HIV and STI prevention. For more information on the Healthy Love Party, visit www.sisterlove.org.

Resources on HIV Prevention Research for Women

Centre for AIDS Programme of Research in South Africa (CAPRISA) www.caprisa.org

HIV Prevention Trials Network (HPTN) www.hptn.org

Microbicides Trials Network www.mtnstopshiv.org

Global Campaign for Microbicides (GCM) www.global-campaign.org

AIDS Vaccine Advocacy Coalition (AVAC) www.avac.org

HIV Vaccines and Microbicides Resource Tracking Working Group www.hivresourcetracking.org

SisterLove, Inc. www.sisterlove.org



Using the Tenofovir gel before and after sexual intercourse demonstrated a 39% effectiveness rate in women tested in South Africa.

Let's Talk About Sex: Policy Implications



In the middle of SisterSong's 2009 National Membership Meeting hundreds of women were quickly mobilized to visit legislative offices at the Capitol during the Stupak-Pitts hearings, while reproductive justice leaders spoke at a later press conference.

By Heidi Williamson,
SisterSong National Policy Coordinator

Earlier this year a close friend called me to share one of her “notable moments in child rearing.” Her four-year-old son was channel surfing as he normally does on a Sunday afternoon and stopped, for reasons unbeknownst to her, on the Discovery Channel. Perhaps the woman in the mini-pool who wasn’t swimming caught his attention or maybe the mother-to-be’s belly was so enormous he needed to investigate. At any rate, his mother asks him what he is watching. He shrugs his shoulders to gesture that he is unsure. She waits a few more minutes then asks him, “Are you sure you want to watch this?” Without turning his head away from the television, he nods yes. After a few more minutes, the mother on screen delivers her child, and the narrator discusses the highlights of the delivery. Suddenly, according to my friend, her son goes up to the screen just as the camera does a close-up of the baby. He turns his head sideways, so that the TV is in his peripheral view and begins opening his mouth to see how wide his jaws will open. His mother, attempting not to laugh, asks him what he is doing. His reply: “How did that lady swallow that baby so it would end up in her stomach?” Can you say: Teachable moment?

And while many of us would not knowingly begrudge a four-year-old for having a quizzical moment, the sad reality is there are far too many adults walking around with his limited understanding of sex, sexuality, and childbirth only to be penalized, silenced and shamed. The primary difference between the four-year-old and the adult: The child’s mind has not been clouded by preconceived notions of appropriateness, religious retribution, or a violation of trust from his parents. This makes his question about conception one of fact and clarity, and the response is just that – factual and clear - for the purposes of understanding.

In the United States, both sex and sexuality are both present and elusive at the same time. Every television show, whether on cable or not, incorporates it into its plot. Virtually every advertisement from alcohol to insurance and clothing utilizes it to increase the bottom line. And every music video embraces it for creative purposes. Yet speaking about it openly and honestly to inform, clarify, or alleviate shame and fear remains taboo in virtually every institution – religious, educational, and legislative. No wonder kids, parents, and advocates are confused by the complexity of the subject. Most go home each night sighing deeply with relief because he or she maintained his or her individual dignity. Yes, one mother or father may have avoided a hard conversation about sex, but collectively the immediate community and public at large has paid a price, particularly in communities of color. That price is the message that sex, while on everyone’s mind, is mindlessly evil and its pleasure worthy of only select few – the married, the Christian, the wealthy, the insured. And we see this undeniably when it comes to sex and *Policy*.

Every policy debate contains its unique set of proponents and opposition. Each advocate seeking to pass or defeat legislation seeks to understand the opposing point of view and neutralize it. There are few issues that provoke more fear and anger on both sides than sex – the need to control it, learn about it (or prohibit learning about it), or use of all mechanisms to mitigate its impact (birth control, abortion, and birthing options). While advocates for comprehensive and progressive reform couch *sex* in digestible terms like “reproductive health” and “reproductive rights”, legislators hear SEX.

On the national level, everyone saw sex paralysis with the health care reform debates. Its historic passage ensured future new health care for more than 12 million women in the United States. Insofar as eligibility levels, educational funding, and family planning access, the Democrats were on one accord, until Nelson and Stupak rang the alarm proclaiming that ‘abortion coverage was not health care’. They threatened to sabotage health care reform if coverage for this legal and medical procedure was not left out of the final bill. And at the end of the day, though President Obama and the Democratic leadership claimed to support abortion rights, abortion coverage was left out of health care reform, leaving poor women and women of color rendered invisible yet again. National health care reform re-affirmed that federal funds will not be used for abortion services; women on Medicaid and those who become eligible will not be able to use their coverage for abortion services in most cases; no federal subsidies can be used toward abortion coverage in any private health insurance plans purchased through insurance exchanges; states could prohibit abortion coverage in health insurance plans offered in a new insurance exchange that will become available in 2014; and, in states where abortion is allowed in the exchanges, women will have to send in two checks – one for abortion coverage and one for everything else.¹

The passage of health care reform is a triumph on the national level, yet states across the country are experiencing blowback on virtually every level of local government. Whether a conservative Insurance Commissioner urges his or her respective legislature and attorney general to opt out of “Obamacare” or state legislatures seek to minimize the reproductive health and rights of the poor and women of color of their own volition, the policy implications for the most vulnerable remain at risk. As with national health care, state legislators hear ‘reproductive health and rights’ as catch phrases for sex and abortion. Ultimately, women, teens, and girls pay the price with fear and shame regarding the human right to sex and sexuality. According to NARAL Pro-Choice America’s 2009 *Report Card*, the U.S has a nationwide grade of “D” for pro-choice, pro-woman legislation. **Progress** for many women is defined only as “low-income women’s access to family planning” and “contraceptive equity”. And other issues like statewide comprehensive sex education for minors and teens, the repeal of the various limitations to abortion access, the increase of access that young women have to education and reproductive health services, and the elimination of parental notification for teens seeking abortion services continue to be yearly battle for many states.

With more than half of all fifty states ranking as either a “D” or an “F”², the South remains a critical factor in how progressive legislation moved on both the state and national level. Historically, Southern conservatives aren’t shy about

impeding progressive legislation, but the threats that arose after the passage of health care reform had positioned states like Georgia, Missouri, Mississippi, and Tennessee as breeding grounds not just for conservatives, but for conservatives of color who seek to undermine the successes of both the Civil Rights and Reproductive Justice Movements. Since 2009 more than seven states have seen bills prohibiting race and sex-selected abortions. Targeting women of color, namely African American and Asian Pacific Islanders, conservatives of color have attempted to exploit wedges and prejudices, particularly regarding women and abortion, among the progressive base and within the ethnicities themselves. These bills act as silver bullets for conservatives who concurrently promote agendas restricting comprehensive sex education for teens as well as opposing the expansion of services like Medicaid for poor women and women of color.

As advocates defend reproductive justice in policy attempts to metabolize increasing health disparities with conservative legislatures, many are finding refuge at the local level. County health departments, churches, high schools, school boards, citywide coalitions and parent-teacher alliances across the country are enacting progressive change on the local level, for the purpose of saving and enhancing the lives of

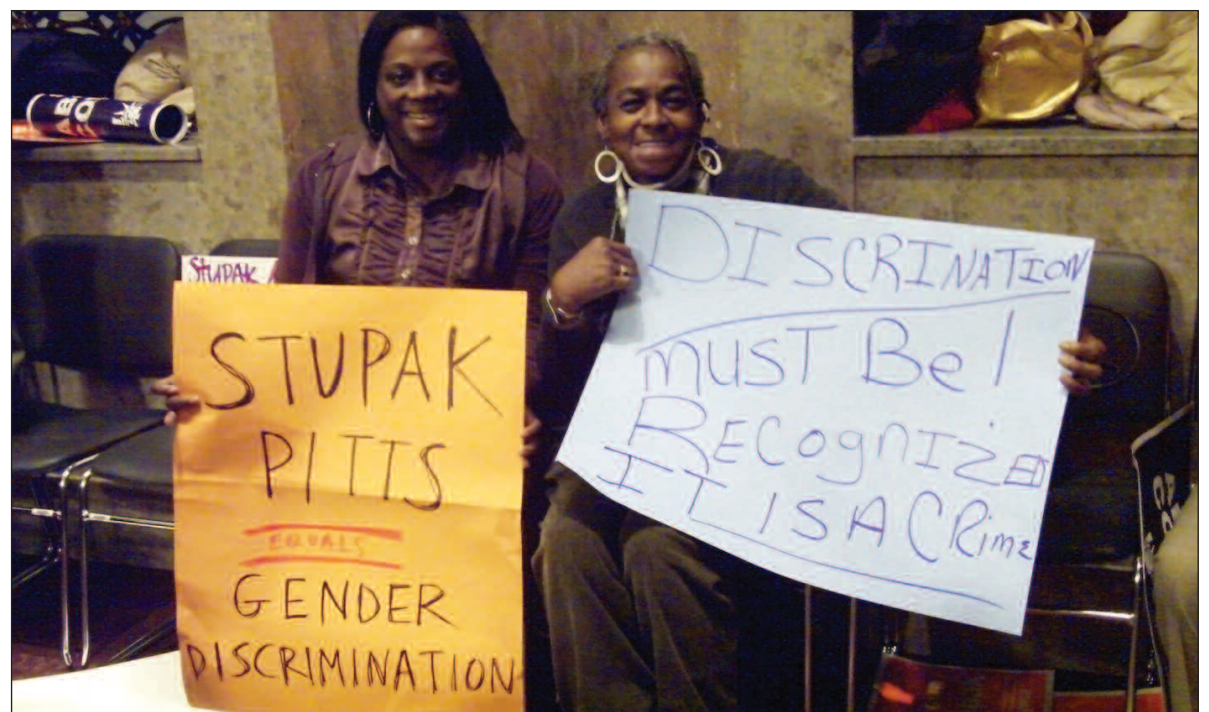
women, children, and teens. But affirming one’s right to sex and sexuality remain a touchy subject. Ultimately, though it is a charge and responsibility. One that women of color, teens, and citizens must fulfill to make laws at every level reflect our lived experience and protect the values that best support our communities.

¹ Raising Women’s Voices, Health Reform and Reproductive Health: Positive and Negative Effects, March 30, 2010.

² NARAL Pro-Choice America Foundation, 2010 Report Card on Women’s Reproductive Rights, November 20, 2010



During the SisterSong 2009 National Membership Meeting in DC, SisterSong members from Louisiana met with their legislators describing the need for reproductive health care coverage.



SisterSong led a Southern delegation to DC last winter to tell legislators that the lack of access to reproductive health care in the South is unacceptable.

Maafa 21

By Anna C. Holley

As an intern for SisterSong, I had the opportunity to view *Maafa 21*—a recent anti-abortion documentary. *Maafa* comes from the Swahili term for unspeakable horror and is forcibly promoting the notion that Black women having abortions is a form of genocide. This documentary is produced by Life Dynamics, a white anti-abortion group that is attempting to use racial tactics to limit the availability of abortion for all women. Publicized by Georgia Right to Life among others, this film uses numerous statistics and historical news articles to argue that abortion providers such as Planned Parenthood are targeting Black women by pressuring them to have abortions. *Maafa 21* claims that because some abortion clinics are in Black neighborhoods, women in these communities are victims of coercion because of their race.



Anna C. Holley,
Staff Assistant, SisterSong

Black ABORTION: A White Perspective

While the film spends little time discussing the politics of abortion, the majority of *Maafa 21* asserts that today's Black abortion rate is a conspiracy brought on by white supremacists attempting to wipe out the Black population by equating such ideas with the eugenics movement and the Holocaust. Additionally, this film describes Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood, as a racist purely interested in using contraceptives as a primary mechanism for population control, inhibiting the growing Black population.

As a white woman, my knowledge of the eugenics movement is limited as it was never covered in my U.S. history classes overwhelmingly populated with white students. To be honest, I have been dedicated to the reproductive rights movement for many years, but initially, I found this film to be quite convincing to the point that after I watched it, I found myself briefly questioning my stance on the issue.

I soon realized, however, that this film did exactly as it intended. It appealed to my ignorance. I realized this after investigating suggestive claims about Black abortion in *Maafa 21*. From reading an article by Loretta Ross entitled: *The Color of Choice: White Supremacy and Reproductive Justice*, I found that population control is certainly a political issue and one that is still prevalent today. But to say that abortion providers are coercing Black women is undeniably false when taking a deeper look at the issue itself. Women of color have tirelessly lobbied the U.S. government for federal funding for abortions, dismantling the notion that Black women are simply passive victims being fooled into having abortions. Through Black women's leadership and their strengthened alliances, they have worked together to bring family planning clinics to their neighborhoods since the 1920s by working with Margaret Sanger, promoting the right to control their own fertility.

While Black women are having abortions at higher rates than other women, *Maafa 21* fails to investigate the *real* reasons behind these abortions. Instead, this film fosters extreme conspiracy theories to instill fear and guilt within Black communities without applying a human rights framework to the issue. *Maafa 21* has one motive: eradicating women's choice. Yet, they are not interested in investigating the social factors leading Black women to make this choice. Rather than coercion, embedded racism within our society creates economic inequality, limited educational opportunities, ambiguity about Black sex and sexuality, and a lack of access to comprehensive sex education and

contraceptives. Accordingly, Black women exert control over their bodies in light of these disparities as an act of survival for themselves and their families. As suggested by Ross, we cannot isolate abortion from other human rights issues as they are not mutually exclusive subjects.

After watching *Maafa 21* for the second time, rather than struggling with my values, I felt manipulated. I grew increasingly aware that a great deal of the anti-abortionists' research and so called "evidence" is taken out of context to support their cause without examining the complexities of this subject. These complexities intertwine race, class, and gender and create circumstances that must be taken into account. Instead, this film is completely devoid of any analysis of these intersections, painting Black women as passive victims rather than autonomous human beings. Because I write from a perspective of a white woman, I cannot always apply my own experiences to those of women of color. As a result, I was looking for something important that was missing from this documentary: a space for Black women's voices.

Without giving Black women a voice in this documentary and exploring their lives, abortion becomes purely political instead of recognizing the self-determination of the human beings directly affected. Although they cleverly use a Black woman as one of the narrators and another as a victim of forced sterilization, it is obvious that emotional manipulation is the goal of the film, rather than an honest use of historical evidence and social injustices to tell the truth about Black women's lives and difficult choices.

Originally from Iowa, Anna was a Staff Assistant at SisterSong this summer and is an upcoming senior at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. She is a Women and Gender Studies major and is especially interested in community organizing and public policy, surrounding the reproductive justice movement. She hopes to pursue a career in human rights. Anna has gained invaluable insight from working with SisterSong, including a better knowledge and understanding of the current complexities of race and abortion in Georgia and within the United States at large.

Ross, Loretta. "The Color of Choice: White Supremacy and Reproductive Justice." *The Color of Violence: The Incite! Anthology*. Ed. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence. South End Press. 2006. 53-65. Print.



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Smiling On The Outside, But Crying On The Inside

By Andrea Johnson

HIV/AIDS Speaker, Counselor, Educator and Tester
Founder/President/CEO
GIRL U CAN DO IT, INC.

My testimony is a story of falling hard and getting back up again. Although I didn't and still don't attend church on a regular basis, I have always thanked GOD for everything that has happened in my life, either good or bad.

My story started out like a fairytale. While volunteering at a Mother's Day brunch at the Hilton Hotel on City Line Avenue in Philadelphia, PA on Mother's Day 2006, I caught the eye of a man, a very beautiful and healthy looking man. At that point in my life, I was happy being single as I always loved myself and it didn't bother me to be single because I lived a stress free and drama-free life. I had all the love and support in whatever I did from my family and friends so I was happy. My family and friends would always say to me, "You need to find a man, someone to care for you." And my response was always, "When God is ready for me to have one, I will."

So when I caught the eye of this man, and he pursued me fiercely, I was wowed. You see, I haven't had many relationships in my life by choice (four total), and three are still friends to this day. Growing up, I saw many marriages and committed relationships broken up because of cheating spouses, abuse, and people just becoming disinterested in each other. I always said to myself, "I don't want a man that lies, cheats, and abuses me in any way." Little did I know, I was getting involved with exactly that.

I fell in love with him and what looked like a healthy man, who was nine years my senior. I thought that he, being older and having more experience in life, was a plus. He told me so much about himself, as well as a lot of the mistakes he made in his life and in his past relationships. I called myself working on the TRICC method (Trust, Respect, Intimacy, Communication and Commitment) with him. I did not judge him on his past and accepted him as he was since I thought what he was telling me was the sincere truth as truth was something we both stressed. I started thinking that I could help him live a better life now that he has taken responsibility for his past and was willing to work hard on his future, which looked as though it included me. Besides that he claimed to have accepted God and could preach from the Bible to you like a preacher would in church. So now I really thought wow, a God-fearing man, we are going to make each other even better people. So I thought! As the months went on, things slowly but surely began to change. While doing his laundry, I found a woman's



number in his pocket, whom I found out was also married, and when I questioned him about it he said that she was someone that he met before me and that she lied about being married and that is why he had to break things off with her. Come to find out that was not the truth as this same married woman continued to be problematic the whole time up until the end of our relationship. The horror was just beginning. I started finding numbers of other women. I kicked him out and vowed never to take him back. He called and called and came by my house and job and stated how sorry he was and that since I was a strong woman he didn't feel as though I needed him. He felt he couldn't talk to me about his feelings, so he would call his old female friends to talk to them about it and that these other females were only friends that he knew long before he met me. I started to doubt myself and thought, I know I have a strong personality, so maybe he did find it hard to talk to me.

That was a big mistake on my part as I learned that I gave him the ok to continue to mistreat me and that if he was persistent and pleaded long and hard enough I would take him back, and he was right.

I was too embarrassed to let my family know what was going on. I self-doubted myself in thinking I was being too strong and not letting him be a man, or so I let him make me believe that. God was saying, "Fool, I am showing you and you're not listening." Then at the end of June, 2007, I caught this man in the act of cheating with the same married female who was mentioned earlier. I was so mad, hurt, and embarrassed at all that I allowed myself to go through with this man, and so many more feelings ran through my head, like killing the both of them for making me feel this pain in my heart. I regained my senses and realized they were not worth it.

After catching them, I made a doctor's appointment to be checked for everything. My doctor and I had a great relationship and she was the only one I felt that I could really talk to about what I was enduring. She said to just leave, but I didn't want to tell her that I had stepped into the next stage with this man or his threats to harm me if I did. I never experienced anything like this and all I felt was embarrassment, shame, and fear. I didn't know who to turn to.

My doctor took all kinds of tests on me including an HIV test. HIV was not in my thought process whatsoever, as this man looked and seemed 100 percent healthy. My doctor called me right after the July 4 holiday and said that she needed to talk to me about something and to call her back right away. Of course I didn't since I knew my hemoglobin was low as I suffer from anemia. I was also trying to work as much

overtime as possible to get my bills paid because I allowed this man to put me in a serious financial strain as well. She then called me again and demanded that I come in to see her as soon as possible. I said why, she said just come in. So I went into the office and she had what looked like tears in her eyes and on July 11, 2007, she told me something that would forever change my life, she told me I had HIV.

I felt ashamed, scared, stupid, depressed, worthless, and so angry that I wanted to kill myself. How could I allow myself to be so stupid! My doctor was on top of everything. She had things set up for me before I even arrived or asked. My doctor and I called this man and I had her tell him as he acted like he didn't believe me. His surprise was more like, "Oh, is that it?"

Afterwards I fell into an instant depression for about three weeks, but being the woman I am, I couldn't stay depressed long. It was like God was saying, "I am not through with you yet." I tried to distance myself from this man, but I couldn't. From allowing him to manipulate me all this time, he knew how to honeymoon me and reel me back in. I think I was more afraid of him now, but didn't want to let it show for my daughter's sake. I wouldn't let him see the fear, but I was definitely afraid. Not only was I afraid, but I was angry, so angry. I took my anger to a level that I never thought I would be able to do, I started to email every friend, family member, and person I knew to let them know that I had this dreadful disease and that I loved them enough for them to know that if it could happen to me it could happen to them.

My doctor then put me in touch with people that would become my mentors and help me to begin to heal and help others while in the process. I was being strong for others and putting on the biggest face of everything being ok at home, but suffering in silence with this man. I listened to him tell me he needed me to survive, because he said that without me, he would be nothing, and that he would never see me with someone else. He also promised for the last time that he would change and that he would work hard to make sure he provided well for his family. I thought, "Since I have this disease, no one is going to want me now, what do I really have to lose?" So on February 28, 2008, after being pressured and giving in, we got married.

I felt even more shameful and depressed as I married someone that I did not trust and really did not truly love

anymore. At this point in my life with this disease I just wanted someone, a man, to love me and if it meant forgiving him even though I didn't truly love him anymore, it meant I wouldn't be lonely and have to go through this alone. I didn't even tell my family I got married. I tried to make the best of the situation I got myself into again with this man. In my mind I thought since we both have this dreadful disease, maybe he will straighten up and do right now. I told him that if I found out he was unfaithful again, especially while we are now married, I would be through with him. He promised that he was starting anew with us.

I never thought I would be associated with anything like this in my life. I always saw others and heard stories of persons that went through similar nightmares, but I never thought it would happen to me. It was like a bad dream that kept getting worse. I later found out that this man cheated on our wedding day. After he began to display some of his old habits, I searched his possessions. I found a cell phone that I didn't know he had. As I called each number one by one and informed these women that he is HIV positive, I grew angrier and angrier. I don't know if he slept with all of these women, but I wanted to warn them and let them know who I was and to go get checked for HIV today. I was even angrier now because this monster was infecting others without them knowing.

I finally got my courage that day to not fear him or anyone besides God ever again. I allowed someone to instill fear, shame, and doubt in my heart. I gave someone else the power over me, someone that didn't deserve any of what I had to give. I allowed myself to endure the baby's mama drama, repeated cheating, lying, stealing and so much more and for what, nothing. In such a short time, I learned many hard and valuable lessons, but the one valuable lesson I learned is that in my darkest hour, God was still with me just waiting for me to accept him back into my heart without fear, shame or doubt. After I did that, he started closing doors that he said he never wanted me to open again and opened doors that helped me draw closer to him.

If you read this article and judge me or make statements such as, "That's not ever going to happen to me," shame on you, because you really never know. You know fully about you, but you can't fully say that for the person you're involved with. Everyone has a story to tell. God even had a story. If you know of someone who is HIV positive or has AIDS and are afraid to seek the help that they need to survive due to the fear and stigma within our society, please help them and/or have them read my story so they will see that they are not alone. Help them to be brave enough to seek out help for themselves. Remember we all come into contact with one another in one way or another. HIV/AIDS may have originated from a chimpanzee in Africa, and now it consumes an enormous portion of Black/African Americans here in America and throughout the world.

I am a mother, daughter, sister, friend, advocate, activist and a Black/African American, professional woman with HIV. I'm exposing myself to you so that I can help you to make better choices so you will not become infected and if you are infected, I want to give you the courage to speak up, take control, and love yourself again. You are a beautiful gift given to this world from whatever GOD you serve. Recognize your power, take your life back, and shine. Realize what I realize, GIRL U CAN DO IT!!!

TRUST



TRUST BLACK WOMEN:

The POLITICS of Race and Abortion

Is the Pro-Choice Movement Ready?

By Loretta Ross,
National Coordinator, SisterSong

In February 2010, 65 billboards suddenly appeared in Atlanta proclaiming that “Black Children are an Endangered Species.” Women of color and our allies won a significant policy victory in Georgia in 2010 when we successfully challenged that dangerous publicity campaign and defeated state legislation attempting to expand abortion restrictions by linking race, gender and abortion. More than 600 bills reducing abortion access were introduced in state legislatures in 2010 and 40 passed. Among this tsunami of abortion restrictions, one bill – Georgia Senate Bill 529 – failed due to the leadership of women of color working together using the reproductive justice framework.

SisterSong, along with our allies, effectively rebuffed the anti-abortion movement in our home state. We helped divide our opposition, and their internal implosion doomed the bill as Tea Partiers battled moderate Republicans. Our intersectional approach effectively contested this new front in the abortion wars that would have wielded race and gender as a weapon to undermine abortion rights. By working strategically with pro-choice allies in our state and across the country, we delivered one of the few national success stories in the 2010 legislative season.

Is Your State Next? Stop the Billboards! Join the Fight.

SisterSong organized a coalition of women's organizations including SPARK Reproductive Justice NOW!, Planned Parenthood of Southeast, the Feminist Women's Health Center, SisterLove, Inc. (a women's HIV/AIDS organization), and Raksha (an Asian American domestic violence organization) to stop this bill in Georgia. Nationally, we worked with a Race and Sex Selection Working Group created by Generations Ahead, National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum, and Reproductive Health Technologies Project on the sex-selection aspects of the legislation, as well as with many other women of color reproductive justice and pro-choice organizations.

Women of color groups played a unique and essential role in the Georgia policy victory as a trusted voice that galvanized leaders of color and key civil and human rights organizations to take action on abortion rights issues, sometimes for the first time. For example, we proved that leaders and institutions that needed to be activated in the African American community could only be moved by black women working together. We had the cultural competency to craft the right messages, but even more importantly, we had the long-standing relationships within our communities of color to be able to tap into trusted messengers to deploy them effectively.

In this policy struggle, we proved that:

- The leadership of women of color can achieve policy victories by mobilizing our base in communities of color to influence decision makers using the reproductive justice framework.
- African American women can be engaged nationally on the front lines of the abortion wars and we need to prepare for future battles.
- The Reproductive Justice and Pro-Choice movements must work successfully together by sharing leadership, capacity and resources.

To build a long-term response to future race- and sex-based attempts to restrict abortion, a coalition of black women's organizations formed the Trust Black Women Partnership (TBW), coordinated by SisterSong, with leadership from Black Women for Reproductive Justice, the Black Women's Health Imperative, the Milwaukee Reproductive Justice Collective, California Black Women's Health Project, Black Women for Wellness, SisterLove, SPARK, and SisterSong NYC.

TBW members are young and older black women working together who are both pro-choice and pro-life. We are not divided over the misleading debates on issues such as birth control, interpersonal partner violence, immigration, parenting issues, incarcerated pregnant mothers, HIV positive women, or abortion because all of these issues are

part of reproductive justice. After all, reproductive justice is the human right to have a child, not have a child, and parent the children we have in safe and healthy environments.

We organized TBW because this cynical attempt to manipulate the black community was the opening salvo in a national attack on abortion rights, using race- and gender-based tactics, and the pro-choice movement was vulnerable. Race and reproduction linked together is not the most comfortable conversation for our allies. African American women had to speak for ourselves to protest this blatant attempt to shame-and-blame black women.

SisterSong investigated who was behind these billboards and what their motives and goals might be. We discovered that this was part of a carefully orchestrated agenda. A year before these billboards were launched, Georgia Right to Life members met with Republican leaders on St. Simon's Island in South Georgia. The groups strategized on presenting a state law that could to challenge Roe v. Wade in the Supreme Court, the decision that legalized abortion in 1973.

It was the next phase of a legal and public relations strategy that Republicans initiated in 2008 with the introduction of race- and gender-based anti-abortion legislation in Congress, deceptively and disrespectfully called the Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass Prenatal Nondiscrimination Act. Although that federal bill

failed, it provided a model for states to replicate to challenge legal abortion in the United States. Georgia Right to Life has announced plans to spread this campaign to at least 10 other states. Billboards have already appeared in Texas, Tennessee, Arkansas and Missouri. An Arizona legislator is considering introducing a similar bill targeting Latinas.

This cynical campaign is not about saving babies of color, or the health and well-being of our communities. One goal is to undermine Roe. Even if Roe remains technically intact, such legislation provides an opportunity for states to question women's motives for seeking abortions, intrude on patient confidentiality, and threaten doctors with criminal sanctions. The intent is to intimidate doctors who provide abortions for women of color, stigmatize women of color who choose to have abortions, and limit access to abortion services in our communities. Thus, the criminal sanctions in the Georgia legislation targeted doctors by defining all abortions as "coerced", even if the alleged coercion is by a third party, such as a parent of a minor child.

But it would be a mistake for us to believe that this attack is only about abortion. This attack went way beyond abortion. This is another page in the same playbook that was used to build the Moral Majority that swept Ronald Reagan into power in the 1970s. Abortion is again being used as a wedge issue to rebuild the base of the Republican Party after a national defeat by Democrats. What is unique about their



The above image is a sample of the overwhelming national media attention we received.

As women of color, we have to consider how to counter this current assault when some of the pro-choice community seems stuck on perceiving abortion as isolated from other human rights issues.

“Is the Pro-Choice Movement Ready?”



strategy this time is that they are also looking to drive a gender-wedge into the African American community, and a racial wedge into the pro-choice community. In the same way, they are using marriage equality and prejudice against immigrants as cultural wedge issues in communities of color. If they are eventually successful, they can divide our base, and set back all of our human rights struggles.

As women of color, we have to consider how to counter this current assault when some of the pro-choice community seems stuck on perceiving abortion as isolated from other human rights issues. Our opponents launched an intersectional attack on us. More than ever, we need to use the reproductive justice framework to defend our collective human rights. It is no longer the right thing to do; it is now the smart thing to do.

This is why the leadership of women of color in general, and African American women in particular, is vital. We created the reproductive justice framework to end the isolation of abortion from other human rights issues such as racism, homophobia, militarism, classism, etc. The fact that the right – instead of defending eugenics as it has done in the past – is now claiming that the pro-choice movement is responsible for eugenics against communities of color should give us all pause.

Women of color have always challenged the motives of eugenicists on the right and the left who promote fertility control for women for motives other than the empowerment of women to make decisions for ourselves. Similarly, we encouraged the anti-violence movement to incorporate other forms of violence against women beyond rape and battering, to understand the threats to our lives posed by state violence, racist violence, reproductive violence, economic violence, and immigration violence.

In addition to lobbying charges of racial genocide against African Americans, our opponents campaign in the black community using xenophobia to claim that black people are losing the “breeding race” with Latinos. Within the Latino community, they posit that Latinas can defeat the anti-immigrant movement by having more babies. In Indigenous nations, they cite abortion as the latest stage in a long devastating campaign of genocidal acts. And they target the Asian American community by claiming that families are committing “gendercide” as the result of sex-selective abortions limiting the birth of girl babies.

Women of color leaders know that fears of eugenics or population control are legitimate concerns in our communities. We experience it every day through the

criminal justice system, the racist allocation of public resources, anti-immigrant policing, the toxicity of our environments, mis-education of our children, the gun violence in our lives, racial profiling, and the health disparities in our lives.

But these human rights issues are rarely prioritized by the pro-choice movement. As a result, the movement has failed to grasp the very rational fears of genocide among our peoples, much less counter them. And it has not proven itself capable of mounting an effective response in defense of women’s self-determination and against population control whether pro- or anti-natalist in intent.

This current campaign linking race and reproduction makes these threats painfully clear. It highlights the risks we face if we do not confront the long over-due conversation about the relationship between women of color and white women in the pro-choice movement. It also underscores the urgency of fully embracing the power of reproductive justice to counter this intersectional campaign.

It would be ironic if our opponents better understand the advantages of an intersectional approach based on human rights than our allies. As Barbara Smith pointed out nearly 30 years ago in her book *All the Women were White, All the Men were Black, but Some of Us Are Brave*, neither the women’s movement, nor the Civil Rights movement can succeed without the leadership of women of color. Not only will efforts to proceed without our leadership fail, but the consequences will poison the soil in which we must toil.

Our movements will be severely tested if we fail to fully understand the racial themes and intersectional politics of this new front in the abortion wars. It’s about race, power and control writ large using the bodies of women of color as political currency.

Women of color have the most credibility, authenticity and experience to fight an intersectional battle of race- and gender politics. Is the pro-choice movement prepared to respect our leadership and work with instead of against us to defeat this latest campaign? Business as usual means failure as usual.

The stakes are too high to get it wrong this time.

I need to know their names
those women I would have walked with...
all those women who could have known me.
Where in the world are their names?

Lucille Clifton,
Poet Laureate,
Maryland
(1936-Feb. 13, 2010)



Photo: Google Image

CELEBRATING THE LIFE OF

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my one hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.

— lucille clifton—

LUCILLE CLIFTON



Taking *his*

By Lindsey Jones

Each year another birthday rolls by and like always, I begin to plan months in advance.
A birthday party or two. A trip outside of the country. New sexy outfits.
More workouts in the gym. This is my 40th and it needs to be memorable.

I decided to put on my shortest black dress, highest stilettos, and just the right amount of body oil to create a subtle, but noticeable shimmer on my skin. I'm packing a small overnight bag with stringy matching black lingerie, body wipes, extra lipstick, a bottle of my favorite West Indian rum, tiny clutch bag, and a couple of female condoms. I've used them several times before, but not the latest version. This one has a slightly different material makeup. Stronger and thinner.

I'm in my two-seater, bumping the sexy throwback, "Nasty Girl," by Vanity 6. Ironic. When the song first came out, I was just beginning to experience consensual sex with a man. At 14, receiving oral sex was my only avenue. I was "saving" my virginity for my first love. He was the one who was sending me into an early sexual frenzy by doping me up orally. We agreed to wait to go "all the way" for another year. Looking back I resent waiting. By the time I was "ready" he moved to another town. It would be over 20 years before I would find out his true secrets.

Now Vanity 6 is filling up my car like musk incense slowly burning and I'm getting more confident about my destination. I pulled up to the door and gave the valet my keys with a much perfected toss of the hair. The hostess checked me in and pulled up my membership number. She smiled and asked if I was alone. "Definitely - coming and going."

She sent my rum bottle to the front bar near the evening buffet. There is a new chef tonight. Brown skinned and beautifully straight teeth. He stands near the carving station and his assistant is serving guests steamed vegetables, potatoes, and various Italian dishes. I get a small portion of everything to save room for the crème brûlée. I order my rum with orange juice and a scantily clad bartender pours a splash of grenadine in my glass for color. Her milk colored breasts are one millimeter from popping out of her halter top. The waitresses are wearing white boy shorts tonight and vixen red stilettos.

I'm in the middle of my solo dinner in the corner of the dining room and look out towards the dance floor. It's fairly early so no one is dancing on the stripper pole yet. But the porno is blasting on the two large plasma screens. One is featuring a sexy, buxom Black female and two anxious brown-skinned males. A long haired white woman with shiny thigh high boots sexing a muscular white man is on the other screen. In the background the dj is just getting warmed up with AC/DC and Journey from the 80s. I love old school music!

Someone catches my eye from the front door. He's a little less than 6 feet, milk chocolate brown, and bald. His thin cotton shirt can barely hold down or hide the well formed pecs from beneath. He has a familiar stride. Kind of like my first love. A long gait with a slight twist on the right. Hmm.

My fork almost stops midair. And I just watch him walk in. I try to shake off the stare and focus on my crème brûlée instead. He scans the room once from left to right and heads to the buffet. I watch what he chooses to eat and what he avoids. They are similar to my choices. He begins to walk toward me and I try very hard to ignore him. There is an open table next to me and he asks if anyone is sitting there. "It's all yours." I meant that.

After he has finished half his plate he leans over to me to begin conversation. He is curious why he hasn't seen me here before. "I don't get a chance to visit too often, but certainly once every few months." I find out he runs a landscaping business and has family in Panama. I can hear a trace of an accent. We talk about interests and dislikes. I'm suddenly reminded how sometimes it's difficult to talk to someone here above the naughty laughter from guests, moans from the porno, and pounding dance beats from the dj.

We talk for nearly an hour and decide to go to the "back." In the back of the establishment new amber wooden coffee tables and comfy lounging chairs are evident. I haven't been here in a while so he gives me his own tour of the new surroundings. The private rooms look far more sophisticated than before with "floating beds" and a glass wall in between the connecting rooms. The pool and hot tub area have new flooring and a new contemporary styled cabana is perched at different corners of the room for public viewing. The bar is crowded by now and couples of all ages and races are talking, drinking, and indulging for all to see.

I decide to take him to one of the private rooms with the glass wall. He hesitates slightly and asks if I prefer a room with more privacy. "No," I say. "I think this will be perfect." The couple on the other side is barely noticing us even now. "We are now standing in the room and gazing over at the other couple. The man looks around 30ish and his back tattoo is expansive. He is going down on his female partner and she is strangely quiet.

By now me and my new friend are sitting on the bed on the other side of the glass wall, touching each other with now far less talking. As he sits, the white towel he has on is dipped several inches below his navel. Ripples upon ripples of muscles follow up his abdomen and up through his chest. I'm dizzy from the waves. His skin is clear and smooth. He pulls out his male condom and begins to rip the edge. I gently push his hand down and suggest another alternative.

I tucked away a female condom in my small clutch purse and begin talking him through the process. He has never seen one before and becomes increasingly curious about what it looks like and how it works. I was amused to see this once Alpha Male from an hour ago, become a complete kitten at the thought of me being in control of the situation and using my own contraception. He looked almost like how I looked at 14 when my lover talked me through what was to come. Submissive and docile. I felt even more empowered as I demonstrated the insertion and what to do next. As I entered the smaller ring of the female condom inside of me his eyes grew larger and mouth slightly parted. Once in I gently released his towel and let it fall to the floor. The couple next door continued in their same position. I pulled my Panamanian friend closer and over me and guided him inside the condom. I could see his body tense up as if I were about to take his innocence. He held on the sheets and I heard him gently sigh after he and the condom now became one. We held hands as he slowly submitted to me.

INNOCENCE

A Short History of AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN & ABORTION

By Muna Abdullahi, Staff Assistant, Sister Song

Loretta Ross' "African American Women and Abortion" essay closely examines the active role Black women have played in the reproductive rights movement from the early 1800s to now. African-American women's roles, efforts and contributions in the movement are often times plagued by racist and sexist ideologies, and overlooked and overshadowed by their white counterparts. This brief summary of her longer essay is intended to provide an overview of Black women's determination to control their reproductive destinies over time and despite many obstacles. This historical evidence counters the more recent claims by anti-abortionists that African American women are incapable of making responsible decisions for themselves about their bodies and their families. We can learn from our foremothers that:

African American women have always fought for dignity, respect, and self-determination over their bodies. Opposition to family planning for women has a long-standing history and a set of well-financed opponents. Ideas of race-based eugenics still contaminate thinking about whether people of color have the human right to have children or not have children, and to parent the children we have. Black women can overcome all obstacles, insults, and are fierce members of the Reproductive Justice movement.

The Black feminist movement's historical advocacy for and commitment to Reproductive Justice has remained obscured for three reasons. The traditional perspective is that the movement for abortion rights is primarily a white women's movement. As a result, feminist literature developed the assumption that African-American women lacked the capability and awareness to establish a grounded perspective about gender inequality and abortion rights. Second, many people assume that a "striking kinship" between reproductive rights and Civil Rights (in the words of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.) is nonexistent. Yet, the two movements were connected until the 1960s through the common goals of birth control proponents and many leaders of the African American community. Ross states, "In the early twentieth century Black organizations were often visible supporters of fertility control for Black women, linking reproductive rights to racial advancement". African American women were not passive in their efforts to attain reproductive dignity but in fact assertive in their decisions to choose to use birth control and have abortions.

The third reason the true contributions of African American women in the movement was hidden is because of racist and sexist perceptions held by population experts, feminists and/or African Americans who believe that Black women are not capable of making their own decisions regarding their political standpoint and their reproductive health. Some anti-abortion activists even claim that Black women are dupes of the family planning movement, leading to false charges of self-genocide perpetrated by Black women. However, a historical examination of African American birthrates, history and activism contradicts these erroneous assumptions.

Approximately 20% of the American population was African American before the Civil War. Before the Civil War, Black women had to hide their knowledge about contraceptives and abortifacients they had secretly

brought from Africa or learned in America because plantation owners punished women who did not breed more slaves. In active resistance, Black women employed contraceptive methods and abortion. They even resorted to infanticide to oppose slavery and exert some limited control over their destinies, even though sexual assault and sexual abuse against enslaved women was rampant. This knowledge was spread even wider after slavery through midwives and secretive literature although the Comstock Law of 1873 was a federal law that made it a crime to sell or distribute information or materials that could be used for contraception or abortion. For example, in 1894 *The Women's Era*, an African-American women's journal edited by Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, declared that "not all women are intended for mothers. Some of us have not the temperament for family life," she wrote arguing for fertility control.

In the latter half of the 19th century, Black women were making great strides to control their fertility and employed such techniques as delaying marriage or having fewer children so that by the early 20th century, the African American population was cut in half. Forced breeding of Black women had come to an end due to the agency of Black women. Moreover, controlling one's family size was linked to a strategy of racial uplift, deliberate strategies by the African American community to improve their social and economic conditions and resist white supremacy.

Early twentieth century African-American women were vigorously involved in the birth control movement. The Women's Political Association of Harlem, working with the New York Urban League, was the first Black organization to implement educational sessions on birth control in 1918. Soon after launching the educational campaign, the organization received massive attention from numerous clubwomen seeking information about birth control. They strongly supported the development of family planning clinics in Black communities, with the first one opening in 1924 in conjunction with the New York Urban League in the largely black Columbus Hill neighborhood in New York City. The *New Amsterdam News*, the leading Black newspaper of the city, trumpeted the opening of the Harlem Clinic on October 16, 1929. The three biggest Black Harlem churches – Abyssinian Baptist Church, St. James Presbyterian, and St. Philip's Protestant Episcopal – hosted public lectures on birth control.

The success of the birth control campaign spurred strong and sustained reactions from various opponents. The main opponents to fertility control were the Catholic Church, white conservatives who were concerned with white women's easy accessibility to birth control, and Black Nationalist leaders who believed in population growth as a form of resistance to racial oppression. Black Nationalist fears of a decreasing African American population size stemmed from the high rates of racism, lynchings, and poverty during the early twentieth century.

The early 20th century quickly gave birth to eugenics as an ideology and a social and political movement due to fears about emancipated African Americans and immigrants. The movement promoted selective breeding as an effective way to improve the overall quality of society. The movement reflected white Americans' fears of people of color and immigrant whites who were not of Nordic-Teutonic descent rapidly out-reproducing the "normal" white American population. Ross notes that "to promote the reproduction of self-defined "racially superior" people, eugenics proponents

argued for both "positive" methods, such as tax incentives and education for the desirable types, and "negative" methods, such as sterilization, involuntary confinement, and immigration restrictions for the undesirables" (as cited in Petchesky, 1990, p.86). Sterilization abuse of vulnerable women became official government policy during this period and lasted until the 1970s when lawsuits by women of color halted the official funding of this practice. The eugenics movement fed legitimate concerns about deliberate attempts to reduce the Black population but African American women were not confused between external attempts to control their reproduction and their personal decisions about their lives. They opposed eugenics and supported individual family planning at the same time.

Skyrocketing infant and maternal mortality rates prompted activists such as Margaret Sanger to argue for reproductive freedom for all women. Sanger had an immediate effect on the American population that began to debate whether women should have legal access to birth control, with feminists and conservatives pitted against each other. However, the early feminism of the birth control movement views and efforts were distorted with the involvement of eugenicists in the campaign who brought their own racist nativism into the debate. The use of birth control became a right or option for white women, while it became viewed as a necessary obligation for poor women, particularly women of color.

During the 1950s, new ideologies justifying population control began to surface after eugenics as a philosophy had been discredited by the Nazis during World War II. New theories were constructed to explain Third World population growth effects on America's ability to dominate world affairs. The U.S began to heavily support population control policies abroad, arguing that population control was vital in the fight against communism. Domestically, the success of the Civil Rights movement in challenging segregation caused many politicians to become increasingly fearful of African American political power. Instead of offering a political argument, they coded their concerns by claiming that Black ghettos would continue to grow, and that a growing welfare class predominately concentrated in inner cities would cause crime rates to skyrocket.

As a result, conservative support for federally-supported family planning grew. Former president Richard Nixon said in 1970, "It is my view that no American woman should be denied access to family planning assistance because of her economic condition." He established the Office of Economic Opportunity to fund family planning programs, particularly in Latino and African American communities, arguing that such programs would reduce health and welfare costs.

The establishment of family planning programs in mainly Black and Latino urban areas in the South caused a division between white conservatives. On one hand, some whites wanted programs that implemented eugenical ideas about reducing the populations of people of color. On the other hand, a strong portion of the conservative white American population was threatened by the idea of all women controlling their fertility. They were especially concerned that white women would have access to family planning intended for women of color. In clinics

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throughout the South, white women were actively discouraged from using these services, such as in Louisiana and Arkansas. This split among conservatives over family planning was not healed until after Nixon, when Ronald Reagan helped launch the “Moral Majority” to put conservatives back in power in 1980.

In the 1970s there was a lack of visible Black male support that had been visible from the 1920s until the rise of the Black Power Movement. Many Black Nationalist organizations such as the Black Muslims of the Nation of Islam, the NAACP sector in Pittsburgh, and the Black Power Conference strongly opposed abortions by linking it to genocide. The Black Panther Party was the only nationalist group that partially supported the accessibility of birth control and free abortions even as it split largely along gender lines.

The birth control clinics established by Sanger did not provide all the necessary resources or services demanded, so that Black women did not have a variety of options before the legalization of birth control in the 1960s. Even though programs and projects were launched aiming to reach African American women such as the 1939 Negro Project, they never developed the capacity to meet the overwhelming needs of the population, especially in rural areas. Black women were limited to refraining from intercourse or adopting methods such as the usage of condoms, spermicidal douching or practicing the withdrawal method. Black women who sought an abortion did it illegally through the assistance from doctors, midwives and quacks. The lack of access to appropriate contraceptives and abortion caused many African American women to resort to sterilization as a means to avoid unwanted pregnancies.

The failure to achieve reproductive justice led many desperate women to take matters into their own hands and establish an “underground railroad” movement to secure abortions. Before abortion was legalized in 1973, many women went to illegal practitioners. In the 1960s, underground abortion was made possible by churches, community based referral services and supportive doctors. In Chicago, an underground network called Jane started in 1969 to address the problem of the lack of safe and affordable abortions. The women of Jane, including several African American pioneers, learned how to perform abortions at a lower cost than the rates other illegal practitioners were charging.

After the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion, Black feminist leadership flourished. For example, in the early 1970s Byllye Avery, founder of the National Black Women’s Health Project in 1984, traveled to New York a great deal helping women obtain abortions because she was a member of a referral network. But she soon realized that trips to New York to obtain illegal abortions were not reasonable options for all women. She instead decided to co-found the Gainesville Women’s Health Center in 1974 with several white women and learned to perform abortions. The National Council of Negro Women issued a statement in support of *Roe* in 1973, while the National Political Congress of Black Women, the Coalition of 100 Black Women, and other important organizations affirmed the right of African American women to self-determination and bodily integrity.

Countless other African American women have fought for reproductive justice and histories are just now being written about them. From the “granny” midwives during slavery to leaders like Angela Davis and Dorothy Roberts, African American women continue the fight for their human rights to control their bodies and their destinies.

Breaking News!

Hyde Amendment Enshrined In Stone

By Loretta Ross, National Coordinator, Sister Song

Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ), Chair of the Congressional Pro-Life Caucus, introduced a bill July 29, 2010 that would make the yearly Hyde restrictions attached to appropriations bills become permanent law, if he gets his way. The new bill, entitled the *No Taxpayer Funding for Abortion Act*, would establish a permanent government-wide prohibition on public funding for abortion. This ban would extend funding prohibitions for all government agencies including Health and Human Services, the military, the Indian Health Service, the District of Columbia, the Peace Corps, prisons and USAID. In other words, poor women and others who receive medical care from government programs – here and overseas — would be permanently barred from receiving public funding for abortions.

Smith was joined by Democrat Daniel Lipinski (D-Ill.) to introduce the bill, illuminating the problems so-called anti-abortion Democrats cause for women’s rights. We watched in horror as the Stupak-Pitts amendment restricting abortion coverage in health care reform nearly derailed that legislation last year.

A Congressional briefing on Hyde was organized by the National Network of Abortion Funds, IPAS, and Black Women for Reproductive Justice with co-sponsorship from several other groups, including SisterSong, Planned Parenthood Federation of America, and the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health. The collaborative hosted a Congressional Briefing this May to launch a multi-year campaign to repeal the Hyde Amendment and prevent the yearly appropriations attachment. Apparently, our efforts are timely and not a moment too soon.

What we can predict is that reproductive justice activists have a long and arduous fight on our hands to prevent anti-abortionists in Congress from further trampling on the human rights of poor women in the United States. For more information on fighting this dangerous legislation, please contact the National Network of Abortion Funds at hydecampaign@lists.nnaf.org.

SisterSong’s service HONORED



Pictured l-r: Laura Jimenez, Heidi Williamson, Corean Elam, Loretta Ross, and Paris Hatcher

On Thursday, September 23, 2010, SPARK Reproductive Justice NOW honored SisterSong’s service to SPARK, Georgia, and the broader reproductive justice movement at their annual fundraising event, Sex, Wine and Chocolate.

Sex, Wine and Chocolate 2010: SPARKing the Fire in Each Other was created to delight the senses, excite the mind, and build and strengthen a community working towards reproductive justice for all.

SPARK Reproductive Justice NOW collaborates with individuals, communities and organizations to grow and sustain a powerful reproductive justice movement in Georgia. They do this by: developing and sharing a radical analysis in order to change culture; mobilizing in response to immediate threats and; Organizing for long-term systemic change.

SisterSong and SPARK have a history of collaboration, most recently working together to defeat SB 529, the race and sex selection bill. We are continuing to work together in the Trust Black Women partnership developing national strategies to stand up for black women against attacks from anti-abortion forces.

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A collaborative of individuals and organizations working towards Reproductive Justice for communities through law and policy, community mobilization, and service delivery throughout the Pacific Northwest

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Contact: <http://www.nwwlc.org/focus/health/nrjc.html>

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