

REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE: Choosing a Broader Movement

Introduction: Envisioning Reproductive Justice

During the 19th and 20th centuries, the women's movement in the U.S. made tremendous gains. We have a great deal to celebrate, and consequently a great deal to defend. As if in backwards motion, the 21st century is proving to be more politically treacherous, particularly in the area of reproductive justice. Since 1995, states have passed nearly 400 measures blocking access to essential reproductive health services. Although we still have Roe, the right to have an abortion has been systematically eroded, state by state, and is now in more peril than at any time since its passage. Increasingly, women across the U.S. lack access to basic reproductive health services and are struggling daily with a host of reproductive injustices that the traditional reproductive rights movement has yet to include in its advocacy efforts.

As a consequence, a large-scale shift is occurring in the movement itself, from a traditional "reproductive rights" framework to a broader one, being defined as "reproductive justice". In talking with a number of women's organizations, working at the grassroots level, the following vision emerges for what reproductive justice would look like in the U.S. In this vision, every woman and girl would have:

- quality reproductive health care that is accessible, affordable, culturally appropriate and available in her language
- the right to live and work in an environment that is free of toxins that would compromise her reproductive health
- comprehensive school sex-education
- access to contraception and affordable abortion services
- a living wage
- equal rights if she identifies as LGBT
- freedom from sexual, emotional, and physical abuse and violence
- equity with men in the research dollars spent studying illnesses that affect her body
- food and water that is healthy and affordable, and;
- immigration policies that do not destabilize her family or erect barriers to services.

To achieve this vision, a vibrant U.S. Reproductive Justice movement would have:

- a large and diverse base of organized support with the power to compel decision makers into positive action
- a solid and balanced infrastructure of service delivery, advocacy, grassroots organizing, media, and research organizations, to support fundamental social and policy change
- the internal strength of strong alliances among reproductive health and justice organizations and an external strength of connections with other key social justice movements such as the environmental and labor movements
- at its center the goal of empowering all women to become active and engaged leaders in transforming the structures that impact their lives and the lives of their children and communities

- a recognition of women’s multiple identities (as low-income, women of color, LGBT, etc) as critical to strategy, analysis and framing
- an explicit racial justice analysis

Perhaps most importantly, it would give all women and girls equal opportunity and the self-determination to participate in and lead a movement that addresses the reproductive rights issues that most affect them and their communities.

More Than Choice: The Distinction Between Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Justice

The traditional *reproductive rights* movement has been characterized by a narrow leadership, constituency and issue focus. It uses a legal and advocacy framework that emphasizes the individual woman and her personal right to reproductive health care, with a primary focus on “choice”. It has tended to focus its energies on a national-level, inside-the-beltway strategy. By contrast, the rapidly growing *reproductive justice* movement strives for a broad and diverse leadership, constituency and issue focus. It has an organizing framework that looks collectively and systemically at reproductive issues, viewing the control of individual women’s bodies as intrinsically linked to the historic and current control of entire communities, and acknowledging the intersection and impact of multiple systems of oppression — such as racism, classism, homophobia, xenophobia, etc. — on women’s reproductive well-being. It focuses on strengthening the base of the movement through building the leadership and collective power of historically underrepresented women to change structural power inequities around a range of reproductive issues that they identify as important.

A Movement that Lacks a Base, Lacks Power: Building the Base of the Reproductive Justice Movement

In 2003, leaders representing three of the most prominent women’s organizations in the U.S. sat down to plan a march on Washington with a vision of organizing the largest mobilization of women in the history of the nation. The trouble was, the more they thought about what was needed to achieve this, the more they realized that there were a lot of key players and key communities that they had neglected to invite to the meeting.

It became increasingly clear that for this march to succeed — strategically and numerically — its focus and leadership would need to reflect the women and communities whose reproductive freedoms were under the greatest attack but who had often been on the margins of the mainstream U.S. reproductive rights movement: poor women, women of color, immigrant, rural, LGBT women and young women. It would also need to include the issues that these sectors of women defined as critical to their reproductive freedom:

- African American women account for more than 80% of the female HIV/AIDS cases in the U.S. and face maternal mortality rates comparable to the third world.
- Native American women on reservations confront the forced loss of their traditional midwifery practices and the prospect of traveling 100 miles to deliver their babies at the nearest substandard, government Indian Health hospital.
- Rural Latina women are impacted by the dearth of bilingual health care and miscarriages or birth defects caused by pesticides in the fields where they pick crops.
- Low-income white women lack affordable reproductive health care and suffer the impacts of federal subsidy programs that push marriage.
- Asian women suffer the reproductive affects of Agent Orange and other chemical warfare exposure in their homelands. Asian immigrants and Asian American women might be exposed to toxins in their current workplaces, such as the rapidly growing nail salon industry.

- LGBT women face rampant discrimination in the health care system.
- Young women struggle with a government mandate to push abstinence-only curricula in public schools.
- For immigrant women, restrictive immigration policies add to the other insurmountable barriers to obtaining basic reproductive health care.

For at least the past decade, these issues have been widely ignored by the traditional reproductive rights movement – during which time this movement’s losses have far outweighed its gains. Wisely, the march organizers chose to broaden out, expanding their core leadership to include the Black Women’s Health Imperative, and the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, along with NOW, Feminist Majority, NARAL Pro-Choice America, and Planned Parenthood. These leaders in turn reached out to historically underrepresented women and, after much reluctance on the part of the more established organizations, broadened out from a singular focus on abortion, to include a myriad of reproductive issues impacting various communities. It was a difficult and grueling process but the results were gratifying.

On the day of the march, April 24, 2004, over 1 million people flooded into the National Mall. It was certainly the single largest protest of any kind at the capital, and possibly the largest and most diverse protest in U.S. history. Over 1,400 organizations and 57 countries were represented. One-third of the participants were under the age of 25 and young women of color, including young immigrant women, were among the core leadership. As far as strategies go, the plan to engage a diverse constituency had been a hugely effective one.

For the battle weary reproductive rights movement, the march signaled a new hope, and demonstrated that a powerful reproductive justice movement was possible in the U.S.. The lessons were clear: in order to succeed, in order to win on abortion or any other front for that matter, the movement needs a broader and more diverse core leadership and base of support. Such a base is not created through the tokenized use of young women, women of color or poor women, to support a middle class, white women’s agenda. It is built through a true sisterhood in which women of every walk of life are empowered to identify the issues that impact their reproductive freedom, and to take the lead in a truly democratic movement that fights alongside them on those very issues.

Grassroots Organizing is the #1 Base Building Strategy: Why Aren’t We Funding It?

Women and girls and the issues that impact their lives would seem an obvious priority for a progressive U.S. social justice movement. If such a priority exists however, it has yet to be reflected in the flow of philanthropic dollars. In the U.S., a meager 6% of all giving is specifically earmarked for this sector. The fraction of this that goes into the reproductive health and rights arena has been shrinking dramatically over the past decade. Of the funding that does go into this arena, there exists a significant imbalance in who is receiving resources to do what. The vast majority of funding for reproductive rights in the U.S. continues to go to a few prominent and long-standing women’s organizations, the majority of which have a leadership comprised of middle to upper middle class white women, and a strong belief that fundamental change occurs through providing reproductive health services to individual women and addressing the legal aspects of reproductive issues through a national, in-the-beltway advocacy strategy. These large, well-funded institutions have played an integral role in keeping abortion legal in the U.S. but have failed to develop an agenda that resonates with the majority of women around the country or to galvanize much needed support at the state and local level.

After more than a decade of crushing losses, it seems prudent for the philanthropic community that supports reproductive rights to reflect on a few commonly held assumptions. First, can a vibrant reproductive rights movement be built through grantmaking that delivers the majority of its resources to a leadership that reflects neither the diversity of women in the U.S. or the sectors of women that are most heavily impacted by restrictions on reproductive rights? Second, is the practice of funding almost exclusively, service delivery and legislative advocacy, wise? These two strategies, carried out in isolation, have consistently failed to demonstrate their ability to maintain hard won gains or deliver new victories in the reproductive rights arena. The questions are fundamental ones: who and what should be funded?

Who and What to Fund?

Over the years, several foundations have wrestled with the questions of “who,” with efforts to target a broader diversity of organizations and constituencies and move resources to sectors that have typically been starved for funds. Ms., Third Wave, Jessie Smith Noyes, Public Welfare and Tides Foundations, among others, now prioritize giving to organizations that engage and build the leadership of women of color, young, low-income, immigrant, rural and LGBT women. The Women of Color working group of the Funders Network on Population, Reproductive Health and Rights is currently exploring the possibility of a five-year initiative (initiated by the Ford Foundation) focused entirely on reproductive health/rights/justice organizations led by women of color, with an eye to fostering increased capacity and long term sustainability.

These funders, along with others, have also tackled the question of “what,” exploring which strategies or combination of strategies best support movement building. When one puts an ear to the field, several things bubble up to the surface. First, reproductive health service providers are being dramatically constrained by an increasing number of arcane laws restricting what resources and services they can provide women. Second, advocates who speak to decision makers on behalf of the women affected by such laws have little to no recourse when these decision makers fail to act, or simply say ‘no’. Third, grassroots organizing, the strategy that builds the leadership and collective power of the people directly affected by a given problem, and most importantly provides the most powerful recourse for the advocates, receives next to no funding.

The Case for Investment in Grassroots Organizing

Grassroots organizing is not the same as mobilization for large demonstrations, it is the systematic and long-term work needed to build the involvement and leadership of women and male allies at the community level. The lack of resources for organizing has created a lopsided movement with an anemic base of support with insufficient clout to win. The Reproductive Justice movement has been as precarious as a two legged table, teetering on service and advocacy, without the stability of a third leg of grassroots organizing or a fourth leg of research and media. When we step back and make a comparison to other movements the case for grassroots organizing is strikingly obvious. Can we imagine the Civil Rights movement succeeding without an organized base built in Selma, Alabama and other communities most affected by Jim Crow? Can we imagine Cesar Chavez and the farm workers winning against powerful agribusiness with only community services and advocacy conducted on their behalf by people who had never worked in the fields? The thought alone is ridiculous. Can we picture the rise of the right wing, for that matter, without the full scale investment in community organizing through churches and local clubs to build a broad and powerful base of support? Then why would we continue to fund the reproductive justice movement in such a top-down manner despite its ineffectiveness?

In the following pages we propose funding strategies that work together to remedy this imbalance and build the base of a vibrant reproductive justice movement.

Funding Strategy One: BUILDING THE BASE OF THE MOVEMENT

FUNDING GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING EFFORTS IN HISTORICALLY UNDERREPRESENTED COMMUNITIES

“Young women, women of color, and poor women are here to lead. We are not here as foot soldiers, we are here to make decisions, we are here to build a broad social justice movement”

Caricia Catalina, National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health youth organizer, March for Women’s Lives, 2004

Grassroots organizing efforts among women in historically marginalized communities exist and are growing. Native American groups are organizing around the impact of military and corporate toxins on the reproductive health of women and children. There is reproductive justice organizing happening among teen sex workers, incarcerated women and girls, women farm workers, Vietnamese nail salon workers. In the South, African American women are organizing for access to reproductive health care to address skyrocketing maternal mortality rates. These efforts are breakthrough, vibrant, and rooted in the community. They are also starved for funding, and struggling to grow in a funding climate that channels the majority of resources into think tanks, or large service and policy advocacy organizations.

Suggested Strategy:

- **Fund groups working at the state and local level.** In the current federal climate, and following the Supreme Court’s 1992 decision in *Casey v. Planned Parenthood*, which devolved much decision-making authority to the state level, local and state-level efforts represent the best opportunities for victories and for base building. We must remember that the right wing thrives today in part as a result of seeds diligently planted on the local level decades ago, in churches, clubs, school boards and town councils. There are many ways in which to approach this, including focusing on a particular region, constituency, or issue area.
- **Provide multi-year, general support funding.** Organizing work is difficult and grueling and takes time and tenacity on the ground. Long-term investments to support the overall capacity of organizations are crucial. There are no shortcuts to developing strong leaders or the committed engagement of a community. Expectations for organizing victories should be tempered by a realistic look at the community and region in which the organization is operating. A decision to fund in the south may mean investing in the initial infrastructure, and the tough political climate will mean fewer quick victories than in New York or the San Francisco Bay Area, for example. This does not diminish the importance of funding in this critical region, with a vision for long term victories.

Possible Organizations to Fund

- Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice
- Khmer Girls in Action
- Young Women United
- Center for Young Women’s Development
- Georgians for Choice
- Idaho Women’s Network
- Women’s Voices for the Earth
- Alaska Community Action on Toxics
- Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health
- Organizacion en California de Lideres Campesinas
- Sicangu Way of Life
- Migrant Health Promotion

What to Look For:

- Organizations whose constituency of historically underrepresented women is reflected in their leadership, including staff and board composition.
- Organizations that either focus solely on grassroots organizing or include it as a core strategy in a model that may also include service delivery, research or advocacy.
- Organizations with a strong community base and a demonstrated ability to mobilize that base to action.
- Organizations with comprehensive leadership development components that provide tools, resources, and leadership opportunities to their constituencies.

Funding Strategy Two:

BUILDING THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF THE MOVEMENT

INVESTING IN RESOURCES TO BUILD THE CAPACITY AND IMPACT OF GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS

Local and state level organizations often rely on coalitions or intermediary support organizations (ISOs) to boost their capacity and provide the connective tissue for a larger movement. ISOs include organizations that provide training and technical support with research, media, policy, and legal work to strengthen the work at the local level, and help build inter and intra movement alliances. They also include national organizations that help connect local organizations to key fights on the state or federal level.

While they play a critical role, ISOs are largely ineffective without a strong network of grassroots organizations to work with. They also attract more funding than local groups, which is important to bear in mind when balancing your giving between ISO's and more community-based organizations. Key coalitions are critical to deepening alliances between groups within the reproductive justice movement and bridges to other movements. They also provide an important 'glue' to strengthen the movement and a mechanism to allow organizations to flex their collective muscle in the policy arena.

Suggested Strategy:

- Fund one or two intermediary support organizations that have an effective existing support relationship with a network of grassroots groups in a specific geographic area. It is critical that the ISO have the trust of local organizations and a demonstrated practice of taking direction from the field rather than driving the work in a top-down fashion.
- Fund key coalitions comprised of strong local grassroots organizations that are working around specific policy initiatives. It is important to identify coalitions that include a diverse network of organizations to carry out a broad-based effort.

What to Look For:

- ISOs that base their strategy and technical support on the needs articulated by the community organizations that they serve.
- Effective grassroots organizing groups that have developed a technical support arm to assist other reproductive justice organizations.
- Organizations and coalitions that effective grassroots organizations identify as critical to their success.
- Coalitions forming around key and timely policy initiatives.

Possible Organizations to Fund

- Western States Center
- National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum
- National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health
- California Latinas for Reproductive Justice
- Idaho Women's Network
- Missouri Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice
- New Mexico Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice
- Native American Community Board
- West Virginia Free

Funding Strategy Three: BUILDING CROSS-MOVEMENT LINKAGES

INTEGRATING REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE AND OTHER PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENTS

“A political struggle that does not have women at the heart of it, above it, below it, and within it is no struggle at all.”

Arundhati Roy

In the reproductive justice movement there exist organizations which, either by virtue of their issue focus or due to a primary objective of broadening the movement, are building bridges to other social justice movements. These organizations are often leaders in their region and catalysts for expanding the movement’s overall base of support. They play a critical role in bringing women’s issues back from the margins into the center of the larger U.S. progressive agenda. An organization that is working for reproductive health care access for immigrant women, for example, is well-poised to work with broader immigrant rights organizations. A group working at the intersection of reproductive justice and economic issues is well-positioned to work with labor unions. Other organizations work through an inverse strategy, going to organizations that have a strong community base and supporting them to integrate reproductive justice issues into their member action and education.

Suggested Strategy:

- Organizations that are building working alliances with other social justice movements around common issue areas. Examples include: a local reproductive justice membership organization working in conjunction with the progressive faith community around reproductive healthcare access for low income residents; or a grassroots women’s organization teaming up with environmental organizations to fight a toxic plant that is affecting women’s reproductive health.
- Efforts to move more organizations to educate and engage their membership on reproductive justice issues. Examples include: education and information initiatives within organizations such as labor unions that have an existing base but an issue focus that has not historically included reproductive justice; or organizations that provide a variety of community based organizations the tools they need to talk to their specific constituency about reproductive justice.

Possible Organizations to Fund

- Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice
- Alaska Community Action on Toxics
- Center for Young Women’s Development
- Latino Issues Forum
- Western States Center
- Young Women’s Collaborative
- Organizacion en California de Lideres Campesinas
- National Asian Pacific American Women’s Forum
- National Advocates for Pregnant Women
- Women’s Voices for the Earth

What to Look For:

- Reproductive justice organizations that have done cross-movement collaborations on specific campaigns.
- Organizations with a comprehensive network, training curriculum, and support mechanisms to help non-RJ-focused organizations to incorporate reproductive justice issues into their work.
- Viable progressive organizations that are incorporating reproductive justice into their core programming. For example, an effective and prominent national Latino organization launching an reproductive justice organizing program, lends important legitimacy and exposure to reproductive justice issues.