



Black History Month

A brief history of the reproductive justice movement



Created by Victory Nwabu-Ekeoma,
Share-Net Netherlands Secretariat

INTRODUCTION

All throughout February, the achievements, excellence, culture, and history of Black Americans are being recognized and celebrated in the United States and acknowledged throughout the world. At Share-Net Netherlands (SNNL) we want to take this opportunity to highlight the history of the movement for reproductive justice, a term coined by African American women which embeds reproductive rights within a social justice framework.

This Black History Month, we're sharing a brief history of the reproductive justice movement, rounding it off with some resources that further highlight the history and experiences of black women and LGBTQ+ people in the fight for reproductive justice

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF REPRODUCTIVE INJUSTICE

The necessity of a reproductive justice framework is underscored by the historical roots of the reproductive oppression black, indigenous and women of colour (BIWOC) and LGBTQ+ people have faced.

During the slavery era in the United States, the sexual and reproductive capacities of enslaved African women were viewed as the property of their owners. Dehumanised as they were, enslaved women also became the non-consenting study subjects central to the birth of gynaecology. These women were operated on without anaesthesia as they were believed to be able to withstand extreme pain, a false belief about the biological difference in pain tolerance between black and white people that still holds credence in medicine today¹. Even with the abolition of slavery and the 20th century civil rights movements, black women's bodies found itself situated at the centre of larger social issues such as overpopulation and criminality. With the eugenics movement of the late 19th and early 20th century propagating ideas of decreasing birth rates among those deemed "unfit" or "genetically inferior", the pro-creative exploitation of black women continued through discriminatory and restrictive policies, such as federally funded welfare programmes which underwrote the coercive sterilization of thousands of poor African American women². With women of the early feminist health movement of the late 20th century demanding greater bodily autonomy, at the centre were the wants and demands of white, middle-class women, which greatly focused on legalizing abortion as an individual choice, and largely ignored the needs and issues of women of colour, poor women, and LGBTQ+ people such as an inability to access to these services, unsafe homes and communities, inadequate wages, or discriminatory policies. In response to the monochromatism of this early feminist health movement, the reproductive justice movement was born.

THE REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE MOVEMENT

The term 'reproductive justice' was coined in 1994 by a caucus of 12 black women who were dissatisfied with limited debate on "choice" that characterized reproductive rights advocacy.

The large focus on choice ignored the threats to the reproductive autonomy of black women rooted in legacies of reproductive oppression. As founding member of the movement, Loretta Ross, later wrote, "[o]ur ability to control what happens to our bodies is constantly challenged by poverty,

¹ Hoffman KM, Trawalter S, Axt JR, Oliver MN. Racial bias in pain assessment and treatment recommendations, and false beliefs about biological differences between blacks and whites [Internet]. *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A*. 2016;113(16):4296-4301. Available from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4843483/>

² Morrison, JC. Resuscitating the Black Body: Reproductive Justice as Resistance to the State's Property Interest in Black Women's Reproductive Capacity [Internet]. *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*; 2019 [cited 2021 Feb 18]. Available from <https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1395&context=vjlf>

racism, environmental degradation, sexism, homophobia, and injustice...”³. The reproductive justice movement goes beyond individualistic notions of “choice”, which assumes all women can and do decide for themselves if and when to have children, that they have resources to follow through with their family planning choices, and that they retain autonomy over their bodies. It was founded on elements of intersectionality, a framework coined by professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, human rights, social justice, black feminist theory, and concepts of self-help/community care which originated with the Black Women’s health movement lead by Byllye Avery. The women that laid the foundation for the movement called themselves Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice. Since then, BIWOC and other marginalized women and LGBTQ+ people have been taking on nuanced power dynamics and addressing intersecting oppressions with the desire to support all women’s human right to living good quality, self-determined lives.

WHERE ARE WE TODAY?

With the unequivocal call for the right of all women to have or not have children and to nurture children in safe and healthy environments, BIWOC have come together in solidarity to redefine reproductive freedom.

Reproductive justice collectives like SisterSong have been leading contemporary movements for reproductive justice. As co-sponsor of the 2004 women’s march in Washington, D.C., SisterSong shifted the march’s focus from the dominant reproductive rights logic of “choice” to the broader vision of “social justice”. This shift was dramatically symbolized by renaming the march from ‘Save Women’s Lives: March for Freedom of Choice’ to the ‘March for Women’s Lives’. This not only recognized that women of colour have fewer reproductive choices, but also highlighted that they experience worse outcomes when compared to white women. Maternal mortality rates are three-times higher among African Americans compared to other ethnic groups⁴. Legislation still acts to target or disproportionately affect pregnant and parenting BIWOC through the demonisation and criminalisation of factors like their immigration status, being poor or their substance use. African American women have the highest abortion rates in the United States, a fact that is interconnected with lack of access to comprehensive sex education, healthcare services, adequate wages, housing, and reliable contraception⁵. Even the police slaughter of unarmed black people is a reproductive justice issue as it violates a mother’s right to raise their children in healthy, safe and humane environments. This is why reproductive justice is important. It does not just allot BIWOC and LGBTQ+ people a marginalized voice within a larger reproductive rights agenda that has historically alienated and is still alienating tens of thousands of women. Rather, it lets marginalized women lead a

³ Chrisler, JC. Introduction: A Global Approach to Reproductive Justice—Psychosocial and Legal Aspects and Implications [Internet]. William & Mary Journal of Race, Gender, and Social Justice. 2013 December. [cited 2021 Feb 19];20(1):1. Available from <https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1367&context=wmjowl>

⁴ Women of Colour and the Struggle for RJ [Intenet]. If/When/How. 2018. [cited 2021 Feb 19]. Available from <https://vawnet.org/sites/default/files/materials/files/2016-08/Women-of-Color-and-the-Struggle-for-RJ-Issue-Brief.pdf>

movement that, through requiring social justice alongside human and women's rights, radically redefines what reproductive freedom means.

FURTHER RESOURCES

The following resources present a selection of books, articles, podcasts, and other sources that spotlight the history, experiences, reflections, and contributions of Black and trans women, and non-binary folk in the fight for a more inclusive and intersectional approach to SRHR and reproductive justice.

To read

- [Radical Reproductive Justice: Foundations, Theory, Practice, Critique](#) edited by L. J. Ross, L. Roberts, E. Derkas, W. Peoples, and P. Bridgewater Toure (Feminist Press, 2017) (book) – *this revelatory anthology oscillates between poetry, art, theory, history, and practical applications to expand on the social justice discourse surrounding “reproductive rights”.*
- [Reproductive Rights and Justice: Who Gets Left Out of the Conversation](#) by Micaela Stevenson for the Minority Sex Report (blog) – *Stevenson writes on the impacts of infertility and the necessity to include women who are unable have children in the reproductive justice movement.*
- [12 Days of Global Health: Grappling with inequities and injustices in sexual and reproductive health](#) by Professor Ernestina Coast for London School of Economics (blog) – *Coast reflects on her research on inequities and injustices and how structural violence impacts people's health and wellbeing.*
- [Sexual health must be anti-racist: A reflection for educators and providers](#) by Terri Harris for Girls Globe (blog) – *Harris writes on the importance of ongoing internal reflection, centring BIPOC & marginalized communities, and decolonising the strategies used in the SRHR space to be actively anti-racist.*
- [Reproductive injustice, trans rights, and eugenics](#) by Blas Radi in *Sexual Reproductive Health Matters* (research article) – *Radi explores how recognition of gender identity of trans people can affect their SRHR, focusing on the eugenic dimensions of trans policies, and how a reproductive justice approach can challenge the dominant discourse impacting trans SRHR.*

To listen

- [The Sex Agenda Podcast](#) (podcast) – Hosted by Decolonising Contraception founder, Dr Annabel Sowemmo, and political activist and commentator, Edem Ntumy, this podcast rounds up sexual health news, social justice issues, and spotlights those addressing inequalities within the SRHR sector.
- [Talking Radical Radio: Centering BIPOC youth in questions of sexual health and rights](#) (podcast) – Hosted by writer and activist Scott Neigh, this episode hears from Sarah Edo of Nuance and pihêsiw of the Native Youth Sexual Health Network on centring BIPOC youth in questions of sexual health and rights.

To watch

- **I May Destroy You** (series) – this Black British drama created by Michaela Coel follows writer Arabella (played by Coel) as she untangles the trauma of her sexual assault and embarks on a journey to rebuild her life. Available on HBO Max and BBC iPlayer.
- **POSE** (series) – this LGBTQ+ drama helmed by director Ryan Murphy centres the stories of African American and Latino LGBTQ and gender-nonconforming characters as it explores their underground ballroom culture in late 80s New York juxtaposed by the complex issues facing this community, like the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and trans violence. Available on Netflix.