

WOMEN OF COLOR AND REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE: AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

Reproductive justice, at the most basic, is a woman's right to control her own body and life. Contraception, maternity, forced/coerced contraception and sterilization, emergency contraception, family planning, abortion, and reproductive health (including issues of HIV/AIDS and other STIs) are all important parts of the broad topic of reproductive rights.

For many women, especially African American women, abortion is not the key issue in the fight for reproductive rights. Instead, issues of maternal mortality, violence against women, lack of affordable prenatal care, teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and the effects of poverty on reproductive health take center stage.

Violence Against Women

Black women have been active in the movements against rape and domestic violence from the beginning; however, their specific cultural concerns have often been left out of the discourse on violence against women. We know that African American females experience intimate partner violence at a rate 35% higher than that of white females, and about 2.5 times that rate of women of other races (1). However, they are less likely than white women to use social services, battered women's programs, or go to the hospital because of domestic violence. This may have to do with lack of access to services in areas with high minority populations.

Maternal Mortality

In a 1999 report, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) put the average death rate for African American mothers at 19.6 per 100,000 live births, about the same as the rate in Nicaragua or Vietnam, and four times the rate of white women in the US (2). While socioeconomic status may influence these rates by denying women access to proper medical treatment, we should also take into account the racism that exists within the healthcare system and medical testing.

Teenage Pregnancy

Teenage pregnancy and poverty are very closely related. Class plays more of a determining role in teen pregnancy rates than does race, and this disproportionately affects African American female teens because of the high poverty rates among African American women. For example, one in four African American children is born to a teenage mother (3).

Contraception

Throughout history, females within minority populations have been subjected to forced or coerced sterilization. In recent years, several states have considered legislating forced contraception by making Depo Provera and Norplant, a long-acting contraceptive implant that was approved for usage in 1990, mandatory for young inner-city women on welfare, usually women of color (4).

HIV/AIDS

In 2002, the AIDS diagnosis rate among African Americans was almost 11 times the rate among whites. More specifically, African-American women had a 23 times greater diagnoses rate than white women (5). Consequently, AIDS is currently the leading cause of death for African American women age 24-36 (6). Unfortunately, safe sex efforts to help curb the spread of AIDS are often rejected by (usually male) African American community leaders because these efforts are seen as "sexually suggestive or culturally inappropriate" (6).

(1) Bureau of Justice Statistics (10/01)
(2) National Black Women's health Project Maternal Mortality among Black and White Women by State: U.S. 1987-1996, Centers for Disease Control
(3) Wattleton, Faye. "Teenage Pregnancy: A Case for national action" 107-111
(4) Roberts, Dorothy. Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty. 1997
(5) Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). HIV/AIDS Surveillance Report 2002
(6) Simmons, Judy D. "Abortion: A Matter of Choice." 120-127

Take Action!

SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective

- ❖ This coalition of local, regional, and national grassroots organizations representing Black/African American, Latina/Puerto Rican, Native American/Indigenous, and Asian/Pacific Islander women was formed with the shared recognition that, “as women of color, we have the right and responsibility to represent ourselves and our communities.” www.sistersong.net

Recommended Readings

- ❖ Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice By Jael Silliman, Marlene Gerber Fried, Loretta Ross, and Elena R. Gutiérrez
- ❖ Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty By Dorothy Roberts
- ❖ The Black Women’s Health Book: Speaking for Ourselves By Evelyn White
- ❖ Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the United States By Rickie Solinger
- ❖ When Chicken-Heads Come Home To Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It Down: Joan Morgan

Notable Black Women

Byllye Avery (1937-): founder of the National Black Women’s Health Project, now the **Black Women’s Health Imperative**, and contributor to *The New Our Bodies Ourselves*.

Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955): founder of the **National Council of Negro Women**, the first national women’s organization to officially endorse birth control.

Dr. Dorothy Brown (1919- 2004): first Black woman general surgeon in the US. As a Tennessee state legislator, she was the first state representative to introduce a bill that would legalize abortion.

Shirley Chisholm (1924- 2005): first woman candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination and cofounder of the **National Organization for Women (NOW)**.

Rev. Barbara Harris (1930-): first Black woman and first woman ever to become a bishop in the Episcopal Church. She was just barely confirmed because of her past as a social activist and abortion clinic escort.

bell hooks (1952-): acclaimed feminist critic and scholar who campaigns against the degradation and exploitation of Black women.

Audre Lorde (1934-1992): a self-described ‘black-lesbian feminist mother lover poet’ who was State Poet of New York from 1991-1993.

Loretta J. Ross: founder and Executive Director of the **National Center for Human Rights Education (NCHRE)** and one of the first Black women to direct a rape crisis center in the 1970s. She served in the capacity of Associate Director for the 2004 March for Women’s Lives.

Harriet Tubman (1819-1913): escaped slave who helped guide hundreds of other slaves to freedom on the Underground Railroad and a crusader for women’s rights.

Sojourner Truth (1797-1883): escaped slave and powerful speaker who campaigned for abolition, woman suffrage, and desegregation.

RESOURCES

Black Women’s Health Imperative
www.blackwomenshealth.org

National Council of Negro Women
www.ncnw.org

National Women’s Alliance
www.nwaforchange.org

Black American Feminism
<http://www.library.ucsb.edu/subjects/blackfeminism/>

African Women’s Bibliographic Database
<http://www.africabib.org/women.html>

Afrol
www.afrol.com/categories/gender_women

All Africa
allafrica.com/women

Black Women’s Health online
blackwomenshealth.com

Femme Noir (Black Lesbian site)
femmenoir.net

Incite! Women of Color Against Violence
<http://www.incite-national.org/>