

Toni M. Bond Leonard

The Struggle for Reproductive and Intellectual Integrity

Black women long have been concerned about their ability to control their reproductive integrity. Since slavery, Black women have fought to have command over childbearing, traditional methods of labor and delivery, and parenting. While socio-economic and political systems have systematically stymied these efforts, Black women always have been fervent participants and supporters of organized strategies to fight back restrictive policies that seek to bar them from exercising their human right to reproductive self-determination. So much so, that Black women became the founding mothers of a framework that would change the face of the entire reproductive health and rights movement.

Women's struggle for the right to be self-determining about their bodies has been a long and arduous one. Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights passed in 1948 was written to ensure that the atrocities like those experienced in the Second World War would never occur again (UDHR), the protection of individuals' (especially women's) right to have reproductive self-determination was not included in that document (Freedman and Isaacs 20). The 1968 Proclamation of Tehran was the first mention of the right to control fertility (20). Since that time, the women's movement has worked tirelessly to secure the reproductive rights of women to access contraceptive methods and safe abortion services. This right, however, has been a futile promise for low-income women, young women, and women of color, especially Black women.

For Black women, the claim to their wombs was carved out during the transatlantic slave trade. Patricia Hill Collins states that “African-American women’s experiences as mothers have been shaped by the dominant group’s efforts to harness Black women’s sexuality and fertility to a system of capitalist exploitation” (50). The African American experience as human chattel to be bought and sold was created by the dominant culture to support the growing agricultural and industrial economy in the U.S. In *Africa in World History*, authors Erik Gilbert and Jonathan T. Reynolds point out that:

[I]t was knowledge and disease resistance that helped to doom millions of Africans to servitude in the Americas.... Africans even provided much of the knowledge necessary to establish cattle ranching as a profitable enterprise in the Caribbean and South America. In addition to providing the agricultural and mining technology that helped make the New World economy profitable, Africans also possessed a degree of disease resistance that made them well suited for life in the Americas. (155-56)

Race became the justification for the enslavement of Africans. In an effort to further substantiate the underlying economic motives, European slave traders in the New World offered the argument that slavery accorded protection to Africans who were considered “inferior to Europeans whites” because they “lacked both intelligence and morality” (164). The costs associated with the capture and transport of African slaves to the New World was high. Thus, forced impregnation through mating between African slaves and rape by slave owners was one method to ensure the continued reproduction of slave labor. Paula Giddings notes that, “[A] master could save the cost of buying new slaves by impregnating his own slave, or for that

matter having anyone impregnate her. Being able to reproduce one's own labor force would be well worth the fine, even in the unlikely event that it would be imposed" (37).

Yet Black women, even during slavery, were not silent victims. Instead, they often employed the use of traditional knowledge of herbs and medicines to prevent pregnancy, as well as methods to induce abortions. Even during the middle passage, African women strove to prevent their children from being enslaved. Some of them would jump overboard while pregnant (Roberts *Killing*). Painful actions of this nature highlight Black women's determined refusals to provide human labor for the slave economy. This degradation of Black women's bodies did not end with the transatlantic slave trade, however. Despite the abolishment of antebellum slavery, the myths and stereotypes of Black women as sexually immoral creatures whose fertility needed to be controlled continued through population control measures.

Post-slavery through the mid-1960's saw Black women's reproduction controlled through mass forced sterilization methods like the "Mississippi appendectomy," a practice of performing hysterectomies on women without their consent. From the 1960's to the 1970's southern Black women were threatened with denial of welfare benefits if they refused the procedure (Roberts, "Forum"). Roberts notes that this same practice of performing hysterectomies without informed consent was done in teaching hospitals during the same period in the North. A victim of a forced hysterectomy herself, noted civil rights activist and feminist, Fannie Lou Hammer coined the phrase "Mississippi appendectomy" (Kiely). Hammer and other Black feminists civil rights activists were outspoken about this form of abuse (Hull 13-22).

As participants in the mainstream women's movement, Black women found themselves on the margins of a movement that understood the need for women to control their childbearing, yet misunderstood the intersectionality between race, class, and gender. By the end of the 1980's

Black women sought to formally organize their efforts around reproductive rights. Formally incorporated in 1984, the National Black Women's Health Project (NBWHP) was organized to work on Black women's health issues and to create a formal national agenda to address the reproductive health disparities of Black women (The Black Women's). One of the first successfully organized initiatives to address the issue of Black women and reproductive rights, NBWHP carried forth the voices of thousands of Black women to policymakers in Congress. As the organization grew in its stature, so too did the expectations of the funding community and White allies (The Black Women's). One of its core strategies was self-help, a strategy that created the spaces for Black women to tell their stories and to experience compassionate support and affirmation from other Black women (The Black Women's). This strategy became the organization's staple organizing tool to bring together like-minded Black women. It was a winning strategy that facilitated Black women in turning the personal to the political and helped the organization grow its membership base exponentially. At its height, NBWHP had chapters around the country and internationally (Silliman). Like many other Black women's reproductive health, rights, and justice organizations, NBWHP found itself pressured to do more policy and advocacy work (Silliman). As Black women began to take more prominent roles in the reproductive health and rights movement, their knowledge of the nuanced ways to effectively carryout grassroots organizing efforts in their own communities would be continuously challenged by the funding community and White allies.

In 1994, after years of contributing to the reproductive health and rights framework, and being unsuccessful at getting mainstream activists to work on more than just abortion, Black women coined the term "Reproductive Justice." Grounded within the human rights framework, reproductive justice was an intersectional analysis that brought together race, class, and gender

with reproductive autonomy. SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective provides the following definition for reproductive justice:

The reproductive justice framework – the right to have children, not have children, and to parent the children we have in safe and healthy environments -- is based on the human right to make personal decisions about one’s life, and the obligation of government and society to ensure that the conditions are suitable for implementing one’s decisions is important for women of color. (SisterSong)

Reproductive justice goes beyond the right to have an abortion, and instead, includes a women’s right to access contraceptive methods to control her fertility, the right to terminate a pregnancy, and access to the social and economic supports to parent the child(ren) she already has. “The reproductive justice framework is about creating the conditions for women to be healthy, have healthy families, and to live in healthy communities” (Bond Leonard). In creating the term reproductive justice and laying its foundation, Black women have affirmed their expertise through their lived experiences and definitively confirmed their intellectual authority by offering an analysis of sexual and reproductive health issues that recognizes the intersectionality of race, class, and gender.

Works Cited

- Bond Leonard, Toni M. "Reproductive Justice: A Framework to Ensure the Health of Women, Family and Community." *Chicago Defender Online*. 4 June 2009. Web. 8 Mar. 2012.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Vol. 2. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.
- Freedman, Lynn P. and Stephen L. Isaacs. "Human Rights and Reproductive Choice." *Studies in Family Planning* 24.1 (1993): 18-30. Web. 16 Feb. 2012.
- Giddings, Paula. *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*. New York: W. Morrow, 1984. Print.
- Gilbert, Erik and Jonathan T. Reynolds. *Africa in World History: From Prehistory to the Present*. Third. Upper Saddle River: Pearson, 2012. Print.
- Hull, Gloria T., et al., ed. *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*. Old Westbury: The Feminist Press, 1982. Print.
- Kiely, Dr. Lisa. "The Historical Context of Henrietta Lacks." n.d. U of Maryland. Web. 16 Feb. 2012.
- Black Women's Health Imperative. "Our Story." n.d. Web. 16 Feb. 2012.
- Roberts, Dorothy E. "Forum: Black Women and the Pill." *Family Planning Perspectives* 32.2 (2000). Web. 16 Feb. 2012.
- . *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproductive, and the Meaning of Liberty*. New York: Vintage, 1999. Print.

Silliman, Jael Miriam, et al. *Undivided rights: women of color organize for reproductive justice*.

Cambridge: South End Press, 2004. Print.

SisterSong. "What is RJ." n.d. Web. 7 Mar 2012.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. n.d. Web. 16 Feb 2012.