

Abortion is a Reproductive Justice Issue for Black Families and Communities

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There have always been those who have stood in the way of our exercising our rights, who tried to restrict our choices. There probably always will be. But we who have been oppressed should not be swayed in our opposition to tyranny, of any kind, especially attempts to take away our reproductive freedom. You may believe abortion is wrong. We respect your belief and we will do all in our power to protect that choice for you. You may decide that abortion is not an option you would choose. Reproductive freedom guarantees your right not to. All that we ask is that no one deny another human being the right to make her own choice. That no one condemn her to exercise her choices in ways that endanger her health, her life.

We Remember: African American Women for Reproductive Freedom, 1989

We are engaged in every aspect of the decision-making process about this struggle against eugenics and for human rights, providing a context for our abortion decisions by telling our stories and validating the trust of our communities. We always resist. Our opponents would do well to never forget that. Trust Black Women.

Loretta Ross, Radical Reproductive Justice: Foundation, Theory, Practice, Critique, 2017

Over thirty years ago, 16 Black women courageously led a movement for reproductive freedom with the release and distribution of the seminal brochure *We Remember: African American Women for Reproductive Freedom* in 1989. In response to the U.S. Supreme Court decision to uphold Missouri's restrictions to abortion in the *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* case, the brochure was a reminder that when abortions are made illegal or restricted, Black women disproportionately suffer life-threatening complications and even death. Furthermore, it placed Black women's struggle for reproductive freedom in historical context - our struggle against intersecting oppressions during enslavement, Jim Crow, and the War on Drugs - and defined what reproductive freedom meant to Black women.

We reflect on their legacy in this moment when the U.S. Supreme Court will rule on another case, *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, seeking to restrict abortion in Mississippi and overturn *Roe v. Wade* during the COVID-19 pandemic, an ongoing maternal health crisis, and sanctioned actions that disproportionately take the lives of Black people. Transnationally, cases such as this impact funding and policies towards abortion in other countries. While many countries are moving toward the liberalization of abortion laws, the

U.S. is moving in the opposite direction towards restriction. The purpose of this call to action is to 1) situate the current struggle for abortion rights within our broader struggle for reproductive justice, 2) uplift the leadership and activism of Black reproductive justice organizations working to safeguard affordable and accessible abortions, and 3) provide actions the White House can take that will contribute to Black people, families, and communities' sexual and reproductive health and wellbeing, which includes but is not limited to abortion.

I. Abortion is a Reproductive Justice Issue for Black Communities

Coined by U.S. Black women in 1994, reproductive justice, or the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities, is rooted in our experiences with and resistance to reproductive oppression. We have experienced forced pregnancy and childbearing, involuntary sterilization, restrictions to abortion and contraception, and policies and environments that endanger and take away our children. Reproductive justice captures the complexities of our lives as well as our activism. As a framework and a movement, it centers communities disproportionately impacted by reproductive oppression as well as uplifts our leadership and organizations. It is intersectional and it works to shift power (e.g., structures, policies, institutions).

Equitable access to safe and legal abortion is a reproductive justice issue. All people regardless of their backgrounds and circumstances have the right to decide when and how they want to have a child and we trust their ability to make the best decisions for themselves and their families. Although the U.S. Supreme Court legalized abortion in 1973 when it overturned Texas's attempt to criminalize abortion, it upheld the Hyde Amendment in 1980, preventing low-income individuals from using Medicaid to pay for abortions. *Harris v. McRae* is one of many Supreme Court decisions that have eroded *Roe v. Wade* and compromised the reproductive freedom of groups and communities that have been and continue to be marginalized (e.g., Black and Brown people, immigrants, LGBTQIA+ people, people with disabilities, young people). As a result, these groups and communities are susceptible to higher rates of unsafe abortions which may result in life-threatening complications and even death. Furthermore, U.S. domestic policies impact access to abortion in other countries. For example, the so-called "Global Gag Rule," which was expanded under the Trump Administration, prohibited any form of U.S. assistance to nongovernmental organizations providing or advocating for abortions in other countries where there is already limited or no access to contraception and abortion, as well as high rates of unintended pregnancy and unsafe abortions.

II. Uplifting the Activism and Leadership of the Black Reproductive Justice Movement

Despite these challenges and restrictions to safe and legal abortion, Black reproductive justice organizations have resisted attempts to control the reproductive decision-making of communities and limit their access to healthcare. This was true when 12 Black women formed Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice in 1993 as a response to President Bill Clinton's Health Security Act, which would have neglected the healthcare needs of low-income individuals (Leonard, 2017). It was also true in 2010 when anti-abortion billboards

were placed in our communities declaring Black children an endangered species in hopes of garnering support for anti-abortion legislation rooted in racism and sexism. Under the leadership of Loretta Ross and then Monica Simpson, SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective led a national coalition of Black reproductive justice organizations demanding our communities to “Trust Black Women” and defeated local and state legislation (Ross, 2017). Similar efforts led by other Black reproductive justice activists and organizations have been conducted throughout the U.S. in response to similar campaigns while In Our Own Voice: National Black Women’s Reproductive Justice Agenda works with its state partners to focus its efforts to change policies at the regional and national levels. For Black reproductive justice organizations, our priority is making sure our families are safe and have the resources and decision-making power to do what is best for them.

III. Call to Action

Although our communities and organizations will continue to fight for, serve, hold, and uplift our families and communities during this difficult time, increased funding and changes in legislation are essential to ensure all people continue to have not only access to safe and legal abortion but everything required for their sexual and reproductive health and wellbeing. As a result, we recommend the following:

1. increased funding and support to Black reproductive justice organizations working to ensure equitable access to safe and legal abortion, healthcare and other needed services in our communities,
2. the establishment of a White House Office of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Wellbeing that can push forward a federal strategy for promoting equitable sexual and reproductive health and wellbeing through a human rights, gender and racial equity lens, and
3. the incorporation of reproductive justice values into foreign policy, which includes ratifying human rights treaties that protect sexual and reproductive health and rights (e.g., The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women).

Black reproductive justice organizations are on the front line advocating for and supporting our families and communities. Many of them are underfunded and lack the infrastructure needed to adequately respond to the challenges our communities navigate daily. Specialized funding to these organizations is necessary to ensure that they can continue to do the work. Moreover, the establishment of a White House Office of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Wellbeing is imperative. The Office would work in tandem with these organizations to realize holistic sexual and reproductive health services and social support policies, regulations, and funding streams. It would also work to remedy those policies, regulations, and funding streams that are currently siloed, disjointed, and ill-suited for ensuring that federal agencies, states, and healthcare systems address systemic racism. The Office will provide a permanent infrastructure to 1) develop a federal strategy for promoting equitable sexual and reproductive health and wellbeing through a human rights, gender and racial equity lens, and 2) better coordinate the actions of the many departments and agencies whose actions in both domestic and foreign policy contexts impact sexual and reproductive health and wellbeing of people in the U.S. and around the world, including the Departments of Defense, Education, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, Labor, Housing and Urban Development, Treasury, and Veterans Affairs, and the Office of Personnel Management. Lastly, the U.S.

In the midst of a global pandemic and with maternal mortality rates at the highest they have been in decades, we cannot possibly afford to turn back the clock or reverse policies that protect the reproductive freedoms of every individual. As we approach the 50th Anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, we ask our allies in government to lead from the front. We ask them to see that it is imperative that we stand firmly in our convictions, hold the line, and refuse to back down from the fight - especially given its inevitable impact on our community specifically. We, the signers of this document, stand firmly on the shoulders of the warriors who came before us and declare that the next generation of women and pregnant people will be spared the indignity of having others legislate away their bodily autonomy. Our legacy will be one of liberation, enlightenment, and empowerment and we will NOT relent until that also includes the irrevocable right to have or not have an abortion.

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