Race, Gender and Abortion

How Reproductive Justice Activists Won in Georgia
(abridged version)

SisterSong Policy Report
October 2010

SisterSong
Women of Color
Reproductive Justice
Collective

© 2010
CONTENTS

Introduction 1
First the Billboards, then the Bill 3
Southern Exposures of Race and Gender 4
Analyzing the Political Moment 5
SisterSong’s Response 6
Mobilizing the Reproductive Justice Movement 8
Mobilizing Our Allies 11
Creating a Lasting Impact: Lessons Learned for the Future 12
Trust Black Women Founding Partners 15
Statement of Solidarity 16
SisterSong Staff and Management Circle 17
Introduction

Women of color and our allies won a significant policy victory in Georgia in 2010 when we successfully challenged a dangerous publicity campaign launched with billboard-splashed allegations that claimed “Black Children are an Endangered Species.” We defeated state legislation attempting to expand abortion restrictions by linking race, gender and abortion. More than 600 bills reducing abortion access were introduced in state legislatures in 2010, according to the Guttmacher Institute. Among this tsunami of abortion restrictions, one bill – Georgia Senate Bill 529 – failed due to the leadership of women of color working together using the reproductive justice framework.

SisterSong, along with our allies, effectively rebuffed the anti-abortion movement in our home state by mobilizing our community and our larger network of national reproductive justice activists. As reproductive justice activists, our intersectional approach effectively contested this new front in the abortion wars that would have wielded race and gender as a weapon to undermine abortion rights. By working strategically with pro-choice allies in our state and across the country, we brought our collective resources together to deliver one of the few national success stories in the 2010 legislative season.

Women of color groups played a unique and essential role as a trusted voice that galvanized leaders of color and key civil and human rights organizations to take action on abortion rights issues, sometimes for the first time. We proved that leaders and institutions that needed to be activated in the African American community could only be moved by black women working together. We had the cultural competency to craft the right messages, but even more importantly, we had the long-standing relationships within our communities of color to be able to tap into trusted messengers to deploy them effectively. We enlisted members of the Congressional Black Caucus, religious leaders, and national Civil Rights organizations, demonstrating how women of color reproductive justice leaders must lead in defeating such race- and gender-based efforts. Our vision for the future is that national Civil Rights organizations officially and publicly join the Reproductive Justice movement in defending the human rights of women of color.

We worked strategically to divide our opponents’ base of support and – in the end – increased frictions between the extremist and moderate wings of the conservative anti-abortion movement in Georgia. With their absolutist, non-compromising stances, the Tea Party faction of the Republican base fought with moderate Republicans. They created an internal implosion among their own forces. Women of color played a helpful role in this process by negotiating reasonably with moderate Republican allies and splitting our opponents. In a conservative-dominated legislature in a decidedly “red” state, extremism was a huge part of the bill’s unpredictable failure.

This intrusive bill would have written into law the right of the state to question the motives of every woman seeking an abortion. Its proponents falsely claimed that the majority of women obtaining abortions are coerced, denying that women can be trusted to make decisions for ourselves. If this race- and gender-baiting legislation succeeded, it would have had damaging national implications for the entire pro-choice movement by driving a racial wedge in the pro-choice movement and a gender wedge in communities of color. It would also trigger a national challenge to Roe v. Wade, making it a felony for a doctor to perform an abortion that had allegedly been “coerced” due to the race or sex of the fetus.

This report is a brief summary of the policy victory in Georgia and some subsequent activities since the legislative session. It outlines how we won by shifting the debate, organizing our allies, engaging our communities, and achieving policy success. We protected abortion rights in Georgia from perilous legislation. At the same time, we shifted the behavior of African American women leaders to form the Trust Black Women Partnership (TBW), a long-term strategy to ensure that black women can mobilize wherever such campaigns appear in African American communities. This report will share the lessons we learned so that activists in other states and communities can benefit and build on the momentum of our success.

continued
Women of color won this victory by proving that our leadership can achieve policy victories by influencing decision makers, allies and funders. Our primary strategies worked to:

1. Reframe the debate to focus on women instead of abortion
2. Research the opposition to expose their distortions and hidden agendas
3. Develop a communications plan to work with the media and inform our base of reproductive justice activists
4. Provide data and facts to challenge the opponents’ distortions
5. Recruit Civil Rights organizations and leaders to alert the African American community
6. Engage communities of faith as allies in religious institutions
7. Organize a legislative strategy to defeat the bill
8. Mobilize the medical and legal communities for expert testimony
9. Utilize our allies to strengthen our capacity
10. Create a lasting impact of lessons learned for the future.

SisterSong thanks our strong partners in this fight, including SPARK Reproductive Justice NOW!, Feminist Women’s Health Center of Atlanta, Planned Parenthood of the Southeast Region, Raksha, and SisterLove, Inc., as well as many allies around the country (who will be named later) who worked with us to defeat this misleading bill. We would particularly like to thank Heidi Williamson, SisterSong’s national advocacy coordinator; Paris Hatcher and Tonya Williams of SPARK Reproductive Justice NOW!; Nikema Williams, the public policy director at Planned Parenthood of the Southeast Region; and Lauren Williams of the Feminist Women’s Health Center for their successful management of the legislative strategy.

When race, gender and abortion intersect in public policies, the leadership of women of color is vital for success. We proved the power of the reproductive justice framework in achieving a legislative victory.
First the Billboards, then the Bill

On February 5, 2010, 65 billboards were quickly erected in predominantly African American neighborhoods in Atlanta with a sorrowful picture of a black male child proclaiming, “Black Children are an Endangered Species.” Georgia Right to Life and the newly-formed Radiance Foundation spent a mere $20,000 to sponsor the billboards that included the address of a previously unknown anti-abortion website. The billboards themselves were owned by CBS -- the same CBS that ran the anti-abortion ad during the 2010 Super Bowl -- sponsored by Focus on the Family, featuring football star Tim Tebow. Interestingly, CBS previously refused pro-choice advertisements on their billboards in Atlanta sponsored by the Feminist Women’s Health Center, claiming that advertising abortion services was “too controversial.”

These stunning billboards attempted to use the history of medical mistrust in the African American community to accuse abortion providers of racism and genocide in a bizarre conspiracy theory. Not so coincidentally, they launched a misogynistic attack to shame-and-blame black women who choose abortion, alleging that we endanger the future of our children. After all, many people in our community already believe that black men are an endangered species because of white supremacy. They used a social responsibility frame to claim that black women have a racial obligation to have more babies -- especially black male babies -- despite our individual circumstances. This social responsibility frame challenged the individualistic, privacy-focused frame of the pro-choice movement. At SisterSong, we speculated they chose to use an intersectional approach in this new attack campaign because our transformative reproductive justice framework -- that intersects race and reproductive politics within a human rights context -- is effectively forcing our opponents to shift tactics to try to racially segment our movements.

The campaign also accused Planned Parenthood, the largest single provider of birth control and abortion services in the black community, of targeting the community for “genocide” because of its “racist founder,” Margaret Sanger. The billboard campaign was quickly followed by a 2009 documentary film with the same theme, Maafa 21, distributed to black churches and organizations.

Because of the conflation of race, gender and abortion in the provocative marketing campaign, the racist billboards very quickly became national news, picked up by CNN, The New York Times, MSNBC, ABC, The Washington Post, The LA Times, many other newspapers, and dozens of national and local radio and television shows. Georgia Right to Life and the Radiance Foundation, working with Priests for Life of Staten Island, NY with their $10 million war chest, also announced plans to spread their campaign to at least 10 other states. Since the Georgia campaign, similar billboards have already appeared in Arkansas, Texas, Missouri, and Tennessee.

These outrageous billboards were the opening salvo in a campaign to introduce a bill into the Georgia Legislature called the Prenatal Non-Discrimination Act (PreNDA), modeled after national legislation introduced by Trent Franks (R-AZ) in Congress, deceptively and disrespectfully called the Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass Prenatal Nondiscrimination Act of 2009 (H.R. 1822). Although the national legislation failed in Congress, it provided a model for anti-abortion groups in states to criminalize abortions provided to women of color allegedly because of the “race or sex” of the fetus. Anti-abortion advocates identified Georgia and other Southern states and Midwestern states as fertile ground in which to organize the black community against abortion rights, and split African American voters along a gender fault line. Simultaneously, they could fracture the pro-choice community along a racial fault line. They could also use xenophobia to attack Asian American communities, building on anti-immigrant attitudes.

In Georgia, this outlandish proposal became House Bill 1155, but the companion bill was Senate Bill 529 or the “OB/GYN Criminalization and Racial Discrimination Act.” Central to their argument is the false claim that most, if not all, abortions are coerced, with the black community and Asian girls as the primary targets for elimination. The proposed legislation targeted abortion providers to drive them out of our state, making it a racketeering crime for them to provide an abortion to women if they have any reason to believe that the abortion is being sought because of the race or sex of the fetus. As a result, this bill would have intruded on patient confidentiality and threatened doctors with criminal sanctions.

Because of SisterSong’s work, our partner organizations, and the intransigence of our opponents, SB 529 was killed in the Rules Committee, the last committee before reaching the floor. Had this bill passed, however, it would have violated our human rights in the following ways:
• It would open the door to racial profiling of women of color, particularly African American and Asian American women, who seek reproductive health services, including abortion.

• It would isolate and stigmatize African American and Asian American women because doctors would be compelled to question our motives for seeking abortions and increase the barriers to reproductive health care.

• Unless the provider has reason to suspect a white woman is carrying an interracial fetus, preexisting biases and stereotypes would subject women of color to intrusive questions that white women would not be asked.

• This bill mandated disclosures about motives, which violates the patient’s right to privacy and confidentiality.

While it is obvious that this bill would have directly affected women of color, SB 529 also targeted doctors, placing them at risk for criminalization:

• This bill would harm doctors by holding them criminally and civilly liable for “alleged” coercion by a third party, such as a parent who urges a young woman to have an abortion.

• This bill would make providers hesitate to offer abortion services to women of color if increased vulnerability to criminal investigations result from providing legal abortions.

• This bill would increase medical malpractice costs, opening medical practices up to lawsuits for the “criminally aborted.” This would mean that fewer doctors would provide abortion services, further limiting the availability of abortion access in the state.

• Doctors would have an additional burden, even beyond the current law, of proving that they are not attempting to “solicit” abortions, like through routine advertising. Not only does this violate the free speech rights of doctors, it would mean invasive questioning of women, and massive amounts of paperwork, further delaying women’s access to services.

Southern Exposures of Race and Gender

As a region, the South does the least to protect women’s human rights and the most to oppose progressive legislation such as civil rights and immigration reform. Offering white Southerners a chance to pretend to champion racial justice and women’s rights at the same time proved to be an irresistible opportunity for the anti-abortion movement in Georgia.

It is important to analyze why African American and Asian American women were targets of such legislation. African Americans, particularly in the South, have consistently served as sacrifices for political gain, subject to attacks from many directions. It may be mere coincidence that African Americans in the South are some of the most loyal supporters of President Obama and his policies. We have large concentrations of voter strengths that can determine the outcomes of local and national elections. The religiosity of the black community compounds many injustices by heightening sexism, and shame and fear around issues of sex and sexuality. It was significant that the anti-abortionists were largely silent on the role of black men in pregnancy and parenting in this new strategy, except to use religious appeals to recruit them to support this new conspiracy theory that purports to eliminate black men.

While the average African American might reference the well-publicized and government-sanctioned Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, better know as the “Tuskegee Experiment,” as a reason for silence and apathy around the issue of abortion, there is a distinct cultural memory and historical context that drives how African American women approach reproductive health in the United States, and manifest mistrust of the medical community. During slavery, Black women were bred for the production of labor. After slavery, coercive sterilization was used to restrict the population growth of the poor and uneducated. Even today, we have to fight against the colonization of our genes, such as the case of Henrietta Lacks, a black woman who died of cancer in 1951, but whose pirated cells from her unwittingly donated cancerous tumor form the basis of much cancer research in this country.
Asian American women, on the other hand, are targeted as foreigners bringing strange customs around pregnancy, parenting and sexual stereotypes from their home countries that “contaminate” U.S. values and mores. The stereotypes endure over centuries, no matter how long Asian Americans have been in the U.S., but are particularly applied to more recent immigrants. They claim that Asian American women in America are pressured to have male children by their husbands and families. By combining the xenophobia of anti-immigrant racism and sexist beliefs about the alleged submissive nature of Asian American women, abortion opponents claim that they are preventing “gendercide” or the intentional elimination of female fetuses.

Women of color in the South are particularly vulnerable when it comes to accessing reproductive rights and services. While Atlanta is thought to be a progressive beacon of the South, the ugly truth bears itself out in the lives of women. Approximately 15 percent of Atlanta Fulton County residents live in poverty, and 23 percent of related children under age 18 are below poverty. Because of poverty and limited access to health care, infant mortality for black children has increased in Georgia, despite the fact the rates for white women have decreased.

In November 2004, a confusing and misleading initiative appeared on Florida voters’ ballots. The initiative, which passed by a two-to-one margin, strips young women’s right to privacy from Florida’s constitution by exempting mandatory parental notification laws for abortion. A fetal personhood amendment to the Florida Constitution will appear on the November 2010 ballot to determine if a fetus has all the protections of legal personhood or if a woman does. It is not possible to protect both the fetus and the woman’s rights at the same time, because the amendment would criminalize abortion, as well as methods of birth control that may interfere with a fertilized egg, like the morning-after pill. Penalties for women having an abortion could range up to 30 years imprisonment. Meanwhile, within this conservative state climate, Miami struggles to lower infant mortality and birth rates to teenage mothers, and has alarmingly high AIDS rates of 301 cases per 100,000 people.

In Jackson, Mississippi, the Jackson Women’s Health Organization which provides reproductive health care, including abortion to about 4,000 patients a year, has been the sole abortion service clinic in the state for the last two years. Additionally, Mississippi has the third highest unintended teenage pregnancy rate in the country, and has some of the highest numbers of women of reproductive age living in poverty.

As if to mock the bombing of a Birmingham, Alabama abortion clinic during the Olympics in 1996 that killed one person and severely wounded others, anti-abortionists launched a “Freedom Bus” tour against abortion rights at that same clinic in July 2010 that brought a hundred mostly white protestors to Atlanta to the King Center for Non-Violent Social Change.

While charges of racism and genocide are not at all new by abortion opponents, this was possibly one of their best opportunities to build on backlash against the Obama Administration and mine the religious conservatism of the Deep South. Georgia offered the opportunists the perfect storm conditions. They are determined to hijack the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement and distort it for their own purposes. What better place to launch a revision of civil rights history than Atlanta, the birthplace of the Civil Rights movement and the home of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.?

**Analyzing the Political Moment**

From the beginning, it was obvious to SisterSong we needed to immediately respond to this unexpected campaign and legislation. The first billboards were located only minutes up the street from our national headquarters. Even before they appeared, national media like the New York Times contacted us for interviews, because our opponents sent out advance press alerts announcing the campaign.

Our response was even more vital because of critical vulnerabilities we analyzed from our perspectives as women of color, including: 1) The overt religious appeals and the distortions of black history in the campaign would make work on reproductive justice in the African American community even more difficult; 2) They used visible black leaders in the campaign to describe themselves as protecting women
and children, and falsely claim they were saving our community from the “abortion industry”; and 3) The pro-choice movement has not historically responded adequately to charges of racism and genocide, visibly flinching when race and abortion are linked in narratives about ulterior motives. These accusations can sound credible given our collective inability to thoroughly confront issues of race and power in the pro-choice movement. Women of color generally, and African American women, in particular, had to take these folks on.

Our opponents crafted this strategy in 2009 in a secret meeting on St. Simon’s Island in South Georgia between Georgia Right to Life and the Georgia Republican Party. To provide an African American woman to champion the effort, they hired Catherine Davis, who failed twice at winning a Congressional seat as a black Republican. They hoped to build an unusual alliance between white and black conservatives, using religion and false compassion for black children to not only restrict abortion access in Georgia, but to split African American voters along gender and religious lines, increasing black support for conservative causes we would not otherwise endorse.

With a predominantly Republican legislature and a weakened pro-choice base in the South, the campaign had a good chance at success. If the billboards were not challenged and the legislation passed in Georgia, we expected that similar attempts would spread virally across the country in new efforts to restrict abortion, using race as a wedge. Subsequent events justified concerns. A ballot initiative in Colorado now is comparing fetuses to slaves, declaring that unborn fetuses are equivalent to enslaved African Americans. As of this writing, it is not clear whether the Colorado initiative will succeed.

Now the same forces that have denied the country universal health care, publicly funded birth control and abortion, and comprehensive sex education are using a different approach to attack abortion by manipulating the black community. A ginned-up “conspiracy theory” that places black women as the “destroyers” of the black family through abortion has in common with previous approaches like calling us “welfare queens” – a certainty of the same outcome: an increase in disabling poverty and instability for black women and our children. Black women are the backbone and core caretakers of the African American community and we will not stand silently by when opponents viciously attack our human rights.

It became obvious that the opposition’s strategy was to present another state-initiated challenge to Roe v. Wade, although this was not their only objective. It also portended a showdown between the far right, libertarian and moderate wings of the Republican Party within Georgia. It called the question on whether the concept of “saving black babies” would work to mobilize the disparate sectors of the Georgia anti-abortion movement, some of whom are not only openly sexist, but racist. And finally, it would test whether overt religious appeals could divide African American legislators and voters, such as had been done around the country on other cultural wedge issues, such as marriage equality and immigration.

Only our organizing efforts would tell if they would succeed.

SisterSong’s Response

SisterSong could not afford to be silent. SisterSong surged into action in response to SB 529. We had to be active on two fronts: to challenge the massive marketing campaign of the billboards, and mobilize to defeat the concomitant legislation. While we did not anticipate this unexpected development in our own backyard, we also assessed that we were providentially positioned to challenge this new front in the abortion wars. We only had from February until late April to defeat the legislation. The Georgia Legislative session lasts only three and a half months, or more specifically, only 40 days.

We had to make decisions quickly and we had to get them right.

SisterSong had worked with Generations Ahead and the National Asian Pacific American Women’s Forum in 2008 and 2009 to respond to Trent Franks’ national legislation. This
collaboration, including the Reproductive Health Technologies Project, evolved into the Race and Sex Selection Working Group in 2010, bringing together dozens of groups concerned about the national legislation.

During the national debate over the Franks’ bill, the sex selection aspect of the legislation appeared to have the most salience and offer the greatest threat, because the concept of black women having abortions due to the race of the fetus was so implausible that even Franks’ staff tried to de-emphasize that aspect of the bill. Unfortunately, the Radiance Foundation and Georgia Right to Life did understand all too well the publicity value of accusations of racial genocide that could soften the emotional ground for anti-abortion legislation, even if the allegations were specious. In fact, there is no evidence at all that African American women have abortions because of the race of the fetus.

In addition to our previous national work on the Trent Franks’ legislation, SisterSong also has a long history of investigating the black anti-abortion movement, and had written about it many times in our newsletter, Collective Voices. In fact, because we frequently wrote about African Americans and abortion politics over the years, reporters found us through their research. Our partnership with Generations Ahead in the Race and Sex Selection Working Group addressed the sex-selection aspects of the campaign, but the race-selection aspects had to be addressed by African American women because the black community was specifically targeted in this campaign.

SisterSong’s core strength is its large membership base built through our convenings, trainings, and leadership development work. We have a base of 80 organizations and thousands of supporters we can quickly mobilize. We are the leading national provider of reproductive justice trainings and a major originator, developer and thought-leader on the reproductive justice framework. We also organize the largest gatherings and conferences of women of color working on reproductive justice in the country. We are very comfortable in using our reproductive justice framework intersectionally to examine issues of race, gender, and class in reproductive politics. Perhaps the largest miscalculation our opponents made was overlooking SisterSong’s presence in Atlanta when they decided to launch the national campaign here.

SisterSong is an inclusive women of color organization. In our 13-year history, we had never before devoted such resources to the needs of only one group of women of color: African American women. Moreover, members of SisterSong are pro-choice AND pro-life. While America generally sees differences on abortion as divisive, for SisterSong, our diversity is empowering. We are unique in that we bring women of color together to work on reproductive justice issues crossing boundaries of race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, etc.

We had to carefully assess the threat this Georgia campaign presented to all women of color, with African American and Asian American women on the initial front lines for the assault, although we expect other race- and ethnically-based appeals to other communities of color to appear in the future. For example, it would not surprise us if Latinos are advised to resist abortions to increase their numbers to fight the anti-immigrant movement, or Native Americans to desist from abortions to wage the struggle for Indigenous sovereignty. Our opponents are nimble and manipulative, and our communities are vulnerable and unfortunately sexist.

At SisterSong’s national office, we were not certain that we had the authority and the capacity to wage this struggle. We had to ensure that our multi-racial, multi-generational Management Circle (Board of Directors) agreed to revise our three-year strategic plan to accommodate this unexpected demand on our slender resources. This meant postponing other scheduled projects until later on in the year because of our limited capacity. Fortunately, they agreed that this work was urgent and consistent with the public policy priorities of our strategic plan. We divided up the primary campaign responsibilities with Loretta Ross, our national coordinator, organizing our national mobilization strategy; Heidi Williamson, our national advocacy coordinator, directing the legislative strategy; and Serena Garcia, our communications coordinator, organizing our communications strategy. This combination of seasoned and newer activists proved that a small organization could win a major policy victory by working strategically with allies from around the country.

1. The Funders Network on Population, Reproductive Health and Rights is the largest affinity group of foundations who support reproductive health, rights and justice.
It was clear that taking on this struggle would strain our limited capacity and risk our long-term survival. We also correctly suspected that we would not immediately receive a surge of funding from many pro-choice funders for this emergency policy work -- unlike more mainstream groups -- because of the historic disparities in funding provided to women of color organizations. According to research conducted by the Tides Foundation in 2007, the combined budgets of the four largest white-led national reproductive rights organizations was nearly $100 million in 2005. The combined budgets of the four largest women of color-led national organizations the same year was under $3 million. At the state level, the picture was not much better. Even in the states where women of color-led work on reproductive issues is better supported, there was a disparity. In California, the median budget of women of color-led organizations in this sector was approximately 9.7 percent that of white-led organizations, in New York the figure is 4.5 percent, in Georgia 4.6 percent, in New Mexico 11 percent. This resource disparity plays out as women of color groups attempt to have an equal seat at the table in coalition campaigns in each of these states. In 2006, of the $67 million that Funders Network members granted in the U.S., only 9 percent went to organizations “serving” women of color.1

We are accustomed to doing more with less, but this unexpected challenge was daunting because of the millions of dollars to which our opponents had access, while we did not even have the time to enter the funding cycles of many pro-choice foundations in time to make a difference in the short-term. Seeking new funding to expand our capacity would have to wait until after the legislative session ended.

We received grants from the Mary Wohlford Foundation, the Anderson Rogers Foundation, the Catalyst Fund, and the Irving Harris Foundation to fund our community educational efforts, and their support was invaluable. While many funders vocally supported our efforts, others were nervous about the policy work in which we were engaging and wondered whether their foundations could support activities designed to directly defeat legislation. Others knew they could not respond quickly enough to be of immediate assistance. We did receive a small surge of unsolicited individual donations sparked by media appearances. We also had to carefully comply with 501(c)3 lobbying restrictions and our grant agreements, and use only non-foundation revenues for our legislative work.

Mobilizing the Reproductive Justice Movement

Despite these challenges, we knew we had to respond quickly. We started by organizing a coalition of Atlanta-based organizations to expand our capacity and bring partners together who could rapidly work to develop our strategy and tactics. In addition to SisterSong, the coalition included:

- **SPARK Reproductive Justice NOW!**
- **Feminist Women’s Health Center (Atlanta)**
- **Planned Parenthood of the Southeast Region**
- **SisterLove, Inc. (a women’s HIV/AIDS organization)**
- **Raksha (an Asian-American women’s domestic violence organization)**

Each coalition partner played a unique role in the work. For example, SPARK did a great deal of work mobilizing young voices, organizing protests, and generating community conversations about eugenics, the role of abortion within the community, as well as how black women see themselves as providers. Paris Hatcher, SPARK’s executive director, led the campaign against CBS, challenging them to discontinue the billboards, and brought pressure to bear on this corporate giant through a national petition campaign.

One of the main reasons why women of color were successful in defeating this bill is because we built a strong collaboration of organizations nationwide that have diverse capabilities. Local organizations in our coalition played different roles based on their strengths in various areas. Some of their contributions and strengths include:

**Feminist Women’s Health Center**

- Provided a paid lobbyist to discuss our concerns with legislators through her long-standing relationships with
legislators
• Provided background information on Democrats and Republicans in the legislature
• Helped organize a network of doctors willing to work with the coalition who testified against the bill
• Located legal scholars to contest the constitutionality of the legislation

Planned Parenthood of Southeast Region
• Has a large database, with 88 governed affiliates and 840 centers nationwide
• Having been in operation for 90 years, Planned Parenthood offered a range of research that proved extremely helpful in providing citizens and legislators with the facts, such as the locations of clinics around the state
• Planned Parenthood Federation of America also provided the expert testimony of Dr. Vanessa Cullins, their Medical Director
• Provided media coaching for younger spokespersons

SPARK Reproductive Justice NOW!
• SPARK is agile and able to mobilize hundreds of young activists quickly for legislative advocacy through its Legislate This! annual campaign. This enabled them to organize people in the community, especially LGBTQ activists.
• Mapped the billboard placements in Atlanta
• Wrote press releases and talking points
• Protested at the billboards to raise community awareness
• Put pressure on CBS through calls to CBS Outdoor Vice President Jodi Senese to urge them not to renew the contract with the Radiance Foundation
• Helped with research and testimony preparation, ensuring a wide diversity of voices who testified
• Did national and local media interviews
• Provided 30 activists to make legislative visits
• Principal organizer for the “Trust Black Women” rally and protest against the Pro-Life Freedom Bus at the MLK King Center in July
• Recruited anti-racist organizations such as the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement

SisterSong
• SisterSong managed the local coalition
• Activated our large national base of women of color for letter writing, phone calls, and statements of support
• Provided knowledge and expertise on African Americans and abortion, which proved invaluable when constructing fact sheets, helping with testimonies, and organizing community members
• Used our knowledge of and contacts with legislators, civil rights leaders, women’s rights leaders, and religious leaders to gain their support, especially assisted by Heidi Williamson of SisterSong and Nikema Williams of Planned Parenthood of the Southeast
• Used our communications capacity to issue weekly updates to our base, write statements and fact sheets, and organize the press conference and media interviews
• Helped women of color prepare testimonies and made sure that community members were speaking to the media to affirm that the public face of this campaign was women of color speaking for ourselves

Raksha
• Because Raksha is an Asian American organization, they provided a unique perspective on how the legislation would affect their communities through the sex-selection aspects of the bill.
• Raksha provided testimony on the intersection of violence against women and reproductive oppression
• Monitored and testified at committee hearings
SisterLove

- Primarily an HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness organization, SisterLove has a strong relationship with medical professionals. As a result, they offered a wide network of doctors, including the Rebecca Lee Society of black female doctors, who provided knowledge about how this bill would inevitably affect their practices.
- Ensured that four HIV+ women testified, spoke at the press conference, and made legislative visits.
- Helped prepare testimony for HIV+ women on the intersection between sexual rights, HIV/AIDS and abortion rights.
- Participated in protests of the Pro-Life Freedom Bus.
- Broadcast interviews on their radio show on WRFG.
Mobilizing Our Allies

We received invaluable help from allies around the country. While SisterSong took action, the failure of this bill could not have happened without the assistance of many individuals and organizations. They made a significant difference in enhancing our capacity to wage this struggle. We were particularly moved by the breadth of organizations working together from the women’s rights, civil rights, human rights, and anti-racist movements.

Hundreds of individuals helped as well, and each media interview generated a new flood of emails, calls and offers. Most were positive, but not all. We cannot list all of the individuals who were particularly supportive, so please accept our sincere thanks. The organizational allies who assisted through advice or support for our efforts included the following. If we have inadvertently left any organization out, please accept our apologies in advance.

Advocates for Youth
Avery Institute for Social Change
Black Women for Reproductive Justice
Black Women for Wellness
Black Women’s Health Imperative
Breast Cancer Action
California Black Women’s Health Project
Catholics for Choice
Center for American Progress
Center for Reproductive Rights
Communications Connection
Feminist Majority Foundation
Generations Ahead
Huffington Post
Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights
Ipas
Milwaukee Reproductive Justice Coalition
NAACP
NARAL Pro-Choice America
National Asian Pacific American Women’s Forum
National Coalition of 100 Black Women
National Organization for Women
National Women’s Health Network
National Women’s Law Center
Opportunity Agenda
Planned Parenthood Federation of America
Political Research Associates
Rainbow PUSH
Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice
Reproductive Health Technologies Project
RH Reality Check
Smith College, Sophia Smith Collection
Spelman College Women’s Research Center
Women’s Media Center
Creating a Lasting Impact: Lessons Learned for the Future

The primary lessons learned from this struggle included:

1. The leadership of women of color can achieve policy victories by mobilizing our base in communities of color to influence decision makers.

2. The Reproductive Justice and Pro-Choice movements must work successfully together by sharing leadership, capacity and resources.

3. African American women can be engaged nationally on the front lines of the abortion wars and we need to prepare for future battles.

Leadership of Women of Color

When it comes to the intersection of race, gender and abortion, the voices of women of color are the most believable and the most authentic within the pro-choice and reproductive justice movements. We have the most credibility in fighting the appropriation of civil rights language and history. We can refute false charges of racism, xenophobia and genocide in ways that are credible and passionate. We are the most trusted in telling the real and nuanced story about birth control and Margaret Sanger. Women of color were engaged in every aspect of the decision-making in this struggle, providing a context for our abortion decisions by telling our stories and validating the trust of our communities.

This has long-term implications for the pro-choice movement. The victory in Georgia affirmed reproductive justice as a guiding framework and as a winning strategy to mobilize the power of our communities for policy victories. If our opponents continue to use an intersectional strategy to undermine abortion rights for all women, our collective success in countering them depends on our willingness to use the reproductive justice framework to work together strategically by sharing leadership, resources, and capacity.

For example, the Georgia legislative sessions were long, unpredictable, and consumed huge amounts of time to monitor, prepare testimonies, and strategize with allies. Raksha, with the smallest staff of all the partnering agencies, could not spend entire days at the state capitol. Asian American voices speaking to the sex-selection portion of the bill were critical, and valuable assistance was provided by Generations Ahead on messaging. They were willing to be more present, but simply lacked the capacity to do so. Having the will to work on policy but not the means sharply highlighted the capacity differential between mainstream and women of color organizations.

The pro-choice movement must overcome its historical reluctance to confront accusations of racism and genocide, and must help to build the capacity and leadership of women of color to work on this emerging front in the struggle. This means that mainstream organizations have to step back, and examine power relations within the pro-choice movement, and realize that women of color must be the ones to step up and speak out against this type of legislation since we are the ones directly affected and most effective. It was difficult, at times, to change the habits of mainstream organizations accustomed to not coping well with racial power dynamics and handling power imbalances respectfully.

The struggle in Georgia highlighted some of the tensions within the movement about the leadership of African American women. African Americans recognize that we all live in a system of white supremacy that affects everyone in America. No one is immune to anti-black racism both within and outside our movement. The failure to recognize this legacy shared by every American jeopardizes our collective ability to defeat our mutual opponents. It is cynical to point out the racism of our opponents while ignoring our own complicity. While the struggle against our opponents was challenging, some allies believed they could circumvent black women and our organizations. They do not fully comprehend the leadership African American women – and all women of color – must provide to bridge the intersections of race, gender and abortion. Working honestly on our internal race and power relations is not only the right thing to do, but it is the smart thing to do to defeat race- and gender-based attacks on abortion and women’s rights.

In the future, we must build effective multi-racial alliances within our movements. To successfully collaborate, we must:

1. Develop joint strategies, building on the strengths and understanding the capacities of each partner in the coalition
2. Embed abortion in the language of human rights and reproductive justice to present an undivided, intersectional united front against our opponents
3. Recognize that race- and gender-selection abortion attacks are distinct, yet entwined, aspects of the same misogyny that decreases access for all women
4. Understand the differing impacts of racism, eugenics and xenophobia (anti-immigrant prejudice) on the standpoints of partners in the coalition, recognizing that each partner has a unique and valuable role in challenging bigotry
5. Encourage women of color to step up, while white allies step back, to present the most trusted and effective messengers to counter accusations of genocide and “gendercide”

6. Build the communications, policy, and advocacy capacity of each partner in the coalition so that we are stronger together and can eliminate weaknesses that our opponents can exploit

7. Increase training opportunities and tools developed by women of color to assist our allies in countering charges of racism as white women and men

8. Develop messages and communications strategies that are authentic, inclusive and credible

9. Re-allocate financial resources so that each partner has the capacity to fully participate in the coalition

10. Share information more evenly so that each partner is fully informed and engaged in appropriate levels of decision making to increase transparency and trust.

Trust Black Women Partnership

While we defeated SB 529 this time around, this certainly won’t be the end of this negative type of legislation, especially here in Georgia. We expect that our opponents will not retreat, but in fact, re-load as Sarah Palin would say! For the future, we are building a firewall of resistance when this type of legislation and billboard campaign spread across the country. Our opponents have already changed their tactics; now they claim to promote adoption for black children as a more compassionate alternative to abortion, ignoring the fact that 4 out of 5 “hard to place” children in the adoption system are African American.

After the Georgia legislative session ended, 30 black women leaders from 11 organizations gathered at SisterSong in Atlanta in July of 2010 to discuss how to respond to similar campaigns in the future in other states. The women came from all over the country, outraged that the campaign had recruited black men and women to give it an air of credibility when the legislative work by our opponents was led by Georgia Right to Life, a long-established and predominantly-white operation using black surrogates. After two days of strategic planning led by MaryKay Penn, our consultant, the Trust Black Women Partnership was born.

For the first time since 1989 when we organized the “We Remember” campaign against the Supreme Court Webster decision, a coalition of black women organizations and individuals came together to work specifically on defending abortion rights, to generate deeper discussions about Black women’s autonomy and human rights, and to build long-term relationships and networks. We selected our name through a professional branding process that built on the phrase “Trust Women” Dr. George Tiller used before he was assassinated in 2009.

The nine reproductive justice organizations that founded the Trust Black Women Partnership (TBW) are led by African American women who understand what is at stake in this campaign to cut black women off from the providers of reproductive services – more unintended pregnancies, more poverty, less educational opportunities for young black women, and an increasingly dangerous environment for black women to care for the children we already have.

The goals of our Trust Black Women Partnership (TBW) partnership focus on defending abortion rights using the reproductive justice framework to challenge the publicity and legislative campaigns of our opponents. TBW leaders have spent years fighting for our right to have equal access to reproductive health care, comprehensive sex education, and financial access to birth control and abortion. The barriers to these basic life enhancing services were always based on public policy, such as the Hyde Amendment.

SisterSong is coordinating the eight organizations who are founding partners of Trust Black Women. SisterSong will incubate the partnership for two years until 2012 when it is able to become autonomous and self-sustaining. The founding organizations are geographically distributed across the country in order to have women who can locally respond to events in their regions. This both expands the capacity of the member organizations but also develops the leadership of a widening pool of experienced African American women strategically located to fight the black anti-abortion movement all around the country. TBW has also established an Advisory Board of individual black women who support the partnership and offer key resources and networks. The founding partners are:

Northeast
- Black Women’s Health Imperative
- SisterSong NYC

Southeast
- SPARK Reproductive Justice NOW!
- SisterLove, Inc.

Midwest
- Black Women for Reproductive Justice
- Milwaukee Reproductive Justice Coalition

West
- California Black Women’s Health Project
- Black Women for Wellness
Trust Black Women primary strategies focus on:

1. Communications and Messaging
   - Opinion and polling research by Beldon, Russonello, and Stewart to delve more deeply into African American attitudes towards abortion
   - Cognitive linguistics analysis of race and abortion frames in the media
   - Effective message development and testing
   - A film documentary entitled “Abortion Conspiracy” for television broadcast and YouTube
   - Website and social media portals for TBW

2. Opposition Research
   - Monitoring and countering of anti-abortion activities in the African American community
   - Engaging communities of faith in resisting sexist religious appeals attacking the autonomy of black women as moral decision makers
   - Building dossiers on black leaders in the anti-abortion movement

3. Advocacy, Law and Policy
   - Developing tools and materials for legislative campaigns in states
   - Defeating race- and sex-based abortion restrictions in the states
   - Building the capacity of member organizations to provide trainings and messages for our pro-choice allies on countering charges of racism and eugenics
   - Working to defeat the Hyde Amendment and other abortion funding restrictions at the local and federal levels

4. Collaboration, Mobilization and Movement Building
   - Trainings on African American women and abortion for our base of black women and our allies to counter our opponents
   - Partnership with the Race and Sex Selection Working Group on sex selection
   - Developing relationships with Civil Rights and other social justice organizations
   - Capacity building fund development for partnering organizations launched by simultaneous fundraisers in Atlanta, Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC featuring advance screenings of Tyler Perry’s “Colored Girls” film with celebrities in each market
Trust Black Women Founding Partners

Deborah Arrindell, American Social Health Association, Washington, DC
Byllye Avery, The Avery Institute and Black Women’s Health Imperative, Boston
Asha Bandele, Writer, New York City
Jasmine Burnett, SisterSong New York City, Brooklyn
Folasade Campbell, Community Center for Family Preservation, Staten Island, NY
Crystal Crawford, California Black Women’s Health Project, Los Angeles
Dazon Dixon Diallo, SisterLove Women’s AIDS Project, Atlanta
Janette Robinson Flint, Black Women for Wellness, Los Angeles
Nourbese Flint, Black Women for Wellness, Los Angeles
Serena Garcia, SisterSong Communications Coordinator, Atlanta
Paris Hatcher, SPARK Reproductive Justice NOW!, Atlanta
Bani Hines-Hudson, Kentucky Health Justice Network, Louisville
Eleanor Hinton Hoytt, Black Women’s Health Imperative, Washington, DC
Laura Jimenez, SisterSong Deputy Coordinator, Atlanta
Toni Bond Leonard, Black Women for Reproductive Justice, Chicago
Pascale Leone, Black Women’s Health Imperative, Washington, DC
Pamela J. Merritt, Writer & Blogger, St. Louis
Sarah Noble, Milwaukee Reproductive Justice Coalition
Mary Kay Penn, Consultant, New York City
Shanebrae Price, SisterLove Women’s AIDS Project, Atlanta
Lynn Roberts, CUNY and SisterSong, New Jersey
Kelley Robinson, Choice USA, Washington, DC
Loretta Ross, SisterSong National Coordinator, Atlanta
Cherisse Scott, Black Women for Reproductive Justice, Chicago
Belle Taylor-McGhee, Consultant, San Francisco
Emily Tynes, ACLU (in individual capacity), New York City
Nikema Williams, Planned Parenthood of SE, Atlanta
Tonya Williams, SPARK Reproductive Justice NOW!
Heidi Williamson, SisterSong National Advocacy Coordinator, Atlanta
Statement of Solidarity with African American Women

We who trust women stand in solidarity with and support of SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, SPARK Reproductive Justice NOW!, SisterLove, Planned Parenthood of Georgia, and Feminist Women’s Health Center to affirm our belief that every woman has the human right to decide if and when she will have a baby, and the right to parent the children she already has with the social supports necessary. In our struggle for reproductive justice, African American women have a unique history that we must remember in order to ensure bodily sovereignty, dignity, and collective uplift of our community. The choices that women of color make are based on their lived experiences in this country and reflect multiple oppressions, including race, class, and gender, and their efforts to resist them. It is unacceptable to speak to the needs of any woman, or her children without taking into consideration the realities that exist in her home and local community.

We affirm that an African American woman’s ability to determine if and when she will have children demands that she control the conditions under which she will give birth and have the power to decide the spacing of her children. These freedoms speak to the power and necessity of the preventive care of women before they become pregnant and the importance of comprehensive sex education for all of our children to understand their human right to sexuality in an empowering and responsible way. It means fully funding public education, protecting the environment in all communities, and eliminating sexual violence for all women.

We affirm that an African American woman’s ability to determine if and when she does not have children must include a full range of options including the right to have an abortion. For women of color the privilege to exercise this right all too often hinges on other factors in her home and community. Abortion must be approached in the context of the individual woman and the circumstances surrounding her, such as poverty, sexual abuse, or the lack of health care. To extract a woman from the context of her life dishonors her lived experiences and the plight of a broader community of people.

We affirm that African American women have the human right to parent the children they already have. To ensure the full enjoyment of this right, they must also have access to the social supports necessary to raise their children in safe environments and healthy communities, without fear of violence from individuals or intervention by the government. A continuum of care is essential to protect the lives of women and children. And we must prioritize the needs of children after birth. This includes funding education, investing in health care reform for all, ensuring food security and prioritizing the unification of our families through the provision of social supports to protect the most vulnerable.

Protecting women and children requires a commitment to these principles. It is a matter of reproductive health, reproductive rights, and ultimately Reproductive Justice.

February 2010
SisterSong Staff

Loretta Ross          National Coordinator
Laura Jimenez        Deputy Coordinator
Heidi Williamson     National Advocacy Coordinator
Serena Garcia        Communications Coordinator
Monica Simpson       Development Coordinator
Corean Elam          Office Manager
Anna Holley          Staff Associate (Summer 2010)
Muna Abdullahi       Staff Associate (Summer 2010)
Farhiya Ahmed        Staff Associate (Summer 2010)

SisterSong Management Circle

Toni Bond Leonard, President    Black Women for Reproductive Justice,
Crystal Crawford                 California Black Women’s Health Project,
Dazon Dixon Diallo               SisterLove, Inc.
Leslie Grant, Secretary          Sistas on the Rise
Leila Hessini                    Ipas, Individual Member
La’Tasha Mayes                   New Voices Pittsburgh
Lynn Roberts                     Hunter College, Individual Member
Luz Rodriguez, Treasurer         Individual Member
Merina Sapolu                    Kokua Kalihi Valley Comprehensive Family Services
Alice Skenadore                  Wise Women Gathering Place
Gabriela Valle                   California Latinas for Reproductive Justice
Juanita Williams                HIV/AIDS Activist