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AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN AND ABORTION
(Originally printed in *Abortion Wars: A Half-Century of Struggle*□)

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Only justice can stop a curse.

Alice Walker

This essay reviews the activism of African-American women in the abortion rights movement, highlighting the past fifty years.¹ Many observers mistakenly view African-American women's struggle for abortion rights and reproductive freedom in the 1990s as reflecting a relatively recent commitment. More accurately, this activism should be placed in the context of our historical struggle against racism, sexism, and poverty.

The fact is, when methods of fertility control have been available and accessible, African-American women have advocated for and used these strategies even more frequently than their white counterparts.² For example, when family planning was first institutionalized in Louisiana in 1965, Black women were six times more likely than white women to sign up for contraception.³

But when contraceptives were unavailable and abortion was illegal, septic abortions were a

primary killer of African-American women. One study estimated that 80 percent of deaths caused by illegal abortions in New York in the 1960s involved Black and Puerto Rican women.⁴ In Georgia between 1965 and 1967 the Black maternal death rate due to illegal abortion was fourteen times that of white women.⁵

Central to my argument is the fact that African-American women have never been “one-dimensional victims of patriarchy.”⁶ Nor have we been one-dimensional activists. African-American women have made consistent and critical activist contributions to the evolution of the reproductive rights movement in the United States. Already in the early 1920s the Black women’s club movement joined forces with early proponents of birth control and called for the placement of family-planning clinics in Black neighborhoods while criticizing eugenics or population control forces.

Black women in the 1920s and 1930s wanted individual control over their fertility, while at the same time they resisted government and privately funded anti-natalist population control campaigns.⁷ This dual-value system seeded an expanded vision of reproductive freedom that guides our work today.

The early African-American activists understood the complex nature of Black womanhood and believed that fertility control was an essential part of the movement to rise from the brutal legacy of slavery. In the words of Brenda Joyner, reproductive rights activism by Black women has been and is “a feminism which realizes that the issues of reproductive control are broader than just the fight for gender equality. It is a feminism which understands the world simultaneously from race and class as well as gender perspectives.”⁸ This essay does not attempt to identify an essential Black women’s viewpoint regarding these issues but seeks to provide “critical self-consciousness about our positionality, defined as it is by race, gender, class and ideology.”⁹ The time has come for us to understand both our powerlessness in society and our influence on the reproductive rights movement.

Despite the fact that much of the decline in the fertility rates of African Americans since the Civil War resulted from the activism and determined choices of African-American women, our contributions to the birth control and abortion movements in the United States have been obscured by racist and sexist assumptions about us, our sexuality, and our fertility. Distilling fact from myth is difficult because so many accounts of African-American and women’s history are written from perspectives that fail to acknowledge our impact. This omission distorts the contemporary views of African-American women about the reproductive freedom movement and our ownership of it. **A F R I C A N - A M E R I C A N W O M E N/2**

The Black feminist commitment to reproductive rights has remained buried for at least three important reasons. First, the movement for abortion rights is erroneously seen as belonging to the predominantly white women's movement. Feminist literature often (but not always) reflects a popularized perception that African-American women's awareness regarding gender equality and abortion rights is underdeveloped. Brenda Joyner, who has been an abortion provider for the past fifteen years, believes that white mainstream women's groups have undervalued the participation and concerns of women of color in the reproductive rights movement: "Perhaps the question is not really where are women of color in the abortion rights and reproductive rights movement. Rather, where is the primarily white middle-class movement when the [1977] Hyde Amendment took away Medicaid funding of abortions for poor women?"¹⁰

Second, the struggle for reproductive rights is not commonly perceived as a part of the civil rights movement, although in fact it was part of the movement until after World War II. In the early twentieth century Black organizations were often visible supporters of fertility control for Black women, linking reproductive rights to racial advancement. For example, from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, the growth rate of the African-American population has been more than halved.¹¹ Historians and demographers typically attribute this and other declines in African-American birthrates to poverty, disease, coercive family planning, or other external factors. These assumptions ignore the possibility that African Americans were in any way consciously responsible for the change by choosing to use birth control and abortion. In the 1930s African-American women were never *passive* victims of eugenics (the "improvement" of humankind through selective breeding), forced sterilization, and other medical, commercial, and state policies or reproductive control. Current debates over the genetic causes of criminality, the validity of IQ tests, inherited intelligence, welfare reform, quotas, and affirmative action all suggest the extent to which the eugenics movement still affects public policy. But for the past sixty years, African-American women have been at the forefront of challenging the relationship between racist science and public policy in our society.

Thus, a third reason that the Black feminist tradition has been obfuscated is that racist and sexist assumptions held by population experts, feminists, or the African-American community itself ignore our power as African-American women to make responsible reproductive and political decisions for ourselves. A historical perspective is necessary to understand and place in context the contemporary views of African-American women on abortion and birth control.

I have been a reproductive rights activist for the past twenty-three years, beginning with work in the early 1970s on sterilization abuse. Because I have organized Black women around reproductive rights, I have witnessed the development of a strong reproductive freedom movement among Black women during this period. In doing research to support my activism, I

discovered a long tradition of reproductive rights advocacy by Black women that was either undocumented or not widely understood. Despite the lack of a full or easily accessible historical record, I became determined to reconnect the work of Black activists at the beginning of the twentieth century to the work and ideology of those at the end.

Many African-American women are alienated from the abortion issue. Our slave history makes many of us determined never again to relinquish control over our reproduction to anyone. As a 1989 brochure published by African American Women for Reproductive Freedom put it, “Somebody owned our flesh, and decided if and when and with whom and how our bodies were to be used. Somebody said that Black women could be raped, held in concubinage, forced to bear children year in and year out, but often not raise them.”¹² This haunting specter of slavery is real and moving. This is the collective nightmare that haunts our vision of a racist system controlling our bodies.

However, this rationale for abortion – that because as slaves we were valued for our procreative capacity, we should never be a slave to pregnancy again – is somewhat short of the Black feminist analysis necessary to understand the complexities of abortion and its impact on the lives of African-American women. Every Black woman must believe she has a right to control her body simply because she is human. This belief does not deny her femaleness or her Blackness but rests upon a fundamentally solid acceptance of her own uniqueness and sense of self-esteem – a belief in her *human rights* and right to bodily self-determination.¹³

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When we demand control over our own bodies, we must not depend solely on our history of slavery, our African traditions, or even on a colorized white feminist analysis. We need to support abortion rights from an analysis that is built from a strong and shared understanding of how the forces of racism, sexism, homophobia, and economic oppression affect our lives. Equating the denial of abortion rights to slavery is convenient intellectual shorthand, but it leaves Black women vulnerable to manipulation by sexists who believe that our role is either to have babies for the long-awaited Black revolution or to cease reproducing altogether, to comply with racist assumptions about our “overpopulation.”

It is equally futile to romanticize our claim to “traditional” African society, even though abortion and birth control were seen as the province of women, not the decisions of men, in most African societies. Traditional knowledge and skills are almost totally inaccessible to African-American women today. Sadly, they are even inaccessible to many African women because of the

profuse marketing of contraceptives and other devices that have eroded the chain of knowledge that made women self-reliant in the past.

What we need is a new feminist theory of reproductive freedom for Black women. We have a strong understanding of the role that race, class, and gender have played in our lives – our triple-oppression theories. But despite our history of activism, many Black women still do not see abortion rights as a stepping-stone to freedom because abortion rights do not automatically end the oppression of Black women. On the other hand, these rights do allow some control over our biology, freeing us from unwanted pregnancies, and they are fundamental to bodily and political self-determination. To ask whether African-American women favor or oppose abortion may currently be fashionable and an opportunity for manipulative politicians. But the answer is obviously yes: we obtain 24 percent of the abortions in the United States, more than 500,000 annually.¹⁴ The question is not *if* we support abortion, but how, and when, and why. Our circumstances have dictated our choices. Neither persuasive analysis nor ideology influenced African-American women to support abortion and birth control. We did so because we needed to. Necessity was the midwife to our politics.

Regrettably, African-American women have been reluctant to analyze our history regarding abortion and to speak out collectively and publicly in support of abortion rights. To do so in the 1960s and 1970s seemed to support arguments of Black genocide, a charge that was not unreasonable in view of a multitude of attacks on African Americans. To speak out also risked highlighting abortion over other aspects of our struggle to achieve reproductive freedom. These struggles involve our experiences of pregnancy, infant mortality, sterilization abuse, welfare abuse, and sexuality in general. Even since legalization, the word *abortion* has remained one of the most emotionally charged words within the African-American community, bringing forth twin fears of genocide and suicide. In some circles, we still refer to it as the “A” word!

To compound the problem, Black women are ambivalent about the mainstream pro-choice movement. While a 1991 poll by the National Council of Negro Women and the Communications Consortium revealed that 83 percent of African Americans support abortion and birth control, little of that support translates into membership in predominantly white pro-choice organizations.¹⁵ The pro-choice movement, as a subset of the larger women’s movement, has not been able to attract significant numbers of Black women into its ranks, even though many special projects targeting women of color proliferated in the 1980s.¹⁶ At the same time, the anti-abortion movement became adept at manipulating Black fears about genocide to silence the voices of Black women who believe in reproductive freedom. Anti-abortion proponents have made frightening inroads into Black churches, which often find it difficult to openly discuss issues of Black sexuality including abortion, AIDS, homosexuality, premarital sex, and teen sexuality. A generation ago, Black ministers were at the forefront of the struggle for reproductive freedom. Today, the silence of our churches – the moral cornerstones of our

community – is a reflection of the church’s disconnection from the real history of African-American women.

It is up to Black women living in these difficult times to define abortion rights for ourselves. By exploring the nature of our silence, we can connect ourselves to our foremothers who were activists for reproductive freedom. As Black feminist bell hooks says, “Moving from silence into speech is a **A F R I C A N - A M E R I C A N W O M E N**”⁴

revolutionary gesture.”¹⁷ Our “revolutionary gesture” means finding our voices and rediscovering our history. We must document our own stories and give ourselves permission to speak proudly about the experiences of “ordinary” Black women whose “unexceptional” actions enabled us and the race to survive. We must dispel the myths surrounding our fertility and activism by developing our own critical analysis of abortion and birth control that does more than simply appropriate someone else’s dogma. To extend bell hooks’s observation, our struggle is not simply to move from silence into speech, but to change the nature and direction of our speech, to make a speech that is heard. We must make a speech that deliberately combines the personal stories and the objective reality that create the authority, authenticity, and uniqueness of the African-American female experiences. As an expression of my commitment to this credo, in this essay I draw, wherever possible, on the experiences of today’s activists.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: SLAVERY, EARLY BLACK

FEMINISM, AND FERTILITY CONTROL ACTIVISM

Before the Civil War, almost 20 percent of the total United States population consisted of African-American slaves.¹⁸ Plantation owners tried to keep knowledge of birth control and abortion away from both slaves and white women to maintain the system of white supremacy used to justify slavery and to increase their investments in human chattel.¹⁹ In addition to the rape of slave women by slave masters to increase the number of children, breeding techniques included giving pregnant slave women lighter workloads and more rations to increase their willingness to have children. Punitive measures were also used: infertile women were treated “like barren sows and . . . passed from one unsuspecting buyer to the next.”²⁰

African Americans covertly used contraceptives and abortions to resist slavery. Often they employed African folk knowledge to do so. In the context of slavery, abortion and infanticide expressed a woman's desperate determination to resist the oppressive conditions of slavery.²¹ As Angela Davis points out, when Black women resorted to abortion, the stories they told were not so much about the desire to be free of pregnancy, but rather about the miserable social conditions that dissuaded them from bringing new lives into the world.²²

Throughout the nineteenth century, white southerners repeatedly expressed their racist nightmares about a huge Black population increase. In fact, the Black population of the South was growing much more slowly than the white population. In 1870 there were 5 million Blacks in the South, and in 1910 there were 8.7 million, whereas there were 8.6 million whites in 1870 and 20.5 million in 1910.²³

By the early 1900s Black women were making significant gains in controlling their fertility by marrying late and having few children.²⁴ In this era the Black women's club movement, the organized voice of African-American women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, directly addressed issues of Black women's sexuality²⁵ and sought to "confront and redefine morality and assess its relationship to 'true womanhood.'"²⁶ Stereotypes about Black women's sexuality and alleged immorality prompted many African-American women to "make the virtues as well as the wants of the colored women known to the American people . . . to put a new social value on themselves."²⁷ The main organization for Black women's clubs, the National Association of Colored Women, had between 150,000 and 200,000 members, mainly middle-class women, in forty-one states in the mid-1920s.²⁸ The club movement was integral to the networks that shared contraceptive information and supported "voluntary motherhood."²⁹

In 1894 *The Women's Era*, an African-American women's journal edited by Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, declared that "not all women are intended for mothers. Some of us have not the temperament for family life."³⁰ Club members and others supported this perspective, and many responded to advertisements in Black newspapers in the early twentieth century for a medicated douche product called Puf, which was reported to "end your calendar worries."

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THE BIRTH CONTROL CAMPAIGN, 1915-1950

Today it is commonplace to link the emergence of the birth control movement in the early twentieth century to the coercion of African-American women by a population control establishment anxious to limit Black fertility. While the population control establishment may have had its agenda, African Americans were willingly involved in the national birth control debate for their own reasons. African-American women were sensitive to the intersection of race, gender, and class issues that affected their drive for equality in early-twentieth-century American society. According to historian Jessie Rodrique, grassroots African Americans were “active and effective participants in the establishment of local [family planning] clinics . . . and despite cooperation with white birth control groups, Blacks maintained a degree of independence” that allowed the development of an African-American analysis of family planning and the role it played in racial progress.³¹

African-American women saw themselves not as breeders or matriarchs but as builders and nurturers of a race, a nation. Sojourner Truth’s statement, “I feel as if the power of a nation is within me!”³² affirmed the role of African-American women as “seminal forces of the endurance and creativity needed by future generations of Blacks not merely to survive, but to thrive, produce, and progress.”³³

In this spirit, the Black women’s club movement supported the establishment of family-planning clinics in Black communities. In 1918 the Women’s Political Association of Harlem became the first Black organization to schedule lectures on birth control. They were soon joined by dozens of other clubwomen seeking information about birth control in their communities. The National Urban League requested that the Birth Control Federation of America (the forerunner to Planned Parenthood) open a clinic in the Columbus Hill section of the Bronx in 1925. Several ministers held discussions about birth control at their churches, and in 1932 the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell of the Abyssinian Baptist Church spoke at public meetings in support of family planning.³⁴

African-American organizations, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Urban League, and leading Black newspapers like the *San Francisco Spokesman* (1932) and the *Pittsburgh Courier* (1936) promoted family planning. The Black press espoused this strategy as a means for uplifting the race, perhaps partially in response to the economic ravages of the Depression. The African-American newspapers of the period also reported the morality rate of women who had septic abortions and championed the causes of Black doctors who were arrested for performing illegal abortions.³⁵

The *Baltimore Afro-American* wrote that pencils, nails, and hat pins were instruments commonly used for self-induced abortions, and that abortions among Black women were deliberate, not the spontaneous result of poor health or sexually transmitted diseases. Statistics on abortions among African-American women are scarce, but 28 percent of Black women surveyed by an African-American doctor in Nashville in 1940 said they had had at least one abortion.³⁶

REACTION

The opposition to fertility control for women in the 1920s came primarily from the Catholic Church, from white conservatives who feared the availability of birth control for white women, and from Black nationalist leaders like Marcus Garvey, who believed in increasing the African population in response to racial oppression. President Theodore Roosevelt condemned the tendency toward smaller family sizes among white women as race suicide. He denounced family planning as “criminal against the race.”³⁷

As racism, lynchings, and poverty took their heavy toll on African Americans in the early twentieth century, fears of depopulation arose within a rising Black nationalist movement. These fears produced a pronatalist shift in the views of African Americans. The change from relative indifference about population size to using population growth as a form of political currency presaged the inevitable conflict between those who believed in the right of Black women to exercise bodily self-determination **A F R I C A N - A M E R I C A N W O M E N**/⁶

and those who stressed the African-American community’s need to foster political and economic self-determination.

In the United States, eugenics proponents believed that the future of native-born whites in America was threatened by the increasing population of people of color and whites who were not of Nordic-Teutonic descent. The eugenics movement not only affected the thinking in social Darwinist scientific circles, but it also grew to affect public policy, receiving the endorsement of President Calvin Coolidge, who said in 1924, “America must be kept American. Biological laws show . . . that Nordics deteriorate when mixed with other races.”³⁸

Unlike Malthus, the neo-Malthusians of the eugenics movement believed in contraception, at least for those they deemed inferior. To promote the reproduction of self-defined “racially superior” people, eugenics proponents argued for both “positive” methods, such as tax incentives and education for the desirable types, and “negative” methods, such as sterilization, involuntary confinement, and immigration restrictions for the undesirables.³⁹ The United States became the first nation in the world to permit mass sterilization as part of an effort to “purify the race.” By the mid-1930s about 20,000 Americans had been sterilized against their will, and twenty-one states had passed eugenics laws.

Among supporters of eugenics were not only the rabid haters in the Ku Klux Klan but also respectable mainstream white Americans who were troubled by the effects of urbanization, industrialization, and immigration. During this same period, thousands of Blacks fled the Jim Crow South and migrated to the North. These fast-paced demographic changes alarmed many nativist whites, who questioned birth control for themselves but approved it as a way to contain people of color and immigrants.

When the movement for birth control began, organizers like Margaret Sanger believed that fertility control was linked to upward social mobility for all women, regardless of race or immigrant status. Because the medical establishment largely opposed birth control, Sanger initially emphasized woman-controlled methods that did not depend on medical assistance. Her arguments persuaded middle-class women, both Black and white, to use birth control when available.⁴⁰

Sanger’s immediate effect on African-American women was to help transform their covert support for and use of family planning into the visible public support of activists in the Club Movement. But African-American women envisioned an even more pointed concept of reproductive justice: the freedom to have, or not to have, children.

The early feminism of the birth control movement, which promoted equality and reproductive rights for all women regardless of race or economic status, collapsed under the weight of support offered by the growing number of nativist whites. Under the influence of eugenicists, Sanger changed her approach, as did other feminists. In 1919 her American Birth Control League began to rely heavily for legitimacy on medical doctors and the growing eugenics movement.⁴¹ The eugenics movement provided scientific and authoritative language that legitimated women’s right to contraception.⁴² This co-optation of the birth control movement produced racist depopulation policies and doctor-controlled birth control technology.⁴³

The resulting racist and anti-immigrant public policies assumed Black and immigrant women had a moral obligation to restrict the size of their families. While birth control was demanded as a right and an option for privileged women, it became an obligation for the poor.⁴⁴ In 1934 Guy Irving Burch, founder of the Population Reference Bureau, said, “I think there is good reason to be optimistic about the future of the native [white] American stock if birth control is made available to the missions of aliens in our cities and the millions of colored people in this country.”⁴⁵

African Americans protested these policies. The *Pittsburgh Courier*, a Black newspaper with an editorial policy that favored family planning, advocated in 1936 that African Americans should oppose depopulation programs proposed by eugenicists because the burden would “fall upon colored people and it behooves us to watch the law and stop the spread” of eugenic sterilization.⁴⁶

One such program was the Negro Project, designed by Sanger’s Birth Control Federation in 1939. It hired several African-American ministers to travel through the South to recruit African-American doctors. The project proposal included a quote by W. E. B. DuBois, saying that “the mass of ignorant **LORETTA J. ROSS / 7**”

Negroes still breed carelessly and disastrously, so that the increase among Negroes, even more than the increase among Whites, is from that part of the population least intelligent and fit, and least able to rear their children properly.”⁴⁷ This quote, often mistakenly attributed to Sanger, reflected the shared race and class biases of the project’s founders.

The Negro Project relied on Black ministers because of its white sponsors’ belief that “the most successful educational approach to the Negro is through a religious appeal.”⁴⁸ Sanger wrote, “We do not want word to go out that we want to exterminate the Negro population and the minister is the man who can straighten out that idea if it ever occurs to any of their more rebellious members.”⁴⁹ The doctors recruited by the ministers were supposed to work for the project for free or, at best, demand payment from their patients. In contrast, the Birth Control Federation at the time paid most of the white doctors who worked on its behalf.

According to historian Linda Gordon, the project was the product of elitist birth control programs, whose design eliminated the possibility of popular, grassroots involvement in promoting birth control as a cause.⁵⁰ Notions of civil rights, women’s rights, or combating southern poverty were missing from this program. Politicians in southern states at this time were particularly

interested in spreading birth control among African Americans to limit Black population growth, which could threaten their political and economic hegemony.⁵¹

It is extremely likely that the racism of the birth control organizers, coupled with the genocidal assumptions of eugenics supporters, increased Black distrust of the public health system and has fueled Black opposition to family planning up to the present time. By 1949 approximately 2.5 million African-American women were organized in social and political clubs and organizations.⁵² Many of them supported birth control and abortion, but at the same time they offered a strong critique of the eugenicists. A clear sense of dual or “paired” values emerged among African-American women: they wanted individual control over their bodies, but at the same time they resisted government and private depopulation policies that blurred the distinction between incentives and coercion.

POST-WORLD WAR II ACCESS

The birth control clinics established by Sanger and others met only a fraction of the demand for contraceptive services. The methods of birth control most commonly available to Black women in the 1950s included abstinence or infrequency of coitus, the withdrawal method, spermicidal douching, condoms, diaphragms, and the rhythm method. Of course when these methods failed (and they frequently did), Black women relied on underground abortion.

The majority of abortions available to African-American women in the 1950s and early 1960s were provided by doctors, midwives, and quacks operating illegally. Little information is available regarding the Black midwives who provided abortions, except for arrest records and court transcripts. Information on physicians is slightly more accessible. For example, Dr. Edward Keemer, a Black physician in Detroit, practiced outside the law for more than thirty years until his arrest in 1956. He was sent to prison for fourteen months and afterward sold vacuum cleaners in New Jersey until he was able to win reinstatement of his medical license in the early 1960s. His assistant, LaBrentha Hurley, was jailed for sixty days and had to fight to get her children back after she was released. When Keemer resumed his practice, he continued openly to defy the law. By this time, he had become militant in the fight for reproductive rights. At a 1971 press conference held by the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws, Keemer described an illegal abortion he had performed the previous day and pledged he would continue to save women’s lives, whatever the consequences. He and his assistant were rearrested several days later and again faced prosecution.⁵³

Ebony magazine published an editorial in 1951 that stereotyped illegal abortionists, ignoring highly skilled practitioners like Keemer and others. The article warned readers that “each year nearly 700,000 abortions are performed on unfortunate, desperate women [by abortionists] whose criminal and unethical methods annually claim the lives of about 8,000 victims.”

According to Rickie Solinger, **A F R I C A N - A M E R I C A N W O M E N**⁸

Ebony's readers had reason to be concerned because a disproportionate number of Black women died abortion-related deaths in Detroit, for example, from 1950 to 1965, revealed that of the 138 fatalities from septic abortions, all involved poor women, most of them Black.⁵⁴

Long after the “granny” midwives in other ethnic groups had been replaced by medically based hospital practices, there were still hundreds of Black lay midwives practicing in the Deep South, who provided most of the abortion and contraceptive services for southern Black women.⁵⁵ According to Linda Janet Holmes, some of these women had midwifery lineages that extended as far back as slavery. Although these services technically illegal, the women developed informal networks of communication that furtively shared contraceptive and abortion information.

Abortion was every bit as illegal in the 1950s as it had been in the 1920s, but until the years after World War II the crime of abortion had a protected status because law enforcement authorities often tolerated the practice as long as no one died.⁵⁶ After World War II, however, the medical profession and the legal authorities stepped up their campaign to eliminate underground practitioners who provided illegal abortions. Black women who provided underground abortions were harassed and prosecuted more frequently than their white counterparts, especially white men.⁵⁷

Lay midwives were especially easy targets, in part because independent midwifery associations did not exist. In reviewing the behavior of law enforcement in the 1950s, Solinger observed that the police were especially eager to arrest women who performed abortions, regardless of their safety records.⁵⁸ Technically untrained and unprotected women were easier to convict than doctors. By the middle of the 1960s, most lay midwives had been forced out of business, except in those places where racism, isolation, and poverty prevented ready access to both medical care and law enforcement.

Middle-class women could sometimes persuade doctors to arrange for a clandestine abortion or to provide a referral. Poor women either had the unplanned children or went to “the lady down

the street” – either a midwife or partially trained medical personnel. Abortions from these illegal providers cost between fifty and seventy-five dollars, which was expensive considering that a pregnant woman might earn ten dollars a day.⁵⁹ Many white women came to Black neighborhoods to obtain abortions, from doctors who were often also involved in the civil rights movement.⁶⁰ White women were frequently charged more than Black women in order to subsidize the cost of poor women’s procedures.

If complications developed from illegal abortions, women visited physicians who operated in the poorer sections of the city. Only as a last resort did they go to hospitals, fearing the legal consequences of having obtained an illegal abortion. This pattern artificially lowered the number of septic abortions reported to hospitals and understated the incidence of abortions among Black women.

Dr. Joe Beasley, who helped establish one of the country’s first statewide family-planning programs in Louisiana in the 1960s, observed that the leading causes of maternal mortality were the medical complications of criminal or medically unsupervised abortions:

The other thing we saw was tremendous problems of induced abortion, with the highest predominance in the lower socio-economic group, and the middle and upper getting more expensive abortions. So we see women very carved up – very crude abortions – knitting needles, cloth packing. And we see them coming in highly febrile, puerperal discharge in the vagina, germs in their blood, blood poisoning, septicemia, and those who survive have a very high probability of being reproductive cripples . . . then when we looked at it, there was a very low pattern of contraception in the lower socio-economic group, in spite of what seemed to be a very strong desire not to have unwanted children . . . I mean, if a woman will risk her very life with a criminal abortion, that’s pretty damn strong motivation.⁶¹

Dangerous, self-administered procedures probably killed many women. Nurses reported that “sticks, rocks, chopsticks, rubber or plastic tubes, gauze or cotton packing, ballpoint pens, coat hangers, or knitting needles” were frequently used by desperate women. Or they chose to use “douches believed effective in inducing abortions made from detergents, orange juice, vinegar, bleach, disinfectant, lye, potassium permanganate, or colas. The gaseous explosions of soft drinks [were] said to cause a miscarriage; some teenagers consider[ed] them spermicidal.”⁶² Clearly Black women needed and wanted abortion and contraception services. But few had access to safe and affordable treatment. **LORETTA J. ROSS / 9**

POPULATION POLICIES FOR THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY

In the mid-1950s population “time-bomb” theories offered an updated approach to eugenics. These still-fashionable theories suggested that population growth in the Third World threatened the ability of the United States to govern world affairs. Brochures published by groups like the Draper Fund and the Population Council showed “hordes of Black and brown faces spilling over a tiny earth.”⁶³ By the early 1960s the United States government began supporting population control policies overseas, and linked foreign aid to anti-natalist depopulation programs. Many U.S. politicians argued by analogy that urban whites in America needed to be protected from the “explosiveness” of overpopulated Black ghettos.

The expression of these fears coincided with the growth of the civil rights movement, in response to the militancy of the movement and its potential for sweeping social change. The political instability of the African-American population convinced many members of the white elite and middle class that Black population growth should be curbed through government intervention. White Americans feared, out of proportion to reality, that a growing welfare class of African Americans concentrated in the inner cities would not only cause rampant crime but would also balloon the national debt and eventually produce a political threat from majority-Black voting blocs in urban areas.

The new politics of population of the late 1950s was implemented domestically in the 1960s, with the establishment of family-planning programs in the South in predominantly Black urban areas. This occurred at the same time that African-American leaders were expressing interest in “taking over” the big cities and “holding them as enclaves against increasing repression.”⁶⁴ Federal and private campaigns to make family planning available and accessible to Black women, particularly in the South, split white conservative opinion on the issue. Some conservatives wanted a eugenically minded set of programs for African Americans that would reduce the Black birthrate. For example, Leander Perez of Louisiana, who supported birth control, was quoted as remarking, “The best way to hate a nigger is to hate him before he is born.”⁶⁵

But many conservatives, already threatened by racial integration, strongly doubted the wisdom of letting women of any race have control over their fertility.⁶⁶ In addition to opposition from the Catholic Church, Protestant fundamentalists believed that family planning was a Communist plot imposed by northern “carpetbaggers.”⁶⁷ In fact, they persuaded many white women not to go to newly established family-planning clinics. One center in Louisiana reported that in its first year of operation, 96 percent of its clients were Black. The proportion of white clients never rose above 15 percent.⁶⁸

Generally speaking, family planning associated with racism was most frequently supported; associated with sexism, this support evaporated. This fissure among white conservatives about women's reproductive rights is still apparent today.

The 1960s launched a "boom period" for federally supported family planning to "eliminate poverty." President Lyndon Johnson, in his 1965 State of the Union message, singled out family planning as one of the four most critical problems in the nation. Even many Republicans jumped on the bandwagon. By 1970 President Richard Nixon claimed, "It is my view that no American woman should be denied access to family planning assistance because of her economic condition."⁶⁹

The year after passage of the 1964 Voting Rights Act, the U.S. Congress pressured the newly created Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to wage a war on poverty by emphasizing family-planning programs for African-Americans. Among politicians, one of the most persuasive arguments for family planning linked these programs with the reduction in health and welfare costs. Family planning, which offered a wide range of maternal and child-care services to poor women, was included in Medicaid coverage after a series of fights with Catholics and conservatives at the state level.

Despite this political agenda, with its racist undertones, some medical experts opposed family planning for African-Americans, convinced that Black women "wanted to be pregnant and have all those children and that even if they did not want repeated pregnancies, they could not possibly understand the principles of birth control because they were not bright enough and lack behavioral control."⁷⁰ **A F R I C A N - A M E R I C A N W O M E N/10**□

The opposition from such odious sources did not confuse African-American supporters of family planning. By the late 1960s family planning became once again "synonymous with the civil rights of poor women to medical care."⁷¹ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., writing in 1966 in a Planned Parenthood publication, echoed this sentiment: voluntary family planning is "a special and urgent concern" for African Americans and "a profoundly important ingredient in [our] quest for security and a decent life."⁷² After the 1965 Supreme Court decision legalizing birth control for married couples, the NAACP reaffirmed its earlier commitment to family planning by adopting a 1966 policy statement that read in part, "Mindful of problems of family health and of economic stability, we support the dissemination of information and materials concerning family health and family planning to all those who desire it."⁷³

During this period African-American women were not blind to the irony of a government plan to make contraceptives free and extremely accessible to Black communities that lacked basic health care. They criticized linking the alleged population problem with women's personal decisions to control their fertility. The only population problem, according to many African-American women, was that some people had problems with some segment of the population. There was much in the debate on population pressures that was reminiscent of the eugenicists. Those who blamed every social issue – riots, pollution, hunger, high taxes, ghettos, crime, and poor health – directly on the population growth of people of color ignored the maldistribution of land and wealth and racist and sexist discrimination in the job market.⁷⁴

Because of the unavailability of contraceptives and abortions, many desperate African-American women chose sterilization as their only hope for avoiding unwanted pregnancies. Birth control by hysterectomy was widely available, and some Black women adapted themselves to the limited choices that existed. Yet African-American women warily watched state legislative proposals to sterilize poor women who had too many “illegitimate” children. None of these proposals succeeded, largely because of the militancy of women activists like Fannie Lou Hamer, who said that “six out of every ten Negro women were . . . sterilized for no reason at all. Often the women were not told that they had been sterilized until they were released from the hospital.”⁷⁵ A national fertility study conducted by Princeton University found that 20 percent of all married African-American women had been sterilized by 1970.⁷⁶

Despite the ways that racist politics cut across the bodily integrity of African-American women in the 1960s and 1970s, many women continued to sustain informal networks that spread the news about the availability of services. They became activists in support of birth control, for better health care, for abortion rights, and against sterilization abuse and population control, linking these issues to the project of improving the overall health status of the African-American community.

THE FEMINIST UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

Before abortion was legalized nationally in 1973, countless women perilously attempted self-abortion, and dangerous practitioners flourished because there were no safety standards without legalization. Despite the dangers, it is estimated that 200,000 to 1,000,000 illegal abortions occurred annually in the late 1960s.⁷⁷

During the last decade of the illegal era, a few organizations operated an “underground railroad,” referring women to illegal practitioners.⁷⁸ Underground abortions were facilitated by church and community-based referral services and cooperative doctors’ networks in the 1960s. In 1967 the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion began operating out of a New York City Baptist church, even before New York State legalized abortion in 1970. A similar service was started in Chicago in 1969. The clergy groups usually referred women to practitioners in Puerto Rico, Mexico City, and England, and helped thousands of women obtain abortions.⁷⁹ Often women from the South traveled north to obtain abortions, sometimes paid for by untraceable discretionary funds from family-planning clinics.⁸⁰

To address the problems associated with the lack of safe and affordable abortions, a group of women in Chicago began to provide abortions in 1969 through an illegal, floating underground network called Jane, officially known as the Abortion Counseling Service of Women’s Liberation. Deliberately patterned after the Underground Railroad that freed slaves, the group provided over 11,000 safe abortions between 1969 and 1973.⁸¹ While abortions from other illegal practitioners cost between \$600 and **LORETTA J. ROSS / 11**

\$1,000, the women in Jane learned how to do abortions themselves and lowered the cost to an average of \$40.⁸² During its last year of operation, more than half of the collective’s clients were women of color, most of whom were poor and Black.⁸³

Although the members of the collective were predominantly white, there were a few Black women who provided services, according to Jane member Laura Kaplan. Because the group’s clients were increasingly African American, the collective felt an urgency to seek out Black women to join the collective. They did not feel that turning to the militant Black organizations was an option, since most radical Black groups believed that abortion was genocide. Black male spokespersons viewed women’s liberation as a threat to Black solidarity and claimed that abortion was a weapon against their community.⁸⁴

One of the earliest African American members of Jane was Lois Smith,⁸⁵ who has described her experiences as an abortion provider:

I discovered Jane when I escorted a girlfriend to get an abortion. You have to understand that the main problem was the secrecy; you couldn’t tell people what you were doing. When I arrived

at the facility, I saw that the clients were predominantly Black, but all the workers were white. Even while I waited for my friend, I began counseling the women, telling them they would be all right.

When I joined the collective, our primary problem was the illegality of what we were doing. This produced extreme secrecy and paranoia, but in a sense, it helped us bond as a group. It wasn't a Black or a white thing, but women's need. The only alienation I experienced was caused by the secrecy, but our family and friends supported us. Sometimes we even used their houses, but we couldn't tell anyone outside of our circle. The Black women were most supportive by keeping silent and taking risks. Fears of police arrests were real. Women had to endure many risks to give our number to a friend, but the networking was steady in the Black women's community.

But abortion was not openly discussed in the Black community because other survival issues were key. Women had been surviving for years using abortion as necessary. But the illegality of the procedure made women feel marginalized and terrified. They had heard so many horror stories about back-alley abortionists that they were often afraid when they came to us. They couldn't tell their doctors or nurses or their husbands. They got support from each other. It was very consistent how sisters supported each other.

The Black women who worked at Jane didn't come in as a group. Mostly we were involved one at a time, so we could never develop a critical mass, or even three to four of us, to get together to talk about what we were doing. But we didn't look on it as a Black or white women's issue; women needed termination of pregnancies, and there was unity created by women who were desperate.⁸⁶

BLACK OPPOSITION TO REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

In the 1960s and 1970s, visible Black male political support for abortion rights was limited. As Angela Davis concluded, this was "a period in which one of the unfortunate hallmarks of some nationalist groups was their determination to push women into the background. The brothers opposing us leaned heavily on the male supremacist trends which were winding their way through the movement."⁸⁷ Some Black male scholars of the period echoed the genocidal arguments previously used, but infused their analyses with new elements of sexism and anti-Semitism. Dick Gregory, a popular political activist, expressed his opposition to abortion rights this way: "My answer to genocide, quite simply, is eight Black kids and another on the

way.”⁸⁸

Whitney Young, leader of the Urban League, reversed his organization’s earlier support for family planning in 1962. Marvin Davies, head of the Florida NAACP, said, “Our women need to produce more babies, not less . . . and until we comprise 30 to 35 percent of the population, we won’t really be able to affect the power structure in this country.”⁸⁹ This was a major ideological shift away from the early positions of the NAACP and the Urban League, when both organizations had supported women’s reproductive rights as a means of racial progress. The NAACP of the 1920s would have been horrified in the 1960s to find itself sounding more like Marcus Garvey and less like W. E. B. DuBois. **A F R I C A N - A M E R I C A N W O M E N**/12□

On the other hand, Black nationalist groups that traced their ideological roots back to Garvey were entirely consistent when they opposed family planning. In the late 1960s several birth control clinics were invaded by Black Muslims associated with the Nation of Islam, which published cartoons in *Muhammed Speaks* that depicted bottles of birth control pills marked with a skull and crossbones or graves of unborn Black infants. The Pittsburgh branch of the NAACP declared that the local family-planning clinic was an instrument of genocide. William “Bouie” Haden, leader of the militant United Movement for Progress, went one step further and threatened to firebomb the Pittsburgh clinic, and a clinic in Cleveland was burned.⁹⁰

The Black Power conference held in Newark in 1967, organized by Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), passed an anti-birth control resolution. Two years later, the May 1969 issue of *The Liberator* warned, “For us to speak in favor of birth control for Afro-Americans would be comparable to speaking in favor of genocide.”⁹¹ Four years later, Congress appeared to confirm their suspicions: testimony before the U.S. Senate revealed that at least two thousand involuntary sterilizations had been performed with OEO funds during the 1972-73 fiscal year.⁹²

The Black Panther Party was the only nationalist group to support free abortions and contraceptives on demand, although not without considerable controversy within its ranks.⁹³ “Half of the women in the Party used birth control, and we supported it because of our free health care program. We understood the conditions of the Black community,” remembers Nkenge Toure, a former member. He also recalls that although there were no formal political education discussions around the issue, there was support from many party women.⁹⁴ Interestingly, not one female party member joined the mostly young, male militants who denounced family planning and attempted to shut down family-planning clinics in New Orleans and Pittsburgh.⁹⁵ However, many of the Black churches that had supported family planning in the 1940s and 1950s did not join the opponents of family planning in the late 1960s because many Black ministers held the line. As one woman reported, “We converted a lot of brothers.”⁹⁶

BLACK WOMEN RESPOND

The assault on birth control and abortion came from both the left and the right. White conservatives saw family planning as an assault on traditional values of motherhood, while some Blacks saw it as a race- and class-directed eugenics program. That such disparate forces aligned themselves against African-American women demonstrated that both white bigots and Black sexists could find common cause in the assertion of male authority over women's decisions regarding reproduction.

In contrast, many African-American women exerted a dynamic and aggressive influence on the family-planning movement. These activists were articulate on the family-planning movement. These activists were articulate and well organized and constituted the largest single bloc of support for family planning. They were so visible that politicians in some states began to see them as a potential political threat. In Louisiana it was estimated that family planners could mobilize as many as 70,000 women if they wanted to. This palpable power increased the determination of white conservatives, particularly in the South, to undermine public and private funding of family planning, as an effort of the "New Right" revolution that was beginning in the mid-1970s. In the last days of the Nixon administration, government agencies were dismantling many anti-poverty programs, which included family planning. Public policy initiatives shifted from helping poor women control the size of their families to punishing them when they failed to do so.

African-American women noticed that "most of the commotion about the clinics . . . seemed to be coming from men – men who do not have to bear children."⁹⁷ Even when Black men successfully shut down clinics, as in Cleveland and Pittsburgh, women organized to reopen them because they "did not appreciate being thought of as random reproduction machines that could be put to political use."⁹⁸ African-American women fully understood the racist impulse that located Planned Parenthood clinics in poor Black neighborhoods but not in poor white neighborhoods. Still, they perceived the free services to **LORETTA J. ROSS / 13**

be in their own best interests. Quoting from DuBois, they declared, "We're not interested in the quantity of our race. We're interested in the quality of it."⁹⁹

In Pittsburgh about seventy women members of the National Welfare Rights Organization rebuffed attempts by African-American men to close family-planning clinics. They rejected the leadership of William “Bouie” Haden, who, it was discovered, was on the payroll of the Catholic Church. “Who appointed him our leader anyhow?” asked Georgiana Henderson. “He is only one person – and a man at that. He can’t speak for the women of Homewood. . . Why should I let one loudmouth tell me about having children?”¹⁰⁰ The women organized to remove Hayden as a delegate from the Homewood-Brushton Citizens Renewal Council in a demonstration of political strength that frightened both Black and white men. Other African-American women around the country declared they would not tolerate male expressions of territorial rights over women’s bodies.

Anti-feminism was not only a male prerogative. One noted Black critic of feminism was Linda LaRue, who wrote in 1970, “Black adoption of the white values of women . . . has created a politicized, unliberated copy of white womanhood.” LaRue asked in the same article, however, “How many potential revolutionary warriors stand abandoned in orphanages while Blacks rhetorize disdain for birth control as a ‘trick of the Man’ to halt the growth of Black population? . . . Would it not be more revolutionary for Blacks to advocate a five-year moratorium on Black births until every Black baby in an American orphanage was adopted by one or more Black parents?”¹⁰¹

In this period, in diverse places and in different ways, African-American women took leadership roles in promoting African-American women’s rights to control their own bodies. Dr. Dorothy Brown, one of the first Black female general surgeons in the South, graduated from Meharry Medical College in 1948 and, while in the Tennessee state legislature, became one of the first state legislators to introduce a bill to legalize abortion in 1967.¹⁰² Her bill, which would have legalized abortion for victims of rape and incest, fell only two votes short of passing. Marion Sanders, in a 1970 issue of *Harper’s Magazine*, published “The Right Not to Be Born,” in which she described the experiences of a Black woman who was denied an abortion after being exposed to German measles. She subsequently gave birth to a severely retarded daughter.¹⁰³ This mainstream article supporting abortion rights for Black women in a sense foretold the current controversy about the conflicting rights of women to control their fertility and the rights of disabled people to be born.

A distinct Black feminist consciousness began consistently to counter the reactionary opponents to family planning. Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman in Congress, dismissed the genocide argument when asked to discuss her views on abortion and birth control:

To label family planning and legal abortion programs “genocide” is male rhetoric, for male ears.

It falls flat to female listeners and to thoughtful male ones. Women know, and so do many men, that two or three children who are wanted, prepared for, reared amid love and stability, and educated to the limit of their ability will mean more for the future of the Black and brown races from which they come than any number of neglected, hungry, ill-housed and ill-clothed youngsters.¹⁰⁴

In 1969 Frances Beal, then head of the Black Women's Liberation Committee of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), wrote, "Black women have the right and responsibility to determine when it is in *the interest of the struggle to have children or not to have them and this right must not be relinquished.*" 105

This sentiment was echoed by writer Toni Cade Bambara in 1970: "I've been made aware of the national call to Sisters to abandon birth control . . . to picket family planning centers and abortion referral groups and to raise revolutionaries. What plans do you have for the care of me and the child?"¹⁰⁶ Black feminists argued that birth control and abortion are, in themselves, revolutionary – and that African-American liberation in any sense cannot be won without women controlling their lives. The birth control pill, in and of itself, cannot liberate African-American women, but it "gives her the time for liberation in those other areas."¹⁰⁷ As the Black Women's Liberation Group of Mt. Vernon, New York, wrote in 1970, "Birth control [and abortion] is the *freedom* to *fight* genocide of Black women and children."¹⁰⁸

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In the early 1970s African-American women believed it was absurd to coerce Black women to be sterilized in order to limit their family size, when these women were willing to have fewer children voluntarily, if safe (and less permanent) methods were accessible. This combined support for fertility control and opposition to population control, a unique voice within the women's movement at the time, did much to inform both the feminist and the civil rights movements in later decades. African-American women rejected the single-issue focus of the women's movement on abortion, which excluded other issues of reproductive freedom. They also opposed the myopic focus on race of the male-dominated civil rights movement, which ignored concerns of gender justice. Activist women also learned a valuable lesson about sexist

backlash that equated Black male domination with African-American progress.

REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS LEADERSHIP AFTER ROE V. WADE

The demand by Black women for reproductive freedom in the early 1970s was crystallized and refined by the development of Black feminist leadership in the second wave of the American women's movement in the late 1960s.¹⁰⁹ African-American women were involved in the movement from its beginning, but both "outside reactionary forces and racism and elitism within the movement itself have served to obscure our participation."¹¹⁰ The fact is, Black women have made significant contributions to the reproductive freedom movement since the Supreme Court legalized abortion in 1973.

In the spring of 1973 Doris Wright, a Black feminist writer, called a meeting to discuss "Black Women and Their Relationship to the Women's Movement." The result was that Black feminists, primarily located in New York, formed the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) in November 1973, under the leadership of Margaret Sloan and Flo Kennedy.¹¹¹ Among those present were Shirley Chisholm, Alice Walker and Eleanor Holmes Norton.¹¹² NBFO activists organized (among other things) against sterilization abuse and for abortion rights. They organized support activities for Dr. Kenneth Edelin, a Black physician on trial in 1975 for performing an illegal abortion, who went on to become the chairman of the board of directors of Planned Parenthood. NBFO also worked to end violence against women by advocating justice for Joann Little and Inez Garcia, women of color who were imprisoned for defending themselves against rapists.

It is important to highlight the connection between the anti-violence and the reproductive rights movements because many of the newer activists in the abortion rights movements because many of the newer activists in the abortion rights movement in the mid-1970s actually came from the movement to end violence against women. They, like myself, worked at rape crisis centers or battered women's shelters. Significantly, few of the early activists came directly out of the civil rights movement without passing through some feminist crucible that heightened their awareness of gender inequalities.

Unfortunately, the early feminists in NBFO report that frictions within the group split them apart. Fortunately, the ideas they promoted remain our legacy.

Some Boston-based activists in NBFO, including noted author Barbara Smith, formed the Combahee River Collective in 1975, named after a Harriet Tubman guerrilla action in 1863 that freed more than 750 slaves and is the only military campaign in American history planned and led by a woman.¹¹³ This collective issued a Black feminist manifesto in 1976 that became a rallying cry for Black feminists, combining for the first time a comprehensive critique of racism, sexism, poverty, and heterosexism for Black women activists seeking ideological cohesion. Collective members worked for abortion rights and against sterilization abuse and presented many workshops in communities and on college campuses on Black feminism, reaching hundreds of young Black women.

In addition to the African-American women in Jane, others worked with early feminist women's health centers, learning not only how to advocate for abortions but, most important, how to *perform*

them. Family-planning programs in the 1970s reduced the medical mystique and rigid hierarchies by hiring nonmedical outreach workers from the communities being served.¹¹⁴ Pioneers like Annie Joseph, Gloria Favorite, and Jacqueline Harvey from Louisiana proved that women formerly on welfare could become effective advocates for family planning.¹¹⁵ This limited democratization had an impact on the belief among women that we can or, more important,

should

learn more about our bodies to control our fertility.

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In the early 1970s Byllye Avery (later founder of the National Black Women's Health Project) was part of a referral network for women who wanted to travel to New York to obtain abortions because they were illegal in Florida. Because flying to New York was not an affordable option for many poor women, she and several white women opened the Gainesville Women's Health Center in 1974 and learned how to perform abortions.¹¹⁶ Avery defined her clients' predicament this way: "For poor women abortion is a matter of survival: if I have this one more child, it etches away my margin of survival."¹¹⁷ Brenda Joyner of the Tallahassee Feminist Women's Health Center and Byllye Avery pioneered a new wave of Black feminists in the feminist women's health center movement that reached from Florida to California.

The SNCC Black Women's Liberation Committee changed its name in the 1970s to the Third World Women's Alliance and then, in the 1980s, to the Alliance Against Women's Oppression. According to Toni Cade Bambara, "We heard each other in Fran Beal's Third World Women's

Alliance Newspaper.”¹¹⁸ Beal wrote: “The lack of the availability of safe birth control methods, the forced sterilization practices, and the inability to obtain legal abortions are all symptoms of a sick society that jeopardizes the health of Black women (and thereby the entire Black race) in its attempt to control the very life processes of human beings.”¹¹⁹

When the Hyde Amendment, which eliminated subsidies for poor women’s abortions, was upheld by the Supreme Court, a number of Black women joined or started reproductive rights organizations, such as the multiracial Committee for Abortion rights and Against Sterilization Abuse (CARASA). Brenda Joyner assessed the post-Hyde situation this way: “The government will not pay for a \$200 or \$300 abortion procedure for a poor woman on Medicaid. But it will pay for a \$2,000 to \$3,000 sterilization procedure for that same poor woman.”¹²⁰

In the years immediately following *Roe v. Wade*, other pro-choice organizations had African-American women leaders. Former congresswoman Shirley Chisholm (who had supported abortion reform while a New York assemblywoman) was invited to be the first national president of the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws, or NARAL (now the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League). She was reluctant at first to accept the invitation, but became NARAL’s first honorary chairwoman because, as she put it:

It had begun to seem to me that the question was not whether the law should allow abortions. Experience shows that pregnant women who feel they have compelling reasons for not having a baby, or another baby, will break the law and, even worse, risk injury and death if they must get one. Abortions will not be stopped . . . The question becomes simply that of what kind of abortions society wants women to have – clean, competent ones performed by licensed physicians or septic, dangerous ones done by incompetent practitioners.¹²¹

Most prominently, Faye Wattleton, a former nurse-midwife at Harlem Hospital, became the first African-American president of Planned Parenthood Federation of America in 1978. Wattleton was motivated, she said, because of her memories of the “desperation and suffering that resulted from unintended pregnancy and illegal, unsafe abortions.”¹²² Between 1978 and 1992, Wattleton made a tremendous impact on the visibility of African-American women in the reproductive freedom movement.

Other Black women, such as Joan Smith in Louisiana and Joycelyn Elders in Arkansas, managed statewide family-planning programs. Smith, speaking in 1981 about the family-planning boom of the 1970s, said, “What caught my fancy was the idea of offering

services to indigent women the same as private doctors were giving. Nobody, and I mean nobody, was talking then about treating poor women with dignity. We said we'd do it and we did."¹²³

These and other women were determined to forge ahead with new ideas about the empowerment of African-American women, built upon the gains of the civil rights and women's movements; however, they were visionaries who lacked a strong base among African-American women. They were often leaders without a constituency. Writer Michele Wallace has reflected on this predicament: "We exist as women who are Black who are feminist, each stranded for the moment, working independently because **A F R I C A N - A M E R I C A N W O M E N**/¹⁶"

there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle – because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done: we would have to fight the world."¹²⁴

The fact is, many African-American women did not join mainstream pro-choice organizations, despite the visible Black leadership. In 1981 Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis wrote, "The negative feelings expressed by Black women in 1969 about the women's movement are virtually unchanged today. Most Black women still feel a sense of distrust: they believe that the White women in the movement are largely middle-class and exhibit racist mentalities, and they are convinced that the concerns of the movement are not relevant to their material conditions."¹²⁵

At this time abortion rights was not on the agenda of many of the major Black women's organizations, although many, like the sororities and women's professional associations, worked against teen pregnancy and infant mortality as part of the larger reproductive freedom movement. Black women instinctively understood what later research would prove: no country or population within a country has ever achieved a low birthrate as long as it has a high infant mortality rate.¹²⁶

A larger base of support for Black feminism and reproductive rights did not emerge until the 1980s. In her groundbreaking 1981 book, *Ain't I a Woman*, bell hooks laid out the ideological framework for this embryonic movement. She wrote, "Only a few Black woman have rekindled the spirit of feminist struggle that stirred the hearts and minds of our nineteenth-century sisters. We, Black women who advocate feminist ideology, are pioneers. We are clearing a path for ourselves and our sisters."¹²⁷ Alice Walker, writing a few years earlier, had called on Black women to reevaluate their relationship to the women's movement: "To the extent that Black

women disassociate themselves from the women's movement, they abandon their responsibilities to women throughout the world. This is a serious abdication from and misuse of radical Black herstorical tradition: Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, and Fannie Lou Hamer would not have liked it."¹²⁸

AFRICAN- AMERICAN WOMEN MOBILIZE

Several key events increased African-American women's visibility in the abortion rights movement in the late 1970s and 1980s. Among these were the United Nations' Decade for Women, the formation of several new Black women's organizations, the fight for the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1988, and the *Webster* Supreme Court decision in 1989.

The Decade for Women

The World Decade for Women was declared by the United Nations in 1975 to highlight the status and progress of women in their quest for equality around the world. During the decade, three World Conferences for Women were held: in Mexico City (1975), in Copenhagen (1980), and in Nairobi (1985). The United States held a National Conference for Women in Houston in 1977. These mega-events were extremely influential in spurring our activism.

The goal of the first world conference was to develop a global "plan of action" to improve the status of women; the mid-decade conference assessed progress on the plan; and the end-decade conference in Nairobi presented a plan of action for women to be implemented until the year 2000. The goal of the Houston conference was to create a United States version of the world plan for American women.

The decade was particularly significant for African-American women because it sparked many opportunities for organizing locally, nationally, and internationally. Many impressive advances were made during the decade, not the least of which was the tripling of the actual number of organizations of women of color in the United States, from approximately 300 to nearly 1,000.¹²⁹

The 1985 Nairobi conference was the watershed event of the decade for African-American women. Because the conference was in Africa, over 1,100 African-American women were among the nearly 20,000 women attending. This was the largest number of women ever to come together at a global women's rights conference and certainly the largest number of Black women ever to attend an international conference. **LORETTA J. ROSS / 17**

The Nairobi conference signaled the massive entry of African-American women into the international women's movement and into the debates on reproductive freedom, both locally and globally. Strategies challenging population control policies by agencies such as the U.S. Agency for International Development, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund coincided with our growing influence on the reproductive rights movement in the United States. Melanie Tervalon, speaking at a workshop in Nairobi, said,

There are three key and interconnected aspects of reproductive rights – access to abortion, [prevention of] infant mortality and [prevention of] forced sterilization . . . As Black women and women of color from the U.S., we have learned . . . that we share many of the same conditions as our sisters around the world – high infant mortality rates, forced sterilization, poor quality or nonexistent prenatal care, inadequate sex education, high under- and unemployment and the attendant disproportionate poverty for our families and children . . . As Black women in the U.S., reproductive rights issues are central to our political work.¹³⁰

For many African-American women, this speech symbolized how reproductive rights activism had moved from the margins to the center of our feminist work. After Nairobi, organizing by Black women for reproductive freedom exploded. Some of it was in response to the increasing repression promoted by the Reagan administration, but mostly it occurred because Black feminism was an idea embraced by activist women. Although many Black women still rejected the word *feminism* for themselves, they strongly identified with feminist causes, particularly the movements to support reproductive freedom and to end violence against women.

New Black Women's Groups

National Black Women's Health Project The National Black Woman's Health Project (NBWHP) was founded in 1983 by Byllye Avery, who at the time was a board member of the National Women's Health Network. The network, a national advocacy group for women's health rights, sought to encourage the participation of African-American women in the health activist movement. In 1981 planning began for the First National Conference on Black Women's Health

sponsored by the National Women's Health Network, which was held in June 1983 at Spelman College in Atlanta.

Originally, the planners expected about 500 women, but excellent organizing and outreach produced nearly 2,000 attendees. The Black women at the conference demanded the creation of an independent grassroots organization devoted to Black women's health. NBWHP was born.

Abortion and reproductive rights were key issues at the founding conference, and in the words of Dr. Dorothy Brown, who addressed the conference: "We should dispense quickly with the notion that abortion is genocide because genocide in this country dates back to 1619 [when the first Africans arrived in the English colonies] and continues today."¹³¹

The Project (as it was fondly called) sponsored conferences on reproductive health in 1987 and 1990, and pioneered the practice of forming hundreds of small self-help groups among women to enable them to discuss, often for the first time, their reproductive health experiences. An *Essence* article written by Bebe Moore Campbell in 1981 discussed the "shame" and "silence" that cloaked abortion practices of generations of African-American women.¹³² The Project determined to break through this conspiracy of silence. By the end of 1989, NBWHP had chapters in twenty-two states and was the fastest-growing Black women's organization in the country.

In its reproductive rights organizing, the Project identified a curious tendency among African-American women. Approximately one-half of the Project members were personally opposed to abortion, but all identified as "pro-choice." The Project thus modeled how women who both favored and opposed abortion could collaborate to protect the rights of all women to reproductive freedom. This was particularly significant because no other sector of the pro-choice movement was as divided about whether they would personally choose to have an abortion. Yet the Black women in the Project were entirely united when it came to preventing the government from recriminalizing abortion. **A F R I C A N - A M E R I C A N W O M E N / 1 8** □

National Political Congress of Black Women In 1984, during Jesse Jackson's first campaign for president, the National Political Congress of Black Women was formed by Shirley Chisholm, Maxine Waters, C. Delores Tucker, Eleanor Holmes Norton, and the Reverend Willie Barrow, among others, because of the racist and insensitive politics of the mainstream women's

movement.¹³³ African-American women were particularly incensed at the 1984 Democratic National Convention, where the National Organization for Women and other mainstream women's organizations, in closed-door sessions, chose to endorse the Walter Mondale/Geraldine Ferraro ticket instead of supporting Jackson. Feeling betrayed, they formed the congress to help Black women campaign for political offices in the two major political parties.

The racial insensitivity white women displayed in the 1980s as they pursued influence within the Democratic Party was extremely unfortunate, as it coincided with the Black women's public visibility within the feminist movement. Black women felt the same sense of betrayal that club women of the 1890s did when they were refused membership in white women's organizations, and that anti-lynching crusaders like Ida B. Wells felt when they looked in vain for support from white feminists of that era.

The National Political Congress of Black Women, with Donna Brazile as its first executive director, brought grassroots women into contact with elected officials from both the Republican and Democratic parties and issued one of the first statements by African-American women in support of abortion rights in 1986. The statement was supported by hundreds of women throughout local and national political activities and was key to the development of the African American Women for Reproductive Freedom coalition in 1989.

NOW's Women of Color Program The National Organization for Women created a Women of Color Program in 1985 to mobilize support for its planned "March for Women's Lives" in April 1986. I was the first director of this program, from 1985 to 1989. My daunting task was to attract the endorsement of organization of women of color for the first national march dedicated to abortion rights.

NOW did not enjoy a good reputation among most women of color, despite the fact that a Black woman, Pauli Murray, a lawyer and later an Episcopalian priest, had co-authored NOW's first statement of purpose in 1966 and had articulated a vision for African-American women that included working for reproductive freedom. Aileen Hernandez, a commissioner for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and a union organizer with the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, became NOW's second national (and first Black) president in 1971. Along with other early Black NOW activists, such as Addie Wyatt and Flo Kennedy, she insisted that NOW add other issues affecting African-American women to its agenda.¹³⁴ NOW, Hernandez asserted, "cannot afford the luxury of a single-issue focus – even when that issue was as important as the ERA."¹³⁵ Hernandez resigned from NOW in 1979 after sponsoring a resolution saying that Black women should not join the organization until it had confronted its

own racism. California state senator Diane Watson concurred: “If they [NOW] don’t really go after a mixed group of women, we should not support such an organization, and we should dramatize our non-support.”¹³⁶

NOW’s negligence regarding racism dissuaded many Black women from affiliating. Only seven organizations of women of color had endorsed NOW’s Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) march in 1978, and little changed over time. In some cases, relations got much worse between Black women and NOW, over such issues as which candidate to support at the 1984 Democratic National Convention.

In 1986 Black women were skeptical about joining a march for abortion rights sponsored by what was perceived as a white women’s organization. For one thing, though abortion had shaped the personal experiences of many of these women, it was not part of their lives as political activists. Although all the leaders of Black women’s organizations I contacted privately supported abortion rights, many perceived the issue as marginal, too controversial, or too “white” for their ready endorsement. Only a few, like Byllye Avery, Shirley Chisholm, and Dorothy Height, spoke out publicly in support of the march. Many of the others, as Angela Davis has observed, were uncomfortable about subtleties that seemed to escape popular discussion of abortion among white women – for example, “the distinction between *abortion* **LORE T T A J**
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rights and the general advocacy of *abortions*. The [abortion rights] campaign often failed to provide a voice for women who wanted the right to legal abortions while deploring the social conditions that prohibited them from bearing more children.”¹³⁷ Because the abortion rights movement focused on legality and public advocacy, it failed to touch the lives of many women for whom access – simply having a clinic to go to and the means to pay for service – was the only understanding of abortion they felt they needed. The same class and race issues that segregated the women’s movement in the 1890s hampered our collaboration in the 1980s.

By 1987 NOW was responding more clearly to the voices of women of color; it sponsored the First National Conference on Women of Color and Reproductive Rights in Washington, D.C., which attracted over 400 women of color, two-thirds of whom were African Americans. No national organization of women of color working on reproductive rights existed at the time, and this conference was significant because it was the first conference in history that brought women from the feminist, civil rights, and Black nationalist movements together to promote reproductive freedom.

Although the April 1986 abortion rights march was endorsed by 107 organizations of women of color, three years later, when NOW held its second abortion rights march, more than 2,000 women came together, to form the largest delegation ever of women of color marching to support abortion rights. The National Black Women's Health Project sent thirteen busloads of people to the 1989 march, becoming the largest single delegation of African-American women.¹³⁸

This time, prominent civil rights leaders also affirmed their support for abortion rights. In January 1989 a statement denouncing Operation Rescue's attempts to shut down abortion clinics was signed by thirty-four leaders, including Maxine Waters, Andrew Young, Rosa Parks, John Lewis, Barbara Jordan, William Gray, Cardiss Collins, Leah Wise, Julian Bond, Louis Stokes, John Jacob, and Roger Wilkins.¹³⁹ Jesse Jackson, who spoke at the abortion marches in 1986 and 1989, recruited other Black male leaders to the cause. Joseph Lowery, head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, made his first appearance at an abortion rights demonstration in 1989.¹⁴⁰

Teen Pregnancy and Other Programs During the 1980s, many black feminists were involved in activities related to reproductive health, particularly teen pregnancy programs, which received significant funding in the Reagan/Bush years, and which sometimes demanded silence on the abortion issue in exchange for federal funding.

The National Council of Negro Women, Delta Sigma Theta, the Urban Coalition, and the Coalition of 100 Black Women all mounted teen pregnancy projects, as did civil rights organizations such as the National Urban League, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the NAACP. All attempted to respond to charges in the media that Black teen pregnancy rates were out of control. A 1986 CBS Special Report, for example, on the "vanishing" Black family attributed teen pregnancy to the so-called moral degeneracy of the Black family. In a report that refuted this racist and sexist premise, the Alan Guttmacher Institute examined interstate and racial differences in teen pregnancy rates. Research sponsored by the institute found that although one of every four Black children is born to a teenage mother, states with higher percentages of poor people and people living in urban areas – whatever their race – have significantly higher teen pregnancy and birthrates.¹⁴¹ Poverty, not race, the institute explained, was the major factor in teen pregnancy.

Black women involved in social work founded programs to combat infant mortality, a problem closely associated with poverty and teen pregnancy. As an indicator of Black progress, or lack

thereof, infant mortality and teen pregnancy programs received relatively strong support from the government, particularly when compared with the attack on abortion and contraceptive programs for African Americans, manifested by the passage of the 1977 Hyde Amendment, the 1980 Mexico City policy (which prohibited funding for abortions overseas), and the 1989 “gag rule.”¹⁴²

By the mid-1980s, in response to the Reagan Administration’s various attacks on reproductive rights, and as an outgrowth of increased organizing by women of color after the Decade for Women, African-American and other women of color were beginning to voice strong support for reproductive **A F R I C A N - A M E R I C A N W O M E N/20**□

rights. At this time, Eleanor Holmes Norton declared, “We ought to be out there explaining that we stand at the head of the line on the issue of reproductive rights. We are, after all, the first and foremost affected.”¹⁴³

African American Women for Reproductive Freedom In the late 1980s many Black women determined to focus on mainstream civil rights organizations. A series of legislative fights pitted abortion rights against civil rights when opponents of both tried to divide and weaken the civil rights coalitions. The effort to pass the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1988 – a bill intended to close several loopholes in the law regarding civil rights coverage – was a case in point. Opponents added several anti-abortion amendments to the bill. In a compromise (mostly between Black and white men), the bill was passed with the anti-abortion amendments, weakening the alliance between the women’s and the civil rights movements. This divide-and-conquer strategy would likely have failed if Black feminists had had a role in the debate, because we bridge both worlds. Our absence allowed men to trade away abortion rights and offered an alarming glimpse into the future – if we are silent.

At the time, most civil rights groups believed they had other priorities: AIDS, drug wars, teen pregnancy, attacks on affirmative action, crime – and simply did not recognize the accumulating threats on *Roe v. Wade* that alarmed Black women. But the Supreme Court’s *Webster* decision changed all that. “Now we have to mobilize,” declared Faye Wattleton.¹⁴⁴

Following the *Webster* decision, which opened the door for more restrictive state regulation of abortion, African-American women responded with furious organizing. In fact, the *Webster* decision created its own form of political backlash as the “carts full of mail” and “streets full of

demonstrators” that Supreme Court justice Antonin Scalia predicted indeed materialized.

In August 1989 Donna Brazile and I organized a telephone conference among twelve leaders of Black women’s organizations to discuss creating a national response to the *Webster* decision. This group became the coalition of African American Women for Reproductive Freedom (also called African American Women for Reproductive Choice in some newspaper accounts).

These powerful and highly visible women decided to issue a statement that would “give permission” for African-American women to talk publicly about abortion. This was a critical decision because most of the leaders of major Black women’s organizations had not yet publicly affirmed their support for abortion, although several had endorsed marches and other campaigns by mainstream pro-choice organizations – a situation that underwrote the silence Black women around the country.

The public statement affirming abortion rights, written by Marcia Gillespie of *Ms.* magazine, became a brochure titled “We Remember: African American Women for Reproductive Freedom.” Emily Tynes, former press secretary of NARAL and a sophisticated media consultant, organized a press conference the day before the opening of the 1989 Congressional Black Caucus national conference at which Faye Wattleton became the first reproductive rights activist to receive the CBC’s national leadership award. Featured at the press conference were Dorothy Height (National Council of Negro Women), Faye Wattleton (Planned Parenthood), Congresswoman Cardiss Collins, Bylye Avery (National Black Women’s Health Project), Beverly Smith (Delta Sigma Theta), Janet Ballard (Alpha Kappa Alpha), Jewell McCabe (Coalition of 100 Black Women), Pat Tyson (Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights), and Shirley Chisholm (National Political Congress of Black Women). These women spoke forcefully about the need to maintain Operation Push and Jacqui Gates of the National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women’s Clubs sent messages as well. Such broad support from Black women’s organizations, church groups, sororities, and political leaders was unprecedented in the history of our movement.

Two thousand copies of the brochure were initially printed, but we underestimated the huge demand. The strategy awoke what one reporter called “the sleeping giant of the pro-choice movement.”¹⁴⁵ By the end of an eighteen-month campaign, over 250,000 copies of the brochure had been distributed in response to requests from African-American women from around the country. **LORETTA J. ROSS / 21**

The brochure campaign was extremely effective because it linked the collective powerlessness Black people felt about the slavery experience to the callous assault on abortion rights in the 1980s. The public statement did, in fact, give everyday Black women “permission” to bring abortion out of the closets of our lives. The brochure read in part:

Choice is the essence of freedom . . . we have known how painful it is to be without choice in this land . . . Now once again somebody is trying to say that we can't handle the freedom of choice . . . [that] African American women can't think for themselves . . . that we must have babies whether we choose to or not . . . We understand why African Americans seek safe legal abortion now. It's . . . a matter of survival.¹⁴⁶

A year later, in June 1990, African American Women for Reproductive Freedom joined the National Black Women's Health Project in sponsoring the first-ever national conference on Black women and Reproductive Rights at Spelman College, which was also supported by the National Council of Negro Women, the Coalition of 100 Black Women, Delta Sigma Theta, Operation Push, The National Urban Coalition, and the National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women's Clubs. The strategy of the conference was to mobilize Black women in as many ways and organizations as possible. Over the next two years, most of these groups sponsored their first-ever conferences on reproductive rights for Black women. “We Remember!” became a rallying cry for our movement as Black women demanded the right to speak for themselves in the abortion debate.

Additional Actions for Reproductive Freedom In 1988 the Center for Women's Development at Medgar Evers College in New York sponsored its first conference on Black women and reproductive rights. The center's work to date had focused on the rights of single Black mothers, and the expansion into reproductive rights activism was a significant shift – the result of the center's Black “nationalist feminist” politics and its leadership role in the Black nationalist movement.

Black students on college campuses also became involved in the movement; for example, students at Spelman published a statement in defense of abortion rights in the student newspaper late in 1989. Black students at Yale and Howard also organized reproductive rights events in the late 1980s. This infusion of young people into the reproductive rights movement is perhaps the best achievement of our activism – the true legacy for the future.

Black women who worked within the pro-choice mainstream created partnerships with Black

women's organizations, bringing financial resources together with the militancy of the African-American women. For example, NOW, NARAL, and Planned Parenthood funded the "We Remember" brochures while agreeing to respect the organizational autonomy of African-American women.

In 1988 the Reagan administration began to push regulations limiting the right of women to receive information about abortion from federally funded family-planning clinics. The proposed "gag rule" deeply offended African-American women, who viewed the regulations as encroachments on free speech and on the patient-doctor relationships. Most seriously, the proposal threatened the health needs of poor women, for whom abortion can be a necessity. In response, Sherrilyn Ifill and Charlotte Rutherford of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, respectively, organized an amicus brief that was submitted to the Supreme Court on behalf of women of color. More than one hundred organizations of women of color became signatories to the first abortion rights brief in history submitted by African-American and other women of color to the Supreme Court.¹⁴⁷

Earlier, the Women of Color Partnership Program of the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights, established in the mid-1980s, had begun organizing pro-choice women of color in churches. Its first director was an African-American woman, Judy Logan-White. Working with NOW's Women of Color Program, regional conferences were organized in Washington, D.C., Oakland, Philadelphia, and Atlanta between 1986 and 1992. Other conferences sponsored by RCAR were held in Hartford, Connecticut; Sioux Falls, South Dakota; and Raleigh, North Carolina. In collaboration with the ACLU Reproductive **A F R I C A N - A M E R I C A N W O M E N/22**

Freedom Project under Lynn Paltrow and the NOW Women of Color Program, in 1989 the Partnership Program sponsored "in Defense of *Roe*," a national conference in Washington, D.C. for women of color.

In July 1994 Black women attending a national pro-choice conference in Chicago decided to launch another highly visible campaign for abortion rights because the Clinton administration was in the process of designing a health care reform proposal that many Black women feared would deemphasize abortion rights. Under the leadership of "Able" Mable Thomas, the group called itself Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice (the Reproductive Justice Coalition, for short). Fast-paced organizing brought together more than 800 Black abortion rights supporters, who raised more than \$21,000 in two weeks to purchase a full-page signature ad in the *Washington Post* on August 16, 1994. The ad sent a clear message to members of Congress that the various health care reform proposals must address concerns of Black women, including abortion, universal coverage, equal access to health care services, and

protection from discrimination.

This remarkable series of events, compressed into a relatively brief period, marked the first time many African-American activists had ever publicly defended abortion rights and demonstrated a new awareness among African-American women who mobilized support for an expanded reproductive freedom agenda. They had an impact on both the Black community and the women's movement. By now, prominent Black male writers, such as Manning Marable, openly challenged sexist views on reproductive rights. Marable insisted: "We must fight for women's rights to control their own bodies and not submit to the demagogues of the rabid right who would return us to back alley abortionists, to those who would destroy young women's lives. Those who oppose the woman's right to choose express so much love for the rights of the fetus, yet too frequently express contempt for child nutrition programs, child care, and education after the child has come into the world."¹⁴⁸

Despite the difficulties in Black male-female dialogue about such issues as the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas sexual harassment charges it appears that African-American men and women are entering into a new (and yet old) consensus about the importance of reproductive rights for racial progress.

By the mid-1990s African-American and other women of color have forced the abortion rights movement to become a broader struggle for reproductive freedom. I do not believe it is an overstatement to say that the activism of Black women and other women of color expanded the focus of the abortion rights movements in the 1990s. This activism influenced several pro-choice organizations to change their names and priorities: the National Abortion Rights Action League was renamed the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League in 1994; the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights became the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice that same year. NOW added welfare rights as one of its top priorities in 1993. This broadening of the agenda of organizations that were primarily seen as narrowly focused was due, in large part, to the demands of women of color for a more inclusive and relevant reproductive rights movement.

This transformation in the politics of the pro-choice movement required an assessment of the interrelatedness of race, gender, and class issues and how they affected different groups of women. Despite our biological similarities, different groups of women cope with vastly different social realities. Black women have placed reproductive health issues in a historical context that makes the reproductive freedom movement relevant to the ongoing struggle against racism and poverty. Today, more Black women publicly support abortion and birth control than ever before; more are working with predominantly white women's organizations than before; and, in many

ways, the ideological gaps between Black and white feminists have diminished as the reproductive freedom movement seeks to make services available and accessible to all women.

Abortion rights has moved from the margin to the center of the dialogue about Black feminist activism. The leadership of the 1960s was finally matched by a constituency in the 1990s that supported full reproductive rights for Black women. In a sense, the deferred dreams of our foremothers of the 1920s were finally affirmed when Black women declared, "We Remember!"

CONCLUSION: IN PURSUIT OF PERFECT CHOICE **LORETTA J. ROSS / 23**

As we plan our activist future, we must clearly envision what we want to create for ourselves, so that we end up where we want to be. We must wrestle with concepts like "perfect choice," the opposite of the very imperfect choices we presently have. (I first heard this sentiment expressed by Naima Major at the National Black Women's Health Project in 1989, when I was its program director; it seemed to capture our aspirations so accurately.) We demand perfect choice: the right to have the resources to make the reproductive choices that make sense.

Perfect choice must involve access not only to abortion services but also to prenatal care, quality sex education, contraceptives, maternal infant and child health services, housing, and reform of the health care delivery system. As Gloria Joseph has said, "Given these realities of health care seen by Black people, White women must understand why Black women do not devote their full energies to the abortion issue. The emphasis has to be on total health care."¹⁴⁹

For example, the scientific community must provide us with safe contraceptive and abortion choices. At the same time, we will not allow those who pursue pharmaceutical profits and political objectives to use us as human guinea pigs in experimental reproductive technologies.

We oppose all bad reproductive technology, just as we oppose the abusive use of promising technology. For example, the contraceptive implant Norplant was the first new birth control offered to American women in twenty-five years and as such was a welcome development because we have so few contraceptive choices. However, within a year of its introduction, an African-American woman in California was ordered by a judge to accept temporary sterilization

with Norplant as a condition of her parole.¹⁵⁰ Only the fierce vigilance of the ACLU Reproductive Freedom Project stopped the judge's dangerous order. This type of abuse is what happens when a racist and insensitive system devises politicized applications of technology, to our detriment.

We demand to be in control of our own bodies and to have access to the best available technology, without limits because of income, race, or sexual preference. We, not doctors or courts or even the men in our lives, should decide if and when we have children.

When perfect choices do not exist, women adapt themselves, using whatever is available. Women often beg for sterilization when that is the only way (short of abstinence) to control their fertility. If abortion is recriminalized, then women will again resort to self-induced abortions, some using life-threatening methods.

The practical imperatives of this work are apparent: We must sponsor more conferences, retreats, think tanks, and we must produce more documentation and research in order to advance our movement and our struggle for freedom, and offer younger women a vision for the future. Poet and writer Audre Lorde expressed our project best: "For Black women, learning to consciously extend ourselves to each other and call upon each other's strengths is a life-saving strategy. In the best of circumstances surrounding our lives, it requires an enormous amount of mutual, consistent support for us to be emotionally able to look straight into the face of the powers aligned against us and still do our work with joy. It takes determination and practice."¹⁵¹

The history of African-American women's activism in the reproductive freedom movement is just now being researched, more than one hundred years after it began. This work is urgent because unless we define for ourselves our own history and our impact, other's descriptions of our contributions will never be accurate or authentic. Today, more African-American women than ever before are active in the struggle to maintain legal and accessible abortion services. This militancy may once again produce tension for African-American men regarding the relationship of race and sex, a reaction I call "backlash." However, our new militancy will also produce definitions of power, activism, and resistance that will frame the way our activism is recorded as history.

¹ Linda Gordon, in her critically acclaimed book *Woman's Body, Woman's Right* (New York: Penguin, rev. ed., 1990), separates the reproductive freedom movement into distinct historical

phases, evolving from “voluntary motherhood” to “birth control” to “family planning” to “reproductive freedom.” Each of these phrases has historical antecedents and associations, but for the purpose of this essay I will use them rather interchangeably.

² Martha C. Ward, *Poor Women, Powerful Men: America’s Great Experiment in Family Planning* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986), 18. **A F R I C A N - A M E R I C A N W O M E N** /24□

³ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴ Robert Stapes, *The Black Women in America* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1974), 146.

⁵ Melanie Tervalon, “Black Women’s Reproductive Rights,” in *Women’s Health: Readings on Social, Economic and Political Issues*, ed. Nancy Worcester and Marianne H. Whatley (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1988), 136.

⁶ E. Frances White, “Africa on My Mind: Gender, Counterdiscourse, and African-American Nationalism,” in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: New Press, 1995), 519.

⁷ Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, *Abortion and Woman’s Choice: The State, Sexuality, and Reproductive Freedom* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, rev. ed., 1990), 130.

⁸ Brenda Joyner, “Fighting Back to Save Women’s Lives,” in *From Abortion to Reproductive Freedom: Transforming a Movement*, ed. Marlene Gerber Fried (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 208.

⁹ Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire*, xiv.

¹⁰ Fried, *From Abortion*, x.

¹¹ Gordon, *Woman's Body*, 48.

¹² Brochure published by African American Women for Reproductive Freedom, Washington, D.C., September 1989.

¹³ The Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks are Males, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1982), 15-16.

¹⁴ Stanley K. Henshaw, Lisa M. Koonin, and Jack S. Smith, "Characteristics of U.S. Women Having Abortions," *Family Planning Perspectives* 23 (March/April 1991): 75-81.

¹⁵ National Council of Negro Women and Communications Consortium Media Center, "Women of Color Reproductive Health Poll," August 30, 1991.

¹⁶ Hull et al., *But Some of Us Are Brave*, xx.

¹⁷ bell hooks, *Talking Back* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 6.

¹⁸ Thomas B. Littlewood, *The Politics of Population Control* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 18.

¹⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of*

Empowerment (New York: Routledge, 1991), 50; Deborah Gray White, "Ar'n't I a Woman?": *Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985), 98.

²⁰ D. White, "Ar'n't I a Woman?" 101.

²¹ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 324.

²² Angela Davis, "Racism, Birth Control, and Reproductive Rights," in Fried, ed., *From Abortion*, 17.

²³ Gordon, *Woman's Body*, 151.

²⁴ Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William Morrow, 1984), 137.

²⁵ Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire*, 6.

²⁶ Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 85.

²⁷ Gerda Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America* (New York: Vintage, 1972), 576.

²⁸ Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 92-93.

²⁹ Gordon, *Women's Body*, xix.

³⁰ Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 108.

³¹ Many thanks are due Jessie Rodrique, the first scholar I encountered who was doing serious research on the birth control activism of Black women. It was her work that encouraged me to investigate and expand on this history to include abortion rights history and to connect it with modern-day activism. As a measure of the sensitivity of her work, most of the Black women who read her research did not realize she was white until she confessed it on the last page. The familiar racial biases and assumptions that frequently mar white women's writings on Black women were totally absent from her work, a tribute to her feminist consciousness and feminist ethics. See Jessie M. Rodrique, "The Black Community and the Birth Control Movement," in *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History*, ed. Ellen Carol Dubois and Vicki L. Ruiz (New York: Routledge, 1990), 335, 333.

³² Roseann P. Bell, Bettye J. Parker, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, eds., *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature* (New York: Anchor, 1979), 117.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Rodrique, "The Black Community," 338.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 335.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Gordon, *Woman's Body*, 133.

³⁸ Alan L. Stoskopf, "Confronting the Forgotten History of the American Eugenics Movement," *Facing History and Ourselves News*, 1995, 7.

³⁹ Petchesky, *Abortion and Woman's Choice*, 86.

⁴⁰ Ward, *Poor Women*, 8.

⁴¹ Cott, *Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 91. **LORETTA J. ROSS / 25**

⁴² Carole R. McCann, *Birth Control Politics in the United States, 1916 – 1945* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1944), 100.

⁴³ Betsy Hartmann, *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Politics of Population Control and Contraceptive Choice* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 97.

⁴⁴ Davis, "Racism, Birth Control," 20.

⁴⁵ Gena Corea, *The Hidden Malpractice: How American Medicine Mistreats Women* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 138, 141.

⁴⁶ Rodrique, "The Black Community," 338.

⁴⁷ W. E. B. DuBois, "Black Folk and Birth Control," *Birth Control Review*, June 1932, 166.

⁴⁸ Gordon, *Woman's Body*, 328.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Eugenics and birth control policies targeting African Americans were not the only reasons African Americans were concerned about American public health policies. In 1931 a pilot project to study syphilis was launched in Tuskegee, Alabama, funded by the Rosenwald Fund. The Tuskegee program ran from 1932 to 1972, until it was exposed as an unethical research project that left syphilis untreated in poor, uneducated Black farmers so that public health officials could trace the unmedicated development of syphilis in humans. This program fed a strong distrust among African Americans of public health policies and the role of private philanthropy in supplementing the role and funding of the state. See James H. Jones, *Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment* (New York: Free Press, 1981), 86-87.

⁵² Claudia Jones, "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!" in Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire*, 113.

⁵³ Daniel Friedman and Sharon Grimberg, *Back-Alley Detroit: Abortion before Roe v. Wade: A Video Documentary*, Filmmakers Library, New York, 1992.

⁵⁴ Rickie Solinger, *The Abortionist: A Woman Against the Law* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 36.

⁵⁵ Linda Janet Holmes, "Thank You Jesus to Myself: The Life of a Traditional Black Midwife," in *The Black Women's Health Book: Speaking for Ourselves*, ed. Evelyn C. White (Seattle: Seal Press, 1990), 98.

⁵⁶ Solinger, *The Abortionist*, 5.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁵⁹ Ward, *Poor Women*, 15.

⁶⁰ Laura Kaplan, *The Story of Jane: The Legendary Underground Feminist Abortion Service* (New York: Pantheon, 1995), 7.

⁶¹ Ward, *Poor Women*, 15.

⁶² Ibid., 14

⁶³ Petchesky, *Abortion and Woman's Choice*, 118.

⁶⁴ Littlewood, *Population Control*, 9.

⁶⁵ Ward, *Poor Women*, 31.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 27.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 62.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 59.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 68.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 17.

⁷¹ Ibid., xiii.

⁷² Martin Luther King, Jr., “Family Planning – A Special and Urgent Concern” (New York: Planned Parenthood – World Population, 1966), 4.

⁷³ NAACP Policy Statement on Family Planning, adopted July 1966, 57th Convention, Los Angeles.

⁷⁴ Corea, *Hidden Malpractice*, 144.

⁷⁵ Littlewood, *Population Control*, 80.

⁷⁶ Davis, “Racism, Birth Control,” 23.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 12.

⁷⁸ Ward, *Poor Women*, 58.

⁷⁹ Kaplan, *Story of Jane*, 61-64.

⁸⁰ Ward, *Poor Women*, 58.

⁸¹ Jane, "Just Call Jane," in Fried, *From Abortion*, 93.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 95.

⁸³ Kaplan, *Story of Jane*, 267.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁸⁵ Not her real name. Ms. Smith requested anonymity.

⁸⁶ Author's interview, January 17, 1996.

⁸⁷ Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 318.

⁸⁸ Littlewood, *Population Control*, 75.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 69. **A F R I C A N - A M E R I C A N W O M E N / 2 6**

⁹¹ Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 318.

⁹² Ward, *Poor Women*, 95.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁹⁴ Author's interview with Nkenge Toure, March 5, 1993.

⁹⁵ Littlewood, *Population Control*, 72.

⁹⁶ Ward, *Poor Women*, 93.

⁹⁷ Littlewood, *Population Control*, 72.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁹⁹ Ward, *Poor Women*, 93.

¹⁰⁰ Littlewood, *Population Control*, 72.

¹⁰¹ Linda LaRue, "The Black Movement and Women's Liberation," in Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire*, 171-172.

¹⁰² Author's interview with Dr. Brown, January 12, 1992.

¹⁰³ Beverly Smith, "Black Women's Health: Notes for a Course," in Hull et al., *But Some of Us Are Brave*, 107.

¹⁰⁴ Shirley Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbossed* (New York: Hodge Taylor, 1970), 114-115.

¹⁰⁵ Frances M. Beal, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," in *Sisterhood is Powerful*, ed. Robin Morgan (New York: Random House, 1970), 393.

¹⁰⁶ Toni Cade Bambara, "The Pill, Genocide or Liberation," in *The Black Woman*, ed. Toni Cade Bambara (New York: Penguin, 1970), 163-64.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹⁰⁸ Beal, "Double Jeopardy," 393.

¹⁰⁹ Space does not permit me to name all of the African-American women who were influential in the reproductive freedom movement during the 1970s and 1980s. It would be remiss of me, however, to neglect to mention the important activists (and sometimes writers) who contributed to the development of a Black feminist reproductive freedom analysis: Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, bell hooks, Paula Giddings, Safiya Bandele, Gloria Joseph, Nkenge Toure, Dazon Dixon, Vickie Alexander, Barbara Smith, Donna Brazile, Eleanor Holmes Norton, Stanlie James, Vanessa Northington-Gamble, Sakinah Ahad, Melanie Tervalon, June Dobbs Butts, Brenda Joyner, Faye Williams, Mary Lisbon, Linda Leaks, Flo Kennedy, Sherrilyn Ifill, Charlotte Rutherford, Virginia Floyd, Sharon Parker, Pam Freeman, Jamala Rogers, Eleanor Hinton-Hoytt, Julia Scott, Byllye Avery, and Bernice Reagon. These women, along with many other women of color and white women, directly and indirectly encouraged many African-American women to become involved in the women's movement. It is my hope that future books will affirm the innovative contributions of each of these heterosexual and lesbian women.

¹¹⁰ “The Combahee River Collective,” in Hull et al., *But Some of Us Are Brave*, 14.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 11-14.

¹¹² Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire*, 15.

¹¹³ The Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1981), 211.

¹¹⁴ Ward, *Poor Women*, 51.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 52-53.

¹¹⁶ Byllye Y. Avery, “Breathing Life into Ourselves: The Evolution of the National Black Women’s Health Project,” in Evelyn C. White, *Black Women’s Health Book*, 5.

¹¹⁷ Byllye Y. Avery, “A Question of Survival/A Conspiracy of Silence: Abortion and Black Women’s Health,” in Fried, *From Abortion*, 76.

¹¹⁸ Moraga and Anzaldua, *This Bridge*, viii.

¹¹⁹ Beal, “Double Jeopardy,” 393.

¹²⁰ Ninia Baehr, *Abortion without Apology: A Radical History for the 1990s* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 56.

¹²¹ Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbossed*, 113-22.

¹²² Planned Parenthood Federation of America, biographical sketch of Faye Wattleton, president, March 1989.

¹²³ Ward, *Powerful Men*, 64.

¹²⁴ Michele Wallace, "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood," in Hull et al., *But Some of Us Are Brave*, 12.

¹²⁵ Gloria I. Joseph and Jill Lewis, *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives* (New York: Anchor Books, 1981), 276.

¹²⁶ Hartmann, *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs*, 9.

¹²⁷ bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 196.

¹²⁸ Alice Walker, "One Child of One's Own: A Meaningful Digression within the Work(s) – An Excerpt," in Hull et al., *But Some of Us Are Brave*, 42.

¹²⁹ National Women's Conference Committee, *A Decade of Achievement, 1977-1987: A Report on a Survey Based on the National Plan of Action for Women* (Beaver Dam, Wis.: National Women's Conference Center, May 1988), 54.

¹³⁰ Tervalon, "Black Women's Reproductive Rights," 136-37. **LORETTA J. ROSS / 27**

¹³¹ Edith Butler, "The First National Conference on Black Women's Health Issues," in Worcester and Whatley, *Women's Health*, 39.

¹³² Petchesky, *Abortion and Woman's Choice*, 155.

¹³³ Author's interview with Donna Brazile, March 19, 1989.

¹³⁴ Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 300-311.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 346.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 347.

¹³⁷ Davis, "Racism, Birth Control," 205-206.

¹³⁸ Judy D. Simmons, "Abortion: A Matter of Choice," in Evelyn C. White, *Black Women's Health Book*, 120.

¹³⁹ Statement on "Operation Rescue" by National Civil Rights Leaders, January 22, 1989.

¹⁴⁰ Sam Fulwood III, "Black Women Reluctant to Join Pro-Choice Forces," *Los Angeles Times*, November 27, 1989, 18.

¹⁴¹ Faye Wattleton, "Teenage Pregnancy: A Case for National Action," in Evelyn C. White, *Black Women's Health Book*, 108-9.

¹⁴² Infant mortality programs received special attention because Black infants in America die at twice the rate of white infants in the first year of life. This Black/white infant mortality gap has always existed, and since the 1920s, has actually widened. While the African-American infant mortality rate declined throughout the 1970s, the rate subsequently leveled off and then rose in the 1980s, a trend that can be attributed in part to cuts in federal programs. See Virginia David Floyd, "Too Soon, Too Small, Too Sick: Black Infant Mortality," in *Health Issues in the Black Community*, ed. Ronald L. Braithwaite and Sandra E. Taylor (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992), 165.

¹⁴³ Chiquita G. Smith, "A Congresswoman's Call to Action," in *Common Ground, Different Planes*, ed. Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights (Washington, D.C., 1992), 1.

¹⁴⁴ Paul Ruffins, "Blacks Backing Pro-Choice Add a Compelling Voice," *Los Angeles Times*, September 17, 1989, 2.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁴⁶ African American women for Reproductive Freedom, brochure, September 1989.

¹⁴⁷ Loretta Ross, Sherrilyn Ifill, and Sabrae Jenkins, "Emergency Memorandum to Women of Color," in Fried, *From Abortion*, 147.

¹⁴⁸ Manning Marable, "Black America: Multicultural Democracy in the Age of Clarence Thomas and David Duke, and the Los Angeles Uprisings," in *Open Fire*, ed. Greg Ruggiero and Stuart Ashulka (New York: New Press, 1993), 256.

¹⁴⁹ Joseph and Lewis, *Common Differences*, 40.

¹⁵⁰ Barbara Mintzes, Anita Hardon, and Jannemieke Hanhart, *Norplant: Under Her Skin* (Amsterdam: Women's Health Action Foundation, 1993), 115.

¹⁵¹ Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand Books, 1988), 123.