THE vibrant histories of resistance and activism presented here demonstrate that women of color have been deeply engaged in the struggle for reproductive justice. As researchers, we recovered, reflected upon, and sought to convey these histories and to draw lessons from the struggles they represent. We hope this work will lead to a deeper understanding of the contributions and perspectives of women of color regarding issues of reproductive justice. As activists, we want these narratives to inform the ways in which organizing takes place and to strengthen organizing efforts by women of color. We also hope they encourage multiracial organizations and women of color organizations to find additional ways to work together, in coalition and across lines of difference, to extend the sexual and reproductive health of all women.

In this concluding chapter, we assess the importance of organizing by women of color, first examining the role of identity politics in their struggle. We analyze why, and how, women of color redefined the meanings of reproductive rights and turned conferences and research into organizing tools. We analyze their organizing strategies and tactics, underlining the role of culture and community traditions. We outline the strategic alliances they fostered with the communities of color and the mainstream reproductive rights and social justice movements to advance their political agendas. We comment on the influence that women of color have had on pro-choice organizations, reproductive health discourses, and policy interventions at the local as well as the national level. Key organizational challenges they face, including funding, are analyzed. Finally, we explore the future
Identity Politics Revisited

Contrary to broadly based critiques, which argue that identity politics fracture movements, we found that women of color organizations, by defining themselves through race and ethnicity, created spaces that nurtured their activism. The organizations they established served as retreats from the battles waged to get their perspectives across and issues raised in the mainstream pro-choice movement, within their own communities, and in other movements. Whereas the larger society and the pro-choice movement marginalize women of color perspectives and concerns, these identity-based organizations validate their particular perceptions of reality. Organizing around race and ethnicity enabled activists to regroup, re-enter, and engage in reproductive rights struggles. In these separate spaces they defined reproductive rights on their own terms, took leadership and action to realize these rights, and mobilized new constituencies and movements. They determined their own struggles and sites for action, thus resisting domination. Through this process, they developed culturally based styles of organizing and communicating and created focal points for action. Though not utopian, these spaces facilitated the imagining of alternative paths to achieve reproductive freedom.

Women of color have brought diverse voices and concerns to the political arena, broadening both the understanding of reproductive rights and the constituencies supporting them. In this way they have democratized the reproductive rights movement. By virtue of being embedded in the changing needs and concerns of their communities, they revitalize the meaning of reproductive rights on an on-going basis to include the concerns of those who are often overlooked. In general, their focus on the least privileged benefits all women. For example, the activism spearheaded by women of color to end sterilization abuse led to the development of guidelines and regulatory processes that provide protection for all women. Even if women of color agendas are incorporated by the mainstream, we think it is essential to maintain their autonomous organizations to play these pivotal and radical roles.

Women of color organizations need to be affirmed and seen neither as competing with other struggles to promote reproductive health and rights nor as a step in the process of integrating into the mainstream movement. Ideally, the independent organizing by women of color would be complemented by multiracial and multiethnic organizing that equitably distributes power and resources to benefit and
empower women of color. Multiracial organizations and collaborations should allow a broad range of groups to bring their concerns to bear in the articulation of reproductive health and sexual rights. Only through the sharing and exchange of ideas and experiences can the needs of all women be acknowledged and addressed. Otherwise, as we have seen time and again, what may represent an expansion of reproductive freedom for one group could be a diminution of freedom for another. In multiracial spaces, a cross-section of women is able to debate reproductive rights and technology issues from a variety of perspectives and take appropriate action that benefits all and does not compromise any woman’s rights. Anti-racist work can also be conducted here. Such organizations enable the work done in women of color organizations to be known to and addressed by a broader constituency. This bridging work is crucial for forging common ground among different groups who have both shared concerns and particular interests.

Multiracial organizing efforts do exist in the reproductive rights movement, especially among younger activists and new organizations such as National Women’s Alliance, Third Wave, and Choice USA. Their commitment to multiracial organizing signals a new development in reproductive rights organizing and is an encouraging development. However, as of now, multiracial organizations and coalitions are not sufficiently strong voices in the pro-choice movement, which is still dominated by middle-class white women and the politics of liberal feminism. If the pro-choice movement is to be more effective, it must be more inclusive of diverse reproductive rights perspectives and concerns beyond abortion. As we have heard from all of the groups in this book, a narrow abortion rights message and agenda alienates women of color; it also alienates low-income white women who share many of the same concerns as women of color. A sole focus on abortion is separated from the lives and daily concerns of most women. While a low-income woman may have one or two abortions in her life, she also must deal with poor, unsafe housing, inept medical care, lack of health insurance, pay inequities, and a host of other issues on an ongoing basis. Severing abortion from these day-to-day concerns casts the pro-choice movement as overprivileged, elitist, and insensitive to the realities of many women’s lives. Whereas liberal feminism basically addresses gender-based economic inequalities and seeks reform through legal changes, a more radical feminist politics challenges the entire system, linking all forms of oppression. The reproductive rights agenda that women of color propose cannot be disengaged from structural economic violence, inequality, and racism, and it is on this point that these two political philosophies—a radical versus a liberal feminist agenda—clash. But it is this challenge
to economic injustice that opens up the most promising opportunities for revitalizing and broadening the pro-choice movement.

Political Roots of Women of Color Struggles

The radical agenda that women of color pursue has its roots in other progressive social movements. The majority of the founders of the women of color organizations we examined were involved in broader social justice movements—civil rights, feminism, women’s health, and Native American sovereignty. Leadership opportunities for women of color within these movements were lacking and they had to contend with a considerable amount of sexism.

The commitment of women of color to reproductive rights often generated controversy in their communities. Most Nationalist organizations failed to address gender issues, with the exception of two groups, the Puerto Rican Young Lords Party and the Black Panther Party. Bitter and divisive debate continues in communities of color over whether the struggle for reproductive rights diverts attention from anti-racist and sovereignty struggles. Thus, reproductive justice advocates face resistance in their communities, as well as from the pro-choice movement, and walk a fine line in both spaces. In pro-choice circles, they are often the only women of color and the ones who raised race-related concerns. In their own communities, they are the only ones talking about issues of sexual and reproductive rights. Peggy Saika, board chair of Asians and Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health, said that APIRH had to be the affirmative action people within the pro-choice movement, a sentiment echoed by many of the other leaders we featured here. Facing resistance at both ends led women of color to feel embattled, isolated, and vulnerable.

Despite these problems, progressive movements shaped the psyches and the organizational mandates of women of color groups. The philosophies and political agendas of these movements were the foundations upon which these organizations built. In addition to working within mainstream pro-choice organizations and their communities, some women of color organizations made connections with evolving social justice movements such as the environmental justice, anti-sweatshop, and immigrant rights movements.

Women of color organizations have affected and been affected by those women’s health and reproductive rights movements that made the politics of race/ethnicity and class integral to their organizing. Many white women in the women’s health movement of the 1960s and 70s were engaged with or sympathetic to the civil rights movement, which made them realize the importance of anti-racist work. Organizations that were, or attempted to be, explicitly attuned to
addressing race within predominantly white organizations were the earliest supporters of the women of color activists and organizations in this book, in particular the National Women's Health Network (NWHN).¹ In addition to having women of color on the NWHN's board of directors, the NWHN supplied organizational support, provided funds directly, and shared its funding contacts as well as field networks that opened doors for women of color activists.

To advance their agendas and perspectives, women of color sought out the support of women of color and white women allies working in mainstream institutions. The ally role that white women in mainstream groups played allowed for some significant action, such as sponsoring national conferences and meetings of women of color, like the "In Defense of Roe" conference in 1989. Race-conscious white women allies also served as bridge builders between autonomous women of color organizations and the movements for choice and women's health.

**Redefining Reproductive Rights**

As the varied histories of women of color organizations described here illustrate, women of color are not the subjects of a single experience or history of racism. Each group had to address its particular history of reproductive oppression and to articulate its particular positive vision and agenda for reproductive freedom, which included demanding the right to have children free from coercion, either by the state or through community pressure. Claiming reproductive rights in a culturally specific and meaningful way was essential to developing a political agenda and a constituency base. Thus, defining the meaning of reproductive rights was a highly charged, politicized exercise and a key step in the organization-building process of each group.

The Native American groups emphasize land sovereignty and the right to maintain and sustain their communities and culture. The historical trauma of having their children taken away from them to be brought up in boarding schools and foster homes shaped their reproductive rights agenda, which also includes cultural and spiritual development and the right to live as Native peoples. Colorado Organization for Latina Opportunity and Reproductive Rights (COLOR) believes that reproductive and sexual rights are central to achieving full equality and opportunity for Latinas in the US. They see their work to secure reproductive rights as part of a long history of Latino activism on issues of social justice. For African American women, bodily integrity is crucial, as this right was wrenched from them during slavery. Immigration restrictions and abuses frame the reproductive rights agendas of Latinas and Asian Americans. Medical
experimentation, discriminatory treatment, poor quality of care, and abuse, as well as issues of population control, were concerns across communities of color. Similarly, as people of color communities are disproportionately poor, the right to have the financial resources to maintain their families is crucial for women of color to realize their reproductive rights. Cultural competency—the idea that providers should understand and respect the languages, customs, and traditions of the communities they serve—has been an important demand across women of color groups.

The organizations in this book that initially formed by organizing around issues of abortion and contraception never separated these issues from other reproductive health concerns. As a result, they moved quickly to action on a broader range of needs and rights. Their communities have different reproductive rights realities and needs, and “choice” is not where they enter the movement. To be relevant in their own communities, they adopted a broad approach that encompassed a range of reproductive rights and wrongs. We see this in the names of the groups, their missions, and their agendas, which are holistic, with reproductive rights being part of a broader health and social justice framework. Casting their names and mission in terms of reproductive health, and most recently reproductive justice, offers an opportunity for dialogue that can include choice but not be restricted by it. Access to basic health services, issues of poverty, and language and cultural barriers were core concerns across women of color organizations that a politicized health framework encapsulates.

Mainstream society has classified women of color broadly into four ethnic categories, ignoring the differences these definitions span. Furthermore, narrowing the women of color to four categories eliminates entire groups altogether. With whom do immigrant women from Africa, the Middle East, and the non-Latin Caribbean, or women of color who identify as multiracial find solidarity? Keenly aware of the problems inherent in such an arbitrary and sweeping classification system, activists attended to the multiplicity of identities encompassed within each grouping. For example, the National Latina Health Organization (NLHO) and COLOR strive to be sensitive to the differing needs, cultures, language nuances, and immigrant experiences among Latinas, who include Puerto Ricans and women of Mexican and Central American origin as well as Cuban Americans. Native groups respect the different tribal histories and sovereign authority of indigenous nations. Asian women's groups strive to be pan-Asian in staffing and to organize around health concerns in specific communities. For example, the National Asian Women's Health Organization (NAWHO) had separate outreach and research efforts to accommodate the different cultural and language needs of the various Asian
communities it serves. It has different organizers for the South Asian and Southeast Asian communities, who know the language and culture of each group. Organizing priorities also differ depending upon community identified needs.

Cultural struggle—finding their voice and framing issues in ways that resonate within their communities—is part and parcel of the political struggle of women of color organizations. All of the activists sought to preserve the connection to their culture and community, consciously drawing on those resources and traditions. Where possible, women of color activists work with community institutions, leaders, and organizations that share their objectives. They reach out to spiritual leaders and draw on spiritual and traditional practices, indigenous knowledge, music, and dance in their organizing efforts that enable a cross-section of the community members to contribute or participate in cultural activities.

Women of color developed culturally specific tools and organizing strategies to advance their work, such as the Self-Help approach pioneered by the National Black Women’s Health Project (NBWHP). Self-Help enables women to come to terms with internalized racism and to develop the confidence to undertake advocacy and organizing to improve their health status. This emotional process is liberatory: it provides a space to raise and share fear and trauma and work with others to overcome these impediments. The NLHO also adopted these methods, adapting them for Latinas. Native women in Akwesasne, by connecting with cultural traditions associated with dance and midwifery, were able to start the process of self and community healing. APIRH embarked on a year-long set of dialogues with community members and leaders to formulate its organizational agenda. COLOR adopted conocimiento to enhance personal and group power. Working one-on-one, in small group sessions, and in circles on issues of internalized oppression and self-esteem were essential features of their reproductive rights work.

By defining their work in the context of political and cultural struggles in their communities, activists have reached new constituencies and actors to support reproductive freedom. For instance, the NBWHP has developed an ongoing relationship with African American leaders in Congress and educates them about black women’s health status, concerns, and needs. By doing so the group has garnered congressional support for a reproductive health agenda. Similarly, NAWHO works with Asian American elected officials and Asian community leaders and members, and Native American activists have brought reproductive health concerns to the attention of public health agencies as well as to their communities and social movements.
Working within the confines of community has its drawbacks too. In the community arena, issues of race and ethnicity are privileged as the primary categories of oppression. This ignores how different systems of stratification intersect in the construction of identity and the meaning and experiences of reproductive rights. Differences of sexuality, disability, and class were mostly glossed over among the women of color groups we examined. It is noteworthy, for example, that though sexuality and sexuality education has been an important component of their work, many women of color organizations have not dealt directly with lesbian issues. Some of this is related to the homophobia that exists in their communities. Despite the fact that some of the leaders of the organizations were lesbian, they chose not to organize on lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues, and there did not seem to be significant internal pressure to take clear stands on lesbian concerns. While lesbians participated in the organizations, were often in leadership positions, and presented at conferences, issues of sexual orientation and homophobia were not largely integrated into organizational agendas.

The lack of attention to homophobia represents a missed opportunity among women of color organization as it is among mainstream groups. Sexual rights are the part of the human rights framework that speaks more directly to the right of bodily integrity and freedom from sexual abuse and challenges discrimination based on gender and/or sexual orientation. They are also affirmative rights and include the right to sexual pleasure, self-expression, and intimacy. Sexual rights were very central in the development of the women’s health movement, but the hegemonic and more liberal pro-choice agenda pushed issues of sexuality to the margins of the movement. Pro-choice and reproductive rights became synonymous and, in the process, issues of sexuality were peeled away from reproductive rights. Women of color organizations also failed to tie sexual rights securely to their definitions of reproductive rights. However, had they confronted the lesbian question, perhaps this disjunction between sexual and reproductive rights would not have occurred. In the ongoing constructions of a collective identity, “deciding who we are requires deciding who we are not. All social movements, and identity movements in particular, are thus in the business, at least sometimes of exclusion.” These exclusions are often strategic. Clearly, there were groups of women, such as lesbians within ethnic groups, whose concerns were marginalized in women of color organizations. It is among the newer multiracial formations like National Women’s Alliance, Third Wave, and Choice USA that sexual orientation and sexual rights are being more seriously engaged.
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Coming Together: The Impetus for Organizing

The conference as a space for education and discussion was adopted and transformed by communities of color as a critical organizing tool. Conferences served as catalysts to community-based organizing. The initial conferences were large inspirational gatherings that drew women from an identity-based group together for the first time around issues of reproductive rights and were defining or "movement moments" for each of the groups. The exhilaration and enormous energy palpable in the first gathering, the Black Women's Health Conference at Spelman, was experienced by the other groups at their early conferences as well. They drew diverse women within each community around a common purpose, enabling political agendas for action to emerge. All of the groups worked extensively to ensure that their conferences reached out broadly within their respective communities, which they saw as crucial for forging an inclusive agenda.

Coming together to learn more about themselves and to chart an agenda for other women who shared their racial/ethnic identity enabled participants to develop new understandings of themselves as individuals and as part of a community. Particular attention was directed toward bringing economically vulnerable women to the conferences. Learning from one another’s experiences was revelatory, with the dialogues between poor and middle-class and professional women being among the most powerful exchanges. However, the organizations we studied found it difficult to sustain the momentum generated by these conferences. A different set of skills and significant organizational infrastructure are necessary to build on conference energy and create networks and programs to implement the vision that is so inspirational for conference participants. Conferences are resource-intensive in terms of labor and finances and are not adaptable to creating regular channels for movement building and outreach. Repeated conferences, without the interim organizational building necessary, can lead to overextension, disillusion, and dissolution. Thus, it is not surprising that many of the groups have abandoned the conference structure or employ it much less as an organizing force.

The NBWHHP stood the longest by its commitment to host annual conferences, but it had to abandon these meetings due to financial difficulties. Other groups like the NLHO, NAWHO, APIRH, and African American Women Evolving (AAWE) tapped the conference process in their initial development stage to identify and energize their constituencies. However, withdrawing from using the conference as a mobilizing vehicle, and instead relying on electronic and newsletter outreach together with mobilization on a program and
project basis, may have made the organizations less open to new ideas and new leadership as well as more distant from their membership. While these digital-age outreach strategies reach greater numbers of people, they are less effective for encouraging a new and diverse set of recruits and encourage passivity among supporters. It remains a challenge for women of color organizations to find ways to raise resources to strategically utilize the conference mobilizing process to enhance program development and institution building activities, as well as to encourage a new and diverse set of recruits to this movement and to respond to the emerging concerns their constituencies.

Outreach Within and Across Communities

Beyond the conferences, activists reached out to women in their communities as well as to women they saw as allies within the US and beyond. They paid special attention to the needs of economically vulnerable women, who are disproportionately represented in communities of people of color and immigrants. However, although most of the groups have tried to address the needs of economically disadvantaged women, they are not primarily poor women's organizations. The rank and file members, staff, and leaders are mainly middle-class, educated women, many of whom are health practitioners or advocates. The emphasis on reaching and bringing in low-income women as key organizational actors, which some of the groups emphasized at the outset, was not operationalized. Systematic efforts are still needed to give low-income women greater presence and voice.

Most of the organizations viewed young people as a key constituency and were committed to developing the next generation of leaders. Several incorporated this commitment in their leadership, organizational structures, boards, and activities. NAWHO, APIRH, and AAWE are all led and staffed by women in their 20s and 30s. APIRH and NAWHO focused on building youth leadership, which was particularly evident in APIRH's Health, Opportunities, Problem-Solving, and Empowerment Project (HOPE) for girls and the NAWHO National Leadership Network.

Intergenerational work is also valued across women of color groups. Among NBWHP's first projects was a film featuring African American women and their daughters talking about menstruation and sexuality. More recently, AAWE has produced a video of mothers and daughters talking about reproductive health and sexuality, which is used to encourage intergenerational understanding. Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center (NAWHERC) consciously builds on the elders model, in which activists relearn and
draw sustenance from the wisdom of their elders and from traditional culture. NBWHP has a college-based program, and the Walking for Wellness Project draws on a cross-generational constituency. The NLHO has developed an intergenerational conference model where women of all ages can come together to learn about and share their concerns. NAWHO has embarked on a project to talk about sexuality with kids.

International connections have also been important for US women of color involved in reproductive rights. Charon Asotoyer of NAWHERC made links with indigenous movements in other parts of the world and was active in the Indigenous Women’s Network (IWN). Through these organizations and their leadership, women of color had an organized, collective presence at the United Nations’ Cairo (1994) and Beijing (1995) conferences, the World Conference Against Racism (2001), the series of UN conferences on HIV/AIDS, and International Women’s Health Meetings, where they brought unique women of color perspectives to the deliberations. They found that they shared many of the same experiences of coercion with regards to population control with women around the world and joined in efforts to challenge reproductive oppression through international conference declarations and other joint statements.

Researchers of Their Own Reality

The dearth of data regarding the reproductive and sexual health of women of color compelled activists in all of the organizations to undertake primary research for their respective constituencies. This was essential to determining community outreach and intervention strategies as well as to developing appropriate policy advocacy positions. For example, the Mother’s Milk Project, NAWHERC, and NAWHO developed extensive research agendas, partnering with academic, national, and state health researchers at places such as Cornell University, the Centers for Disease Control, and the Office of Minority Health. Through such initiatives, they have pressured the government to undertake research and programming that addresses the reproductive health of women of color. These efforts have had a broad impact on national health policy, especially with regard to racial disparities in health and health care. APIRH employed the Participatory Action Research (PAR) model in all of its work and developed the Reproductive Freedom Tour as well as the HOPE project for girls to identify community problems by community members. Using PAR, they devised community based solutions to reproductive health hazards in the community and to sexual harassment in the schools. AAWE, too, conducted research on access to emergency
contraception for African American women and worked to make it more available.

The research that has been carried out by women of color groups is action oriented, participatory, and serves numerous objectives, sometimes simultaneously. The research process itself often drew on community traditions: for example, NAWHERC used the roundtable process to talk about and document the personal experiences of Native American women. In this way, women of color activists transformed the research process and broke down the barriers between researchers and their subjects. Their findings—high incidence of infertility among African American women, fetal alcohol syndrome among Native American women, breast cancer among Asian and Pacific Islander (API) women—have been used to galvanize their constituencies to advocate for changes in policies and programs to address critical health needs. For example, the research conducted at Akwesasne on birthing and breast milk contamination conceptualized the women’s body as the “first environment.” It made the direct connection between a woman’s body and environmental toxins that has been pivotal in developing further studies by national health agencies in the US and Canada on environmental impacts on reproductive health.

The research process—design, methods employed, researchers, and partnerships forged—and the ways in which the results were used, were also forms of political activism. For example, Katsi Cook trained Native women to “become researchers of their own reality” and in so doing empowered them to conduct community health research and advocate on their own behalf and inspired a few Native women to attain advanced academic training and degrees. Similarly, the findings were used to inform and mobilize the communities and ultimately to change health policies and practices by securing more health resources for those communities.

**Organizational Structures**

The organizations represented here run the gamut in terms of their size, agenda emphasis, organizational structures, and leadership styles. Some, like NAWHO and the NBWHP, have centralized organizational structures and over time have garnered impressive resources for their work. Others, including Mother’s Milk Project, APIRH, COLOR, and the NLHO, are more loosely structured, and less formal or professionalized. For example, both NAWHO and the NBWHP have more hierarchical leadership and organizational styles and tend to be staff run. They have presidents or executive directors who earn comparatively high professional salaries, while the grassroots organizations tend to rely more on volunteers for both
staffing and board members. The offices of some organizations are well appointed and their board meetings and other formal gatherings are upscale compared with the more grassroots women of color groups.

The need to develop strong institutions is an ongoing challenge for women of color groups. Pursuing work on several fronts, taking on a holistic agenda, and developing the internal structures necessary to facilitate the work, all coupled with a consistent lack of steady funding, is daunting. The organizations have tried different structures with varying degrees of success, including organizing chapters, functioning as loose networks, developing membership models, being volunteer driven, and creating staff-driven organizations. However, with the pressure to play so many roles at once, they have paid insufficient attention to issues of transparency and accountability, which has led to dissatisfaction and disillusionment among staff members in several instances. Staff development as well as setting in place institutional policies and procedures to make sure that these organizations are not dominated and controlled by a founding leader are important to address.

These women of color organizations were founded by strong and charismatic leaders and have not been able to adequately develop the next line of leadership and ways to share responsibility and authority. The women of color movement suffers from the “founders syndrome,” where a few leaders become the face of the organizations they represent. This, however, is not unique to reproductive rights organizations led by women of color. It tends to be a problem shared by many of the grassroots nonprofit organizations. This is beginning to change, as the number of women of color leaders and organizations is increasing steadily with time, allowing more diverse voices to speak out on the issues. Developing leadership beyond the founding ranks and bringing in the next generation of leaders are critical challenges, in which several of the organizations are now engaged, as a few founding “mothers” have stepped aside. Among them are Byllye Avery, Peggy Saika, and Mary Chung, who continue to play a supportive role. Thus, while they have made room for new leadership to emerge, their organizations have not lost their expertise and dedication.

There have been some ideological tensions between the professional versus the grassroots orientations of women of color groups, both within and between women of color groups. A few organizations are more policy focused than based in community organizing. However, women of color are redefining what it means to be engaged in policy work by underlining the importance of bringing local voices to national attention. Disagreements have arisen among women
of color regarding whether those working on the policy level or grassroots base-building groups are better placed to speak on behalf of or represent the community. More professional or national groups, due to their access to resources, have an advantage as spokespersons, while grassroots organizations are closer to the community and thus more representative and better able to speak on community issues. Again, each has a distinct space and contribution to make, but due to the competition for funds, there is often jockeying among women of color groups regarding who should speak on behalf of or represent a community.

A shift from grassroots political work toward more emphasis on policy level and professional organizational style could reflect a political shift away from an oppositional and radical politics. However, we contend that the lines between what constitutes a radical or a mainstream group are blurred or less meaningful among women of color reproductive rights groups. No matter what the organization’s offices, staff hierarchies, or budget size, advocacy on behalf of the rights of women of color, especially low-income women, constitutes a radical agenda. It is the content of the agenda, the alliances and analysis that ground the work, and the constituencies mobilized that make for a radical agenda.

**Working with Mainstream Pro-Choice Organizations to Advance a Policy Agenda**

Most of the women of color activists who were involved in reproductive rights and health policy brought with them experiences of frustration from their attempts to include their issues in mainstream pro-choice agendas. Even when their efforts were successful, the work took its toll. Cherrie Moraga discusses the challenges that women of color confront when working in the mainstream:

> Our strategy is how we cope, on an everyday basis, how we measure and weigh what is to be said and when, what is to be done and how, and to whom...daily deciding/risking who it is we can call an ally, call a friend, whatever that person’s skin, sex or sexuality. We are women without a line. We are women who contradict each other.⁵

Constantly negotiating shifting currents of power is an untaught method of survival.⁶ In our research, we found activists were at once engaged in and drained by such survival strategies in their relationships with white feminists and the mainstream pro-choice movement.
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Once women of color formed their own groups, they thought they would be in a better position to pressure pro-choice organizations to address their concerns. Newly formed women of color groups banded together in the late 1980s and early 90s to promote a women of color agenda. They demanded to have a seat at policy tables and in marches, programs, and legislative policies to promote reproductive rights, because decisions about agendas and strategies were made by the large, mainstream pro-choice organizations with little input from women of color. However, at that time, fledgling women of color organizations did not command the political or economic clout in terms of organizational resources to negotiate a place at the policy table, and their attempts to influence the pro-choice movement bore little fruit. While women of color believed they should be included regardless of their organizational resources, the mainstream groups did not operate in this way; they excluded other white organizations that lacked resources as well. Sometimes this led to public critiques of mainstream organizations by women of color. However, their complaints about being excluded from decision making did not lead to their inclusion.

It was not until the 1990s that the NBWHP and NAWHO were able to command a place at pro-choice policy tables. NBWHP established its Public Policy and Education Office in Washington, DC, in 1990 so that it could promote a broad range of policies to improve black women’s health and serve as a voice for African American women in national policy deliberations. NAWHO had a Washington office for the same purposes. NAWHO and the NBWHP started to build congressional support for their advocacy work. This increased their bargaining power vis-à-vis the mainstream groups that were legislatively focused. The National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health also tried to cultivate this political capacity, but the effort over-extended the resources of the organization, causing it to shut down for a period of time. Native American groups focused on sovereignty in attempts to address mainstream public policy agendas.

A great deal of effort and time was spent by women of color activists to ensure the presence of women of color at pro-choice events and decision-making circles. To date these issues have not been resolved. No organizations of women of color were originally included in the decision to hold the 2004 March for Women’s Lives when it was planned by the National Organization for Women, Planned Parenthood, the Feminist Majority, NARAL Pro-Choice America, and ACLU. A storm of criticism over the lack of inclusion led to important changes. The name had originally been the March for Choice and it was changed to reflect a broader reproductive rights agenda. Co-author Loretta Ross was hired as the co-director for the
march and the four-person steering committee was expanded to include the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health and the Black Women's Health Imperative (formerly the National Black Women's Health Project).

Other problems arose when women of color tried to bring their perspectives to the pro-choice movement. Mainstream organizations often viewed individual leaders of women of color organizations as representatives or spokespersons for entire communities. Consequently, a handful of representatives were called on repeatedly to serve in this capacity. While the reliance on a few women of color as representatives to the mainstream made for continuity and familiarity for the mainstream groups, this tactic had its drawbacks. Already slim resources were stretched further, as women of color leaders were pulled out of the work that needed to be done in their communities to play the role of national spokesperson for their identity group. It also led to some jockeying among women of color to ensure their group was represented, and this was sometimes divisive in terms of relationships with other women of color.

The issue of appropriate spokespersons was compounded by the perception that the so-called "representatives" of women of color were not selected by women of color but were "anointed" from outside. Frequently a well-meaning foundation officer or member of a mainstream group would select a person as a spokeswoman for an ethnic group. Typically the person selected was someone who was either familiar or whose style and politics they recognized. This in turn produced the "star" syndrome among a few women of color, who sometimes had disproportionate access to information, resources, and wider networks. This underlines the catch-22 situation that many women of color organizations face: demanding to be "at the table," when there are few representatives that are constantly called upon, carries its own burdens. This issue needs to be addressed by both white women and women of color. White women must be willing to increase the representation of women of color; women of color must be willing to make space for others to participate.

Reflecting on these experiences, we see the pressure on thinly staffed and poorly funded groups to be active on yet another front. Their work with mainstream organizations was in addition to their core activities, which included doing research and outreach in their communities and trying to affect state and federal legislative public health policy. Few mainstream pro-choice groups play all these roles at once, except for the very large ones.

The forays that women of color made into the mainstream underline the importance of simultaneously continuing to work in their own organizations and networks and where they think it is expedie-
ent, to ally with other mainstream or women of color organizations to advance their objectives. However, serving as a/the voice for women of color in mainstream circles—from a position of inequality—was onerous and sometimes even undermined efforts to consolidate their own work. It took time and energy away from other tasks necessary to meet the needs of their own organizations and constituencies. This led activists to question whether their efforts were warranted, especially when the mainstream seemed resistant to change. COLOR, AAWE, and APIRH were concerned about this problem but felt obligated to keep trying to affect mainstream discourses and policies. For example, Julia Scott, as the head of the NBWHP at the Washington office, was regularly asked to be the representative for all women of color, which hampered her efforts to develop a political agenda for her own organization. Mary Chung, Luz Alvarez Martínez, and Charon Asetoyer were repeatedly being called upon to speak for Asian Americans, Latinas, and Native Americans respectively. Thus, the selecting of representatives could be viewed as a double-edged sword—while it was useful in promoting women of color perspectives in the mainstream, it also led to the depletion of women of color resources.

Challenges of Funding

The lack of steady and consistent funding for the core operations of their organizations has plagued the development of women of color groups. The funding community has been less hospitable to the broad agenda of reproductive rights that women of color organizations embrace. In part this is a structural issue. Small foundations are often single-issue oriented and the larger foundations are structured into various programs with different program officers in charge. Thus, groups that work across issues often do not fit foundation program guidelines and structures. Foundations are typically more responsive to the single-issue abortion and contraception rights and access funding requests of most mainstream pro-choice organizations than to the broad political agendas of women of color organizations. For example, while the NBWHP focused on Self-Help, empowerment, and constructing an African American health agenda through the convening of large conferences, it had a hard time raising funds from donors for these activities. It is easier to raise funds for a single issue or legal advocacy work around a single issue, which is why most foundations were more interested in funding the NBWHP Public Education Policy office over the base-building mobilization using the Self-Help model that characterized the work of the Atlanta Mother House. Committed to Self-Help, the NBWHP has never been able to fund this core activity.
While we think that work at both the base-building and policy level is important, reproductive rights funders have been more supportive of traditional and professional organizations over base-building efforts. This preference has ramifications in the field, as women of color groups must compete with mainstream groups for scarce resources that at best do not really support their holistic agendas and at worst actually undermine them. Despite the funding challenges, the advantages of a broad strategy outweighed the difficulties. It brings an organization a greater number of potential allies. Working to improve women’s health in a social justice or human rights framework meant that groups could more easily build alliances with other movements working on civil rights, community empowerment, environment, and health care access, whether or not there was a reproductive rights or gender component.

Foundation staff are under pressure from their boards to show that their grant making is having significant impact. While it is relatively easier to measure whether or not an organization makes a difference in the legislative sphere, it is harder to assess the grassroots work in which women of color are often engaged. Working on issues of internalized oppression, which is so important to enable women of color to take action on other fronts, is a vital part of reproductive rights work among the groups we studied but is much harder to evaluate. Different evaluation measures are needed if women of color are to be supported in their multilayered strategies.

The Ms. Foundation, though its grants were usually small, was crucial for almost all of the organizations. In the early 1980s, Ms. and the Ruth Mott Foundation were among the few funders that were ready to invest in women of color organizing. The Ms. grants were invaluable because of the leverage they gave organizations to reach out for other funds and for the networking and technical assistance that they provided the grantees. During the mid-1980s, the advent of several women of color program officers to positions in small and larger foundations was also important for women of color organizations to garner funds for their work. For the most part, women of color funders were open to the particular needs confronting the groups and were more sympathetic to the inclusive analysis and vision of reproductive rights organizing.7 The education and lobbying efforts with other funders to understand the importance of the work that women of color were doing was as important as direct financial assistance. These foundations continue to provide core support for women of color groups and to be advocates for women of color in the funding community.

Sometimes funders’ strategies, however inadvertent, put groups in competition with each other. For example, it seemed that there was
a cap on the number of women of color groups from each community that would be supported. Providing funds to only one African American organization rather than a range of African American groups working on reproductive rights meant that one voice from each community would often get unduly amplified and others would not be heard. Once there was one Latina reproductive rights organization, it was hard to raise funds for another one, as a funding portfolio already had Latina representation. Such an approach is racist to women of color since donors do not just support one white women’s organization to serve as the representative or token voice. They typically fund a diversity of pro-choice organizations to capture a range of issues and approaches. Only recently are foundations becoming more open to seeking a diversity of voices and strategies within the women of color reproductive rights and health movement.

The politics of funding white women’s groups to organize women of color also caused considerable tensions. It reinforced white hegemony because the white organizations held the purse strings. This strategy created resentment among women of color groups, who felt used rather than being equal partners. It also meant that there was less money to directly fund women of color groups.

Cobbling together many small grants is a very labor-intensive and time-consuming process, especially for groups that do not have staff fundraisers. Fundraising is an enormous burden on the director of any nonprofit, but it is intensified for women of color who have all the regular functions of directors and, in addition, serve as the token person of color in numerous situations.

One promising development is the Funders Network Women of Color Strategy Group. This initiative by the Funders Network represents a group of funders committed to strengthening the role and leadership of women of color within the reproductive health and rights movement. The group has organized sessions at the network meetings and commissioned research to “understand better the barriers to experiences in, and importance of women of color in reproductive rights organizations and leadership.” Women of color are also trying to change the way in which donors and grantees interact and to make this relationship more of a partnership. Through their work in the SisterSong Collective and Third Wave Foundation, women of color are trying to envision what a partnership between donors and grantees would look like and are questioning the way it would affect the traditional power relationship. They are exploring the risks entailed in such a partnership as well as the promises.
Women of Color Organizing—Outcomes

The impact of women of color organizing around reproductive rights has been far-reaching. Women of color organizations have made sure that concerns and issues central to women from their communities are defined, registered, and represented. They have drawn increased government attention, resources, and services to their communities, especially to the reproductive health needs of the most underserved in those communities, and brought about important policy changes. New research has been carried out on topics that were not addressed by the mainstream movement or health institutions. Creating and developing new program interventions, initiating reproductive health and education services that previously did not exist in their communities, raising state and federal attention, and creating programs and generating funds to address the needs of their constituencies, these organizations have provided an essential voice to health policy formulation and decision making.

Through the development of women of color organizations, an entire new set of leaders has emerged. They have become commanding voices for expanding and promoting reproductive rights and have developed a new agenda for action. They are dedicated to extending leadership, training, and mentoring for the next generations, who will come into a movement that values their participation and provides mentorship and support. This will insure that there is a cadre of leaders who can articulate the reproductive health needs of their communities, engage in outreach, research, and education, and have greater political education and connections to promote the reproductive health needs of their communities. We are already seeing the impact of their work both in the organizations profile here and in new multiracial groups. Younger activists are increasingly drawing on the holistic perspective that women of color have articulated. They employ many of the techniques and tools that women of color have created to advance a more inclusive agenda.

There are more women of color working in senior positions in mainstream pro-choice organizations who are allying women of color groups to build a broader-based movement. The demands by women of color, coupled with the pressure exerted by some foundations for greater representation of women of color in the movement, have resulted in more women of color leaders on the boards and staff of mainstream organizations.

Within the mainstream organizations and movement, the organizing of women of color has raised awareness of their communities reproductive rights issues. Women of color have spotlighted issues of marginalization, discrimination, and inequity and raised impor-
tant new perspectives. The organizing by women of color around the Hyde Amendment and welfare reform, and the critical approaches they brought to the promotion of Norplant and Depo-Provera, have made pro-choice organizations more sensitive to discriminatory reproductive health policies. Women of color have also been somewhat successful in making issues of infant mortality, drug use during pregnancy, infertility, and reproductive tract infections important elements of a comprehensive reproductive health agenda. In a recent survey commissioned by the Funders Network, most representatives of mainstream organizations interviewed said they thought “women of color look at reproductive health and rights issues in ways that differ from the prevailing mainstream perspectives.” The differences included looking at access rather than rights and having a holistic way of seeing reproductive rights issues which goes beyond health care issues to include housing, jobs, and safety for their children.

Many of the activists whose work is represented in this book were in Atlanta at the SisterSong National Reproductive Health and Sexual Rights conference in the fall of 2003 that brought together a wider circle of women, service providers, policy-makers, and allies to discuss and develop strategies to improve the reproductive health of women of color in the US. Since the last time women of color met nationally in 1989, many more women of color activists and organizations are involved in organizing and advocacy for reproductive justice. The 600 women at Atlanta are rejuvenating a movement for the reproductive rights of all women. Linda Burnham of the Women of Color Resource Center described it as “a touchstone event in the struggle for reproductive rights and the development of women of color organizing.” The sheer range of sexual and reproductive rights work being done by women of color in mainstream movements, in their own organizations, and in other social justice and human rights organizing, as well as the variety of forms in which this takes place, indicates that the activism of women of color has entered a new phase. For many of the attendees, it felt like a reproductive rights movement was aflame outside of the mainstream.

This new phase of organizing for reproductive rights must address an enormous range of urgent health issues. Women of color work in a world in which their people lack access to basic health care while killer pandemics like AIDS ravage their communities. They have to guard against and challenge new and devious twists in population control such as the “war on terrorism,” and they will have to confront more covert forms of racism and sexism threatening their right to safe and healthy lives. Activists must somehow extend their limited resources to engage in public policy debates as health care access becomes increasingly limited for vulnerable and underserved
populations. They have to continually point out and sustain the spiritual dimensions of reproductive justice organizing, and ensure that their cultures and traditions are not extinguished in the drive to homogenize the American population. Women of color have to be the tellers of their own stories, and more among them must document their own activism to maintain the authenticity of their voices and experiences.

Activists must be firm in their support for abortion rights, but at the same time not let abortion politics eclipse equally pressing issues such as access to health care or racial disparities in health care delivery. We are beyond the point of merely claiming that the pro-choice movement must include the perspectives of women of color. For the reproductive rights and pro-choice movements to make a difference in the lives of all women, the voices of all women must be heard. Appeasing conservative forces will not do. Only comprehensive, inclusive, and action-oriented agendas will redirect the reproductive and sexual rights movement in a way that is relevant and compelling to the diversity of women who constitute America today.

The activists and the organizations discussed in this book have seeded a movement. They have provided it with new models for organizing, demonstrated ways to draw in broader constituencies and engage other social justice movements, and developed a holistic vision of reproductive justice which refuses to allow rights to be divided.
NOTES

1 Several of the early leaders like Byllye Avery, Katsi Cook, Charon Asetoyer, and Loretta Ross speak warmly of the nourishing role the NWHN played in their development.


3 NAWHO and APIRH, for example, paid particular attention to the needs of immigrant women and to the economically weaker Asian community members. The NBWHP and AAWE made special efforts to bring poor women to their events.

4 For example, there was little research on the high rates of infertility among African American women until the NBWHP highlighted this issue. NAWHO’s path-breaking community-based studies of API health and sexuality broke stereotypes regarding Asian attitudes towards abortion and contraception.

5 Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color (New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1983), xix.


9 Ibid.


11 Some argue that the rise in terrorism is related to population growth in poor countries. The theory goes that growing populations without access to sustainable livelihoods and secure futures turn to terrorism. Thus, the growth in population in third world countries represents a security threat to the US and the world. For a more detailed analysis of this trend, see Anne Hendrixson, "Superpredator Meets Teenage Mom: Exploding the Myth of the Out-of-Control Youth," in Policing the National Body: Race, Gender, and Criminalization, ed. Jael Silliman and Anannya Bhattacharjee (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2002), 231–258.