THE POLITICAL CONTEXT FOR WOMEN OF COLOR ORGANIZING

This chapter outlines the multiple political contexts within which women of color have organized for reproductive rights. The first section charts the rise of a fierce anti-abortion movement, its role in the re-grouping of the Right, and subsequent efforts to control women's reproduction. While these forces threatened the reproductive rights of all women, women of color were often special targets. The second section sketches the various responses by three sectors of the women's movement, including the mainstream pro-choice, reproductive rights, and women's health movements. We see how each movement's response to the attack on women's reproductive freedom was framed by the ability, or inability, to meaningfully incorporate class and race into its organizing. With the anti-abortion movement and white women's responses to it as backdrop, the third section places the strategies and actions of women of color—organizing on their own behalf—in the foreground.

The Anti-Abortion Movement and the New Right

In the US, the Catholic Church has always opposed the government's support of birth control. In 1966, to explicitly condemn government support of contraception, it formed the National Conference of Catholic Bishops after the Supreme Court legalized contraception for married couples. However, it was Roe v. Wade, the landmark 1973 Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion, that galvanized religiously motivated opponents of reproductive freedom and abortion into a "Right to Life" political movement. In November 1973, the first edition of the National Right to Life Committee's newsletter issued a call to action: "We must work for the passage of a constitutional Human Life
Amendment," signaling the beginning of an orchestrated campaign to re-criminalize abortion. Since Roe, abortion opponents have pursued multiple legal and illegal strategies—even employing deadly violence—to undermine abortion rights. The growing anti-abortion movement had important legislative successes in restricting abortion rights. Its first major victory came in 1977 when Congress passed the Hyde Amendment prohibiting Medicaid funding for abortion at the federal level. Most of the states followed suit.4

The anti-abortion movement was becoming a more powerful political force in the late 1970s as part of a larger conservative mobilization. Incensed by the loss of the Vietnam War, the success of the civil rights movement in dismantling segregation, and the gains of the women’s and gay rights movements, conservatives wanted to win back the White House from Democratic president Jimmy Carter. In the 1980 presidential election, the Republican Party courted the emerging anti-abortion, anti-gay rights, and anti-Equal Rights Amendment constituencies that came to be known as the New Right.5

Weaving together anti-gay and anti-abortion strands into a perversely labeled pro-family agenda, Republicans called for a return to traditional sex roles and patriarchal family structures. With this as the centerpiece of a broader conservative agenda, they were successful in mobilizing evangelical and fundamentalist Christians and thereby revitalizing the Republican Party. Jerry Falwell founded the “Moral Majority” in 1979, proclaiming the organization to represent the real majority in America. This and other New Right organizations brought Christian fundamentalists and Catholics into a coalition that helped to elect Republican Ronald Reagan as president in 1980.6 In turn, his election bolstered the anti-abortion movement and enabled conservative Republicans to rapidly mobilize a legal and political backlash against feminism and civil rights.

President Reagan appointed staunch anti-feminists in virtually every social policy-making position, and he moved quickly against abortion rights. In 1981, he supported a Human Life Amendment to the US Constitution that would legally recognize fetuses as persons and subordinate women’s rights to fetal rights. When this effort proved too politically divisive,7 even among opponents of abortion, Reagan’s administration opted for federal legislation that would have bypassed the onerous constitutional amendment process. Though both efforts failed, they bolstered subsequent attempts to elevate the legal status of the fetus. At the state legislative level, abortion foes pushed for restrictive legislation to control the behaviors of pregnant women which they claimed were endangering the “unborn,” such as the use of illegal drugs and alcohol consumption. By 1999, an estimated 200 women in more than 30 states had been prosecuted for “fetal abuse.”8
Women have even been subjected to court orders forcing them to have cesarean births, and in 2004, a woman in Utah who delayed her C-section for two weeks was accused of murder when one of her twins was stillborn.\textsuperscript{9} Professor of politics Jean Shroedel argues that many of the post-\textit{Roe v. Wade} abortion cases decided by the Supreme Court have shifted concern away from the woman toward the fetus.\textsuperscript{10} The most high-profile and significant development thus far came in April 2004, when President Bush signed the Unborn Victim of Violence Act which, for the first time, accords legal status to the fetus throughout pregnancy.\textsuperscript{11}

During the early 1980s, Operation Rescue and its affiliates around the country mobilized thousands of eager participants in a strategy of civil disobedience.\textsuperscript{12} Anti-abortion activists staged prayer vigils and sit-ins and blockaded entrances at family planning clinics. The success of Operation Rescue's tactics was evident in 1988 during the Democratic National Convention in Atlanta, when anti-abortion movement groups targeted local clinics in an effort to shut them down. Over 1,000 protesters were arrested, and thousands more were involved in the actions. While the clinics remained open during the "Siege of Atlanta," abortion providers were under daily attack, and the women who worked at the clinics, as well as the women who sought their services, had to cross a blockade of protesters.\textsuperscript{13}

For this work, Operation Rescue claimed the mantle of the civil rights movement,\textsuperscript{14} provoking the response of 14 veterans of the civil rights movement who issued a statement, "Civil Rights and Reproductive Rights," at a 1989 press conference, expressing their resentment at the theft of civil rights imagery:

The adoption of the tactic of civil disobedience is their right, but the appropriation of the moral imperative of the civil rights movement is all wrong. The civil rights struggle sought to extend constitutional rights to all Americans and have those rights enforced. Today's anti-abortionists, quite to the contrary, are attempting, in the Operation Rescue protests, to deny American women their constitutional right to freedom of choice. They want the constitution rewritten.\textsuperscript{15}

Women of color were not taken in by the poorly disguised anti-abortion-as-civil-rights rhetoric. For the most part, they knew that the waves of primarily white (male) protesters were not seeking to save their babies, and that their real targets were young white women—who happened to be obtaining more than 70 percent of the abortions in the United States at that time.\textsuperscript{16} Dázon Dixon Diallo, who worked at
the Feminist Women’s Health Center in Atlanta, described a client’s resistance to the protesters’ messages,

The [young, black] client I was protecting seemed to handle the pleas to “save her baby from these murderers” very well—she realized that these people just didn’t understand or care about her. But when a young-looking, blonde and blue-eyed man screamed charges at her that the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. would “turn over in his grave for what she was doing” and that she was “contributing to the genocide of African Americans,” she broke. She stopped, stared him in his eyes with tears in hers, then quietly and coolly said, “You’re a white boy, and you don’t give a damn thing about me, who I am, or what I do.”17

Despite intense organizing, only a small number of people of color joined the anti-abortion movement. However, those who did, such as Dr. Mildred Jefferson, were vocal and prominently displayed. Jefferson was the first prominent woman of color to speak out publicly against abortion; she served as chairperson of the board of the National Right to Life Committee and she provided congressional testimony in 1974 in favor of a constitutional amendment that would protect fetal life. A few African American women who had experienced sterilization abuse were also recruited by the anti-abortion movement and gained national attention when they formed Blacks for Life. In 2003, sociologist Louis Prisock found it difficult to determine the number of African American anti-choice organizations, but he reports indications that their numbers are rising.18

Not all opponents of abortion embraced nonviolence. During this same period of time, anti-abortion terrorism developed,19 and throughout the 1980s and 90s there was an escalation of violence against abortion clinics and clinic personnel, especially abortion providers. The tactics they used were borrowed from the far Right white supremacist movement and included bombings, arson, and kidnappings. By 1990, 80 percent of clinics had experienced some serious form of violence or harassment. Throughout the 1990s, these threats and attacks became routine. To date, there have been seven murders at abortion clinics, and clinics must now devote considerable portions of their budgets to security.

Violence and harassment have contributed to decreasing abortion access. These tactics are part of a long-term anti-choice strategy whose ultimate goal is outlawing abortion entirely. Legislation and judicial actions are also key to this strategy. Consequently, the anti-abortion battle in the courts has raged continuously since Roe with mixed success. In 1981 the Supreme Court upheld the Hyde Amendment.20 Then,
in 1989, with the decision in *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services*, the Court upheld the right of states to restrict abortion in a range of ways that had previously been deemed inconsistent with *Roe.* In his dissent, Justice Blackmun, author of the *Roe* decision, articulated the fear that *Webster* augured the end of abortion rights.

Thus, "not with a bang, but a whimper," the plurality discards a landmark case of the last generation, and casts into darkness the hopes and visions of every woman in this country who had come to believe that the Constitution guaranteed her the right to exercise some control over her unique ability to bear children... For today, at least, the law of abortion stands undisturbed. For today, the women of this Nation still retain the liberty to control their destinies. But the signs are evident and very ominous, and a chill wind blows.

Following closely behind *Webster*, in 1990 the Supreme Court upheld restrictions on minors’ rights to abortion in *Hodgson v. Minnesota*, which seriously curtailed abortion rights for young women under 18 years old. Again in 1992, in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, the Court further chipped away at abortion rights. The assault on abortion rights abated somewhat at the federal level after Clinton's election in 1992 but reignited under the 2000 Bush administration. Meanwhile, state-level attacks have been persistent for over 25 years. The net result has been significant erosion in access to abortion, which has the most adverse impact on low-income women, young women, and women of color.

**Responses to the Anti-Abortion Movement**

**Stopping Water With a Rake**

Three parts of the feminist movement—the pro-choice, reproductive rights, and women's health movements—responded with significantly different approaches to the anti-abortion movement and the rise of the New Right. This section offers a glimpse into the differences and gives insight into the questions of inclusion raised in the first chapter. Although women of color were active in all three movements, the majority was primarily white and middle class. This section also details the evolution of and need for race- and ethnic-based organizing by women of color.
The Mainstream Pro-Choice Movement

While the legalization of abortion mobilized opponents, it demobilized the majority of pro-choice advocates. Because the ability to find and finance abortion services was not a problem for middle-class white feminists, it appeared to them that with Roe, the battle for abortion rights had been won. Thus in 1977, when Congress passed the Hyde Amendment prohibiting federal funding for abortions, the leading women’s organizations that had rallied for Roe did not marshal a large-scale response. This issue was of primary importance to women of color, who are disproportionately low-income. Thus, this was a divisive and watershed moment for the pro-choice movement. It could have confronted the overt white supremacy of the Right’s agenda and its own internal racism, had it made overturning Hyde and fighting for public funding a priority. By not doing so, it seemed to women of color that the pro-choice movement was not concerned with their rights.

As we have seen, between Roe and Reagan, a full-blown and multi-faceted war on abortion rights had been launched in the courts and in the streets. Finally, with the looming threat of an anti-abortion constitutional amendment, a visible pro-choice movement re-emerged in 1981. However, the pro-choice response was defensive and its mission narrow. Pro-choice activists framed their politics in terms of choice and privacy, instead of using the language of women’s rights and autonomy. “Abortion” itself was replaced by the more neutral appeal to defend the “legal right to choose.” Their focus was on creating a winnable strategy to defend the legal right to abortion, not to secure access.

Journalist William Saletan argues that mainstream pro-choice groups made a considered decision to recast their demands in an effort to broaden their base. Believing that most voters did not care about women’s rights, they framed the issue in terms of intrusions by big government, a fundamentally conservative approach. In 1984, working with political strategists whose experience was in electoral politics in the Democratic Party, National Abortion Reproductive Rights Action League (NARAL), Planned Parenthood, and others conducted a national poll to determine what messages would be effective with conservative voters and could drive a wedge into the conservative opposition. They found that many voters, hostile to welfare and taxes, opposed both banning and paying for abortions. There was a clear racial divide: Blacks were in favor of funding, albeit by a narrow margin, while whites were overwhelmingly opposed. 24 Saletan starkly articulates the possible courses of action: “Confronted by this latent coalition of pro-life, anti-government, anti-tax, anti-wel-
fare, and anti-black voters, abortion rights activists had two choices. They could declare war against all of these constituencies in the name of a broad liberal agenda. Or they could divide the coalition and isolate pro-lifers by seducing the other constituencies.” 25 To woo voters who routinely opposed government interference in social issues, 26 they chose the latter and put a libertarian spin on it. Abortion restrictions were criticized as encroachments by big government on tradition, family, and property.

This approach was partially successful, at least temporarily. It split the opposition by bringing pro-family, anti-government voters into the pro-choice electoral coalition. However, adopting privacy as the rubric for long-term pro-choice organizing backfired politically. It undercut demands for public access to abortion that had characterized the feminist struggle for legalization in the 1960s and 70s.27 It also played into the hands of conservatives who were denouncing “big government,” thus reinforcing the federal government’s position, under the 1977 Hyde Amendment, that it had no obligation to pay for women’s private decisions to have abortions. Saletan argues that the pro-choice movement created a “mutant version of abortion rights as a viable alternative to the feminist, egalitarian version originally envisioned by pro-choice activists.” 28 He further notes that the limited definition of abortion rights made it possible to be pro-choice and to accept restrictions such as parental involvement laws and bans on public funding of abortion.

It is important to acknowledge that within the mainstream, there were other dissenting voices. For example, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the National Organization for Women (NOW) consistently kept a feminist women’s rights approach that incorporated a breadth of issues and strategies.29 NOW also believed in the importance of large, visible mobilizations. For example, on April 9, 1986, NOW organized the first national march for abortion rights, the March to Save Women’s Lives. Exceeding the organizers’ expectations, more than 600,000 demonstrators participated in what was at that time the largest women’s march in US history. This was also a turning point in the age composition of the pro-choice movement—half the participants were young women who came of age in a country where abortion had always been legal. As we shall see later in the chapter, NOW, along with a handful of other organizations, made efforts—with varying degrees of success—to reach out to women of color. The organization was also an early opponent of welfare reform.

However, the broader and more radical approach did not prevail. Instead, the narrowly gauged conservative strategies and messages came to dominate the mainstream pro-choice movement. It did not
address access to abortion or the larger context of reproductive health care and left out a central element of the reproductive rights agenda of women of color: the right to have children. While this framing brought moderate and conservative voters to abortion rights, it was at the expense of dividing feminists, alienating poor women, women of color, more radical white activists, and those from the holistic women's health movement.

We think that this strategy was a mistake in the long run, and that it was predicated on a misreading of the organizing tactics employed by the opposition. The Right created single-issue organizations for tactical purposes, but never lost sight of its multi-issue agenda. Thus it could achieve an important degree of unified action despite internal tensions on specific issues. In this way, people with strong feelings about a specific issue were brought into a broader conservative movement.

In contrast, the single-issue approach of the pro-choice movement did not create a broader politics or lead to building an enduring progressive coalition. Instead, activists with a broader perspective were driven away and created their own organizations outside the mainstream pro-choice groups. Some moved from choice to reproductive rights; others focused on access to and information about reproductive health services; and women of color began mobilizing for a new reproductive rights agenda. The following sections explore these various approaches.

The Reproductive Rights Movement

The pro-choice movement's failure to mount significant opposition to the Hyde Amendment and its refusal to join women of color in connecting sterilization abuse to abortion rights mobilized white abortion rights advocates who had broader politics and different political roots. Activists who came from the progressive movements of the 1960s—civil rights, the New Left, the anti-war and the women's liberation movements—insisted on keeping abortion rights within a feminist framework, which emphasized sexual freedom and highlighted how race and class shape reproductive choice. These activists criticized the mainstream pro-choice movement for being too middle-class focused, for lacking an emphasis on access, and for being too defensive and conservative. They were also critical of the preoccupation with electoral politics. They formed grassroots groups and feminist clinics, articulated broader messages, and promoted radical and direct-action strategies. Their goal was to mobilize the large numbers of people who would not be attracted to the mainstream's politics.
Chapter 2

One of the first and largest organizations to embrace a reproductive rights agenda was the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse (CARASA). The organization was formed in 1977 by women who had been involved in the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements in the 1960s and 70s. CARASA distinguished itself from the major national organizations, specifically NARAL and Planned Parenthood, whose abortion rights efforts were focused primarily on lobbying, legislative work, direct mail, and education through the media. CARASA saw a need for other forms of activism: "While this work is necessary at the present time, exclusively focusing on it ignores the importance of grassroots organizing and education—going directly into neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, churches and the streets, where the Right-to-Life Movement has organized, in order to create a truly popular movement for reproductive freedom and not just a lobby of experts." CARASA saw the mainstream pro-choice organizations as narrow at best and, at worst, as taking positions that undermined the reproductive freedom of many women. In this regard, they specifically cited hostility to regulations regarding sterilization abuse and the use of population control arguments for abortion rights. Following the lead of women of color, CARASA placed opposition to sterilization abuse on a par with support for abortion rights.

In 1979, CARASA co-founded the Reproductive Rights National Network (R2N2), an umbrella organization for national and grassroots groups that situated abortion rights within a broader social justice and anti-racist context. R2N2's membership was varied; affiliates included feminist health clinics, women's caucuses of national Left organizations, and unaffiliated local activist organizations. They defined themselves as reproductive rights activists to distinguish their perspective from the single-issue politics of the pro-choice movement. R2N2 also espoused the critique of population control and "choice" that had been articulated by women of color. It emphasized access to abortion services and funds, arguing that without access, abortion rights would not be realized for low-income women and women of color.

R2N2 was an eager ally for the newly emerging women of color reproductive rights organizations. However, while R2N2 saw the link between women's oppression and ending racism, it was not always successful in putting its politics into practice, nor was it equipped to deal with racism within its organizations. Thus, in 1981, national R2N2 split and ultimately dissolved over disputes about whether to make fighting racism within the organization its top priority. There was a painful struggle which pitted opposition to the anti-abortion offensives against internal anti-racist work. This polarization itself is
evidence of the inability of many white women to overcome the racial divide. As activists and scholars of color have noted, at that time even the more radical wings of the women's movement did not consistently or meaningfully integrate race, class, and gender oppression into their agendas.

The Women's Health Movement

While there was some overlap in membership and in politics, the women's health movement developed outside and alongside the pro-choice and reproductive rights movements. Beginning in 1969, when abortion was still illegal in most states and reproductive health care was in the hands of the mostly male health care establishment, many feminists mobilized "to wrest back some control over their sexuality, their reproductive lives, and their health from their doctors, and particularly their obstetrician gynecologists."33 This was a largely decentralized movement of grassroots organizations. Historian Sandra Morgen's description of its beginnings captures this well: "In different sites, through different means, across the country, women began to take their health care into their own hands."34 Women's health activism took several forms, which included disseminating information, advocating new ways of providing services, promoting Self-Help, patient advocacy, community organizing and counseling services, providing safe illegal abortions, and in many communities, establishing feminist clinics.35

The post-Roe assault against abortion rights had a severe impact on women's clinics and health advocacy groups. Many had received financial support from federal or state programs. Thus the specific restrictions on abortion (such as the Hyde Amendment and similar laws at the state level), the overall cuts in social spending for programs and services for poor women, and the anti-abortion violence all took their toll. Organizations and clinics faced constant financial pressures. They were forced to lay off staff and cut programs. Ultimately, many had to close or were bought out by mainstream providers. Then, in the 1980s, HIV/AIDS brought new actors and issues, reinvigorating women's health activism.

Though the women's health movement was grounded in local grassroots activism, advocates sought to consolidate its influence on Capitol Hill. In 1975, the National Women's Health Lobby was founded in Washington, DC. Later renamed the National Women's Health Network (NWHN), the organization was established "to monitor Federal health agencies and ensure that the voice of a national women's health movement would be heard on Capitol Hill."36 The network was a key player in the women's health movement in general and was
particularly important to women of color, emphasizing organizational support for activists of color from the outset. When several women of color were brought onto the NWHN board at once, their presence and voting power were maximized. The diverse NWHN board membership also enabled the white women and women of color to learn from and support one another. Longtime network board member and program committee chair Judy Norsigian observed, "We developed relationships by making ourselves available for advice, counsel, and information. We provided ongoing support through these more informal yet sustained contacts. The idea was to be there when you were needed."

The network encouraged women of color to establish their own organizations.

The women's health movement developed a critique of mainstream health care, which incorporated racism and classism as well as sexism. This movement provided an important home and support network for women of color activists, many of whom worked in clinics or other feminist health advocacy organizations. However, like the reproductive rights movement, the women's health movement was a site of struggle around differences of race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation. In clinic settings these were not abstract debates, but intense disagreements, especially over specific issues such as mission, development and location of services, and hiring and firing.

As we have seen, the politics of race and class permeated all three responses to the political threats posed by the rise of the New Right and the anti-abortion movement. These forces set the context within which women of color organized for reproductive rights.

**Organizing by Women of Color**

Although the National Black Women's Health Project (NBWHP), formed in 1984, was the first women of color reproductive health organization to be created and remained the only national women of color group until the late 1980s, many of the individuals and organizations of women of color featured in this study became active in pro-choice organizing in the 1970s and early 80s. They were alarmed by the thinly veiled white supremacist agenda of the New Right and the rise of the anti-abortion movement.

Women of color organizing for reproductive rights have always needed to respond simultaneously to state-imposed policies aimed at controlling their fertility and to social justice movements that neglected their reproductive health concerns. Loretta Ross sets out the various strategies used by women of color:

"Sometimes we work with predominantly white organizations that marginalize issues of race and class, and"
privilege abortion rights over other issues of reproductive justice...Some of us work with people of color organizations that marginalize gender and class issues, and where women's reproductive health issues are tangential to struggles against racism...Some women of color work with anti-poverty organizations that sometimes neglect race and gender issues altogether, assuming that class issues subsume concerns about reproductive health.39

This section outlines a few of the ways in which women of color organized for reproductive justice.

**Working with Mainstream Pro-Choice Organizations**

By the mid-1980s, several activist women of color had been recruited to positions of leadership in the large mainstream pro-choice groups. In 1978, Faye Wattleton became the first African American to head the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, a position she held for 14 years until 1992. Luz Alvarez Martinez joined the national NARAL board and called for greater representation of women of color in the organization. Emily Tynes was NARAL's first African American director of communications (1983–1988); Judy Logan-White and Faith Evans (an African American woman and man) created the Women of Color Partnership Program as part of the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights (RCAR) in 1984.40 Loretta Ross became the first director of Women of Color Programs at NOW (1985–1989), a post that had previously been called the "minority rights" staff position.

These activists were able to accomplish significant outreach to women of color through and in coalition with mainstream organizations. In 1986, women of color at RCAR, NOW, NARAL, and Planned Parenthood began organizing local and regional forums for women of color about reproductive rights.41 These gatherings provided the opportunity for activists of color to meet together—often for the first time—to discuss how to move their reproductive health concerns to the national level.

On the heels of these synergy-building gatherings and one year after the historic 1986 NOW-sponsored pro-choice march, Loretta Ross organized the first National Conference on Women of Color and Reproductive Rights, held at Howard University. Despite the fact that women of color had been active and in the leadership of NOW from its inception, they were also skeptical of NOW.42 Ross intended for the conference to build a bridge between women of color and NOW. She reached out to women of color she knew from other movements, including violence against women, teen pregnancy, and anti-poverty organizations, to involve them in reproductive rights activism. She
states, “It was the first conference in history that brought women from the feminist, civil rights, and black Nationalist movements together to promote reproductive freedom.” Casting a wide net was necessary since, despite the fact that they were pro-choice, relatively few women of color activists would have responded to a narrow call.

In addition to Ross, this trailblazing conference was coordinated by women of color working at pro-choice organizations, including Planned Parenthood, NARAL, and RCAR, who were responding to the concerns of women of color who felt their perspectives and leadership were not adequately advanced by the pro-choice movement. As a result, at the conference women of color, not the white leaders of sponsoring organizations, were prominently featured. Of the more than 400 women of color who attended the conference, two-thirds were African Americans—with a sizable delegation from the NBWHP, by then a three-year old organization. Participants came together across identity groups to talk about the reproductive health issues in their different communities. Many of the women of color active in the movement today met for the first time at that conference, and went on to build long-term networks and relationships which spurred future activism.

The conference was a place for women of color to articulate their own agendas, and it demonstrated that they would mobilize for reproductive justice if race and class dimensions were prioritized. While the explicit purpose of the conference was to mobilize more women of color to participate in the pro-choice movement, the women who came also advanced a critique of that movement.

Two years later, the impending Supreme Court decision in Webster v. Reproductive Health Services (1989) catalyzed other organizing activities by women of color. Seeking to limit the public provision of abortion services, Webster posed a severe threat to low-income women and women of color. A national conference called “In Defense of Roe” was organized in April of 1989 by the Women of Color Partnership Program of RCAR and Lynn Paltrow of the ACLU’s Reproductive Freedom Project. Women of color, community organizers, and women of faith came together to strategize against the anticipated state-level attacks on Roe v. Wade that would follow Webster.

The meeting identified two priorities: a national reproductive rights organization for women of color and the development of local coalitions. It inspired women of color to engage in reproductive rights organizing across the country. For example, the meeting marked the first time that Asian and Pacific Islander women from different cultures came together to discuss reproductive rights issues. They wrote a collective statement stressing their diverse perspectives and common purpose: “This is a historic moment for us. Recognizing the
tradition of family and community, including alternative lifestyles, we, as Asian Pacific American women, underscore the importance of a reproductive health agenda for our communities.\(^{45}\)

Patricia Camp, state coordinator of the Illinois affiliate of the national RCAR, said, “Being able to make a movement of our own, which deals with reproductive health issues in our own way and from our own perspective is the most valuable service that this conference provided.”\(^{46}\) Inspired and angered by what she learned at the conference, Migdalia Rivera, consultant to the Hispanic Health Council of Hartford, Connecticut, took information about the potential impact of anti-choice public policies on poorLatinas back to her community and energized activists.\(^{47}\)

The “In Defense of Roe” conference was planned to coincide with the second National March for Women’s Lives organized by NOW. While more than 100 organizations of women of color had endorsed the first march, Sharon Parker of the National Institute for Women of Color described their actual presence as “drowning in a sea of white.” In striking contrast to the 1986 march, in 1989 women of color took steps to make their presence highly visible. With Parker’s assistance—further aided by the NBWHP sending 13 bus loads of women to the Washington, DC, march—a delegation of 5,000 women of color rallied behind one giant banner, “Women of Color for Reproductive Rights.” Following the march, Reverend Yvonne Delk, director of the Office of Church in Society of the United Church of Christ, issued a call to action:

We are women who have been and continue to be discriminated against in employment, locked into stereotyped roles, sexually exploited, politically subdivided, trivialized and domesticated by those who would deny us the right to control our bodies and our lives. What we say and do today has long reaching implications, not only for the women of color in this nation and for women of color throughout the globe, but it is our legacy to the generations of women who are yet unborn.\(^{48}\)

In May 1989, one month after the Webster decision, Donna Brazile of the National Political Congress of Black Women and Loretta Ross of NOW organized African American Women for Reproductive Freedom, a new coalition of high-profile women. They published We Remember: African American Women for Reproductive Freedom, written by Marcia Gillespie, then an editor of Ms. Magazine. The statement
was a way to elevate African American women's voices in the public debate about abortion. Gillespie wrote:

This freedom—to choose and to exercise our choices—is what we've fought and died for. Brought here in chains, worked like mules, bred like beasts, whipped one day, sold the next...Somebody said that we were less than human and not fit for freedom. Somebody said we were like children and could not be trusted to think for ourselves...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. Oh yes, we have known how painful it is to be without choice in this land.49

We Remember was a profound articulation of the connection between reproductive justice and the struggle for racial justice. The We Remember campaign was overwhelmingly successful. In six brief months, more than 250,000 copies of the brochure were reprinted and distributed across the country, through mailings, at conferences, and at events organized by women of color. Faye Wattleton50 of Planned Parenthood and Kate Michelman of NARAL provided the funding and agreed not to put their organizational logos on the brochure so that the focus would remain on women of color. The coalition's impassioned statement represented an important national collaboration between autonomous African American women's organizations that were not necessarily focused on abortion access and black women who worked in mainstream pro-choice organizations.

Women of Color Working for Social Justice Organizations

Historically, civil rights, environmental, and immigrant rights groups have not included reproductive rights in their agendas. Nevertheless, women of color participating in reproductive rights organizations have consistently looked for ways to work with groups that focus on economic and racial justice. Reproductive rights activists have joined in coalitions with the NAACP, Asian Pacific Environmental Network, American Indian Movement, and Mexican American Legal Defense Fund and drawn attention to reproductive rights in the context of these struggles.

In addition to bringing reproductive rights to social justice organizations, the search for allies has also led women of color to build coalitions that bring a wide range of groups to the service of reproductive justice. For example, the 1993 Campaign for Abortion and Reproductive Equity (CARE), organized by the NBWHP, brought over 300 civil rights, labor, and pro-choice organizations together
in an effort to overturn the Hyde Amendment and restore federal Medicaid funding for abortion. While many of these groups were not interested in supporting abortion rights per se, they were concerned about equity and responded to the call to challenge discrimination and support racial and economic justice.51

Reproductive rights activists faced other challenges in trying to work with economic justice organizations. Although many of the organizations that work on poverty, homeless advocacy, and welfare reform are led by women of color, ironically, these groups have sometimes neglected race and gender issues. Because some groups are financially dependent on the Catholic Church, openly expressing their support for reproductive rights would jeopardize their funding.

Organizations and groups working on HIV/AIDS and violence against women have also been important allies for reproductive rights activists of color. Because problems such as HIV/AIDS and domestic violence are widespread in their communities, women of color have had more success recently in bringing these issues out in the open—after encountering initial silence and resistance. Through responding to the direct service needs of the communities, serving battered women and people with HIV/AIDS, they linked together advocacy and service delivery. Churches in particular have focused on helping women and children through direct services such as providing meals and shelter. Through these services, bridges were built between churches and other community institutions that had been reluctant to address feminist and gay and lesbian issues and advocates from these movements.

National Coalitions of Women of Color

Since the late 1980s, there have been four major national collaborations among women of color. Several of the founders of the eight organizations included in our case studies played leading roles in these efforts, met each other through these activities, and formed alliances that strengthened them as leaders. By 1992, there were national women of color organizations, but they were frustrated by their inability to be fully respected partners in the pro-choice movement. In order to have a greater impact on both the mainstream movement and US domestic policy, in 1992 six organizations launched the Women of Color Coalition for Reproductive Health Rights (WOCCRHR): Asians and Pacific Islanders for Choice, National Black Women’s Health Project, National Latina Health Organization, Latina Roundtable on Health and Reproductive Rights, National Coalition of 100 Black Women, and Native American Women’s Health and Education Resource Center.
WOCCRHR represented the first effort to build a national women of color reproductive health coalition.

The most immediate challenge for WOCCRHR was to determine the role it would play in the third national March for Women's Lives organized by NOW in 1992, given that the women of color organizations had not been included in the planning. Despite excluding them from the leadership, march organizers expected women of color to mobilize their constituencies to attend. Ultimately WOCCRHR decided to support the 1992 NOW march, but published a statement objecting to the fact that they were not included in the organizing process. A memo from the NBWHP circulated with WOCCRHR's statement clearly states the problem:

The NBWHP has joined with a number of women of color reproductive rights organizations to protest NOW's process (or lack of process) for the inclusion of women of color in the scheduled April 5 March for Reproductive Freedom...We do not want people to stay away, especially women of color. These issues affect us and we need to be seen and heard in support of reproductive freedom. However, we must also speak out regarding NOW's practices involving the lack of inclusion of all the women of color reproductive rights groups.52

The coalition's response was an unprecedented challenge from women of color to NOW and the other major pro-choice organizations regarding their politics of exclusion. NOW's practice in march planning had been to invite to the decision-making table only those people who were able to commit significant financial resources to organizing multi-million-dollar marches. This process ensured that women with power stayed in power and marginalized women of color.

Two years following NOW's third March for Women's Lives, the founders of WOCCRHR organized again in order to have an impact on the September 1994 United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, Egypt. As part of the US delegation to the Cairo conference, WOCCRHR delegates and other women of color within the larger delegation, in a first joint effort, established the US Women of Color Delegation Project. The project members authored a "Statement on Poverty, Development, and Population Activities," which they presented at an ICPD workshop. The introduction outlines the reasons for their intervention:

Much of what is known of US policies is developed mostly by white, upper and middle class Americans. This document reflects a people of color perspective on issues of
population as they interact with institutional policies of racism, political oppression, and classism and gender bias to entrench poverty and "underdevelopment" within our society.\textsuperscript{53}

The delegation's statement connected the lack of reproductive freedom for poor and marginalized women in the US, many of whom are women of color, with that of women in developing countries. It made clear that many women in the US did not enjoy reproductive rights.

Through these efforts, WOCCHRHR brought the situation of women of color in the United States to the attention of the international community and created enduring friendships and alliances. Upon returning from Cairo, they decided to join ranks a third time to bring women of color to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China in September 1995. The US Women of Color Beijing coalition provided information, leadership training, and strategic planning for women of color to participate effectively in the Beijing conference.

After the Cairo and Beijing conferences, the women in WOCCHRHR found that funding was unavailable for them to continue their working relationships once they returned home. This was largely because funding for international "population" activities is separated from funding for domestic reproductive rights work within foundations. Nevertheless, their participation in these international events produced significant shifts in their thinking about how to frame the demand for reproductive freedom for women of color in the United States. By attending the conference, they connected their local and national struggles to the global movements against poverty and for women's rights. They returned home determined to forge ahead in building a national movement of women of color for reproductive health that would, for the first time, incorporate the global human rights framework into their activism.

The fourth coalition effort came in 1997 when the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective was formed.\textsuperscript{54} The Collective included 16 organizations representing four communities of women of color: African American, Asian American and Pacific Islander, Latina, and Indigenous. SisterSong's original mission was advocacy for the reproductive and sexual health needs of women of color. Its strategy has been to mobilize at the grassroots level while also developing a public policy agenda.\textsuperscript{55}

The groups involved in SisterSong address a wide range of reproductive health issues, including HIV/AIDS services, midwifery, services for incarcerated women, health screenings, abortion and contraceptive advocacy, clinical research, teen pregnancy programs,
cancer screenings, drug and alcohol treatment programs, and programs for the treatment and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases. This inclusive range of programs illustrates the scope and depth of the organizing work on reproductive and sexual health issues done by women of color from Puerto Rico to Hawaii. SisterSong sponsored its first national conference on women of color and reproductive health and sexual rights issues in November 2003 at Spelman College in Atlanta. More than 600 people, mostly women of color, participated in this event, marking a new era of reproductive justice organizing by women of color. Most recently, the collective organized women of color to participate in the April 2004 March for Women’s Lives under the banner “Women of Color for Reproductive Justice.”

These coalitions have taken essential steps in building a movement of women of color for reproductive justice. The threats to reproductive rights and women’s health continue unabated. As always, the effects from erosions in access to care and services fall disproportionately on women of color. It is our belief that the following eight case studies offer the visions and strategies we need to move forward on an inclusive reproductive agenda.
NOTES


3. Ibid.


5. Anita Bryant's *Save Our Children* campaign in Florida and the Briggs Amendment in California both occurred during the 1970s.


9. "Harm to Fetuses Becomes Issue in Utah and Elsewhere," *New York Times*, March 27, 2004. Ultimately the murder charge was dropped, but she was given 18 months of probation on a charge of child endangerment.


11. The Unborn Victims of Violence Act, also known as Laci and Conner's Law, is named for Laci Peterson, a woman who was murdered when she was eight months pregnant. Her husband is being tried for the murder. Public outrage over this case dovetailed with anti-abortion strategy to pass the UVVA. More than 30 states have similar laws. Attorney Lynn Paltrow, executive director of National Advocates for Pregnant Women, sees UVVA as a threat not just to abortion rights but also to women wanting to continue their pregnancies. In her article "Policing Pregnancy," she argues that "far from safeguarding pregnant women or children, the UVVA creates the legal foundation for policing pregnancy and punishing women who carry their pregnancies to term." Lynn Paltrow, "Policing Pregnancy," *Tompaine.com*, http://www.tompaine.com/scontent/10189.html.

12. In 1988–89, 32,000 people were arrested. About 12,000 people were arrested once and 5,750 people account for the remaining 20,000 arrests, as documented by Ann Baker in her article "Pro-Choice Activism Springs From Many Sources," in *From Abortion to Reproductive Freedom: The Movement to End Legal Restrictions on Abortion in the United States*, 1970–1989 (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990), 13.
Transforming a Movement, ed. Marlene Gerber Fried (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 179.


Operation Rescue did not invent the anti-abortion claim of being a civil rights movement; it had previously been used in the 1970s by John O'Keefe. Ironically, several of those who became active in the extremist wing of the anti-abortion movement met in jail in Atlanta. For more on this history, see James Risen and Judy L. Thomas, Wrath of Angels: The American Abortion War (New York: Basic Books, 1998).


Loretta Ross, Sherrilyn Ifill, and Sabrae Jenkins, "Emergency Memorandum to Women of Color," in From Abortion to Reproductive Freedom, 149.


These acts were not recognized as terrorism, nor was there a federal response until President Clinton's election in 1992.


For example, Webster allows states to prohibit public facilities and public employees from performing or assisting in abortions which are not necessary to save the life of the pregnant woman, permits states to conduct tests to determine fetal viability on women seeking abortions who appear to be at least 20 weeks pregnant, and grants states the new power to ban an abortion if the fetus is viable.


In Casey, the Court replaced the strict judicial scrutiny which governs other "fundamental" rights with the weaker and vaguer undue burden standard. This opened the door to a wide range of federal and state criminal restrictions.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid., 119.

Its origins were in DC policy circles. NOW was created in 1966 by women who had been delegates to a conference of Equal Employment Opportunity Commission state commissions. Two years after the Civil Rights Act was passed, the EEOC seemed uninterested in enforcing the sex discrimination part of the act. When a resolution to do so was blocked from a vote, angry delegates, including Betty Friedan, Pauli
Murray, Mary Eastwood, and Kathryn Clarenbach, founded NOW. While ending sex discrimination was the overarching goal of NOW, there were several political tensions within the organization, including friction between members who did not think it necessary to challenge the prevailing social and economic system to achieve that goal and others who believed that patriarchal capitalism would have to go. See Winifred D. Wandersee, American Women in the 1970s: On the Move (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988), 40.


31 It was a reminder of the racist, population-control skeletons in the pro-choice movement’s closet. For example, Planned Parenthood, a key player in contemporary pro-choice politics, has historical ties to both eugenics and population control politics. The founders and most of the early activists of NARAL (originally National Abortion Rights Action League—now, NARAL Pro-Choice America) came from the world of family planning, but some were from the population control movement. Even though NARAL adopted a women’s rights rather than a population control approach to abortion rights, the organization’s roots in the population control movement were a red flag for women of color.


34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., 70. Morgen estimates there were 50 women-controlled clinics by 1976.

36 Ibid., 29. Morgen obtained this information from material published by the NWPH in 1976.


38 Morgen, Into Our Own Hands, 225.


40 Faith Evans was the first African American man who was not an abortion provider to become prominently involved in national organizing for reproductive rights. He had an unusual feminist consciousness derived from his status as a single father with six children. He joined RCAR in after working for years in the National Welfare Rights Organization.

In 1993, RCAR broaden its mission and changed its name to the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC).

41 Forums were held in Washington, DC, Philadelphia, PA, Chicago, IL, Atlanta, GA, Pierre, ND, and Hartford, CT.

42 Two African American women were heavily involved in the founding of NOW: Pauli Murray co-authored NOW’s first statement of purpose, and Aileen Hernandez was NOW’s second president. However,
Hernandez resigned in 1979, telling black women that they should not join the organization until it confronted its own racism.


Participants had developed what Chlela Sandoval calls “oppositional consciousness.” For more information, see Chlela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 42–45.


Yvonne Delk, “The Time Has Come to Stand Up,” *Common Ground,* 5.


Later that year, Faye Wattleton became the first woman to receive an award from the Congressional Black Caucus for her work on reproductive freedom.

In another instance, several groups that joined the major mainstream pro-choice groups in a broad-based coalition succeeded in blocking confirmation of Robert Bork’s 1987 nomination to the Supreme Court and participated in similar, albeit unsuccessful, efforts to defeat Clarence Thomas’s 1991 nomination to the Supreme Court, and again in 2001, to prevent confirmation of John Ashcroft as attorney general.

Cynthia Newbille-Marsh and Byllye A. Avery of NBWHP, Memorandum, March 31, 1992.


The collective evolved from roundtable discussions organized in 1997 and 1998 by the Latina Roundtable on Health and Reproductive Rights, led by Luz Rodriguez.