**Black Women and Reproductive Justice**

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Reproductive justice is a phenomenon that goes beyond the much simpler traditional demand of reproductive rights. When we describe reproductive justice, we are talking about not just the right of women to choose not to have children but also to have access to a safe and healthy environment to raise children in. Having the right to have children when wanted, the right abort unwanted pregnancies, the right to choose the type of birthing option as well as the right to parent the child born of the parents are all covered and effectively protected under reproductive justice. Abortion rights therefore come under a much wider umbrella term of reproductive justice which borrows explanatory meaning from social justice. Intersectionality regarding race, gender and class are all addressed when advocating for reproductive justice. This distinction is crucial because even though the rhetoric of reproductive choice does convey serious meaning, it fails to ensure the public resources that women need in order to realistically maintain the control over their bodies that they fought so hard for. Although encompassing women of all backgrounds, it especially caters to the needs of women of color since subtle policies to regulate women’s reproductive rights are almost always particularly destructive to the more socially vulnerable of women. (Roberts)

Reproductive politics has been long coined as an official phrase by feminists. This is because feminism grounds itself in the idea that women choosing when or how to reproduce has historically been a battleground with significant political meaning. Governments and policymakers have always tried to control or limit the degree of choice women can have over their own bodies. This is the reason why advocacy and activism around reproductive health of women, reproductive rights and reproductive justice is so profoundly central to all feminist struggle. Reproduction in itself is a complicated and controversial issue as it lies at the union of gender, sexuality as well as national identity. It is therefore the talking point of countless regulatory laws which restrict the element of choice around reproduction. The degree of this choice then varies from nation to nation and gains an additional flavor of race when categorizing within one country. Talking about and understanding the abject need for reproductive justice for black women is crucial since exclusionary feminism has unquestionably neglected the losses faced and sacrifices made by women of color. When laws like the Hyde Amendment, family caps and prosecutions are allowed to pass and stay resulting in gross criminalization of pregnant women, black women automatically face the greatest risk of an erosion of their reproductive rights that Roe vs. Wade promised. The vital connection between a condoned criminalization of pregnant women, which goes as far as equating infanticide with abortion, and reproductive rights can only be understood correctly when explained in the context of reproductive justice.

The most significant connection between black women and their perpetually ignored reproductive rights dates back to slavery. As black women were supposed to be property, so were the children they birthed. This then led to the creation of a longstanding social system which failed to respect or acknowledge biological bonds between families that they considered less worthy of human rights. (Luna) The raw struggle for survival during slavery created unprecedented bonds in black communities which transcended the ‘normal’ American way of having nuclear families. Communal connections which did not need a common bloodline were confusing for the slave-owning side. Many celebrated sociologists have stooped low enough to call it the root of familial problems in America. Even though these ideas and the social conditions they propagated in are no longer strictly relevant, the social mindset these created unfortunately persists. Policymaking and sociological studies all continue to aim towards finding a ‘solution’ for the stereotypical problem of absent black fathers. The familial system in black communities is still looked down upon as deficient and lacking. It is this exact scenario of an unjust surveillance on the parenting of black families which is why black communities continue to come up with alternative family formations which make sure their children are cared for by the extended family even when the parents cannot be around. When the black family is not respected or held in regard by those who design the laws on how to create or run said families, it automatically creates a gap between reproductive rights as promised by the government and those actually reaching black women.

Black women are ignored when feminism on the political left fails to go beyond justifying abortion rights with the ridiculous logic that abortion caters to economic needs by reducing unwanted children hence curtailing poverty and overpopulation. The right to have children and the right of children to parents are hence neglected. When the activists themselves frame birth control simply as a solution to economic problems, they reduce and diminish the capacity abortion has in its use for racial injustice. Historically racist and eugenist roots in the left’s activism for abortion rights puts a murky shade on their feminism as it has real links with apparent feminists who advocated for racial cleansing and genocide via forced abortions. Forced sterilization rationalized by citing intellectual inferiority historically existed and thrived in around thirty states for decades. These laws were designed to hunt racially and economically vulnerable communities and hence terminating pregnancies in order to stop the birth of children deemed a threat to the society have always disproportionately affected black or native communities. (Luna) This whole scenario was however especially hilarious since the same women that the state and the doctors continued to force sterilizations on, were not trusted to make that exactly same decision for themselves. The ridiculous rule of 120 was only one of the several outrageous sterilization guidelines that these women of color had to follow in order to consensually receive a sterilization they wanted. Consequentially, the political right has repeatedly exploited this connection as a justification for banning abortion by calling it a tool for racial discrimination. Another significant racial twist to this story is the fact that oral contraceptives were frequently tested on women of color without their consent. Here, the contrast between what the activism achieved and what it allowed to happen is too great to ignore. Even though feminist struggle achieved the landmark success of obtaining legal rights to contraceptives for women regardless of their marital status, they ignored the plights of women of color who were tested on without attention to scientific protocols. Therefore, in order to keep the trophy of contraception, feminism categorically threw women of color to the dogs. Other than lack of respect for consent when awarding abortion or contraceptive rights, black women have also been handed a challenge in the face of feminist theory that fails to transform into real, impactful feminist action.

Reproductive justice is hence a necessity for black women and for all women of color. It was black feminists in 1994 attending a pro-choice conference who joined reproductive rights with social justice to officially initiate the political struggle for reproductive justice. Black women therefore took responsibility to claim that their voices did not deserve the margins of the debate on abortion rights but were rather entitled to the center of the conversation on reproductive politics. In order to bring the fight to them, black women had to become organized and socially aware of the inequalities that prevent them from emerging as self-determining humans capable of making and upholding their own reproductive decisions. An overwhelming majority of black women is at a greater risk of living through the experience of disenfranchisement from decisions regarding their own bodies. Knowledge and experience are firmly intertwined, and it hence rings true for black women speaking up for the injustices they have faced. (Ross) Connecting real survivors of reproductive oppression with theorists who write about this injustice is the greatest success the movement has garnered. This movement spearheaded by women of color reiterates the critically important phenomenon of uprooting racial discrimination from within the left while working towards healthy and sustainable legal reproductive rights for all women. When determining the legal or medical experience of an individual woman seeking her reproductive rights, we must be able to connect all her separate but equally influential identities who contribute to the unique experience of privilege or discrimination she might face. Only with this intersectionality can we truly describe feminism as a phenomenon that affects and is accessible to all women.

Previously ignored or misunderstood issues regarding the reproductive freedom of black women continue to rise or, in some cases, be resurrected. A conversation on these issues as they come to the forefront is possible because of a black women-centered movement that seeks to award long-awaited reproductive justice to women from a range of diverse backgrounds.

# References

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