

“A New Vision for Advancing Our Movement for Reproductive Health, Reproductive Rights, and Reproductive Justice” (2005), by Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (ACRJ)

In 2005, the organization Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, or ACRJ, published “A New Vision for Advancing Our Movement for Reproductive Health, Reproductive Rights, and Reproductive Justice,” hereafter “A New Vision,” in which the authors explain how reproductive justice is hindered by societal oppressions against women of color. ACRJ, known as Forward Together since 2012, was a founding member of SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, a collective of organizations founded by people of color that work to advance the reproductive justice movement. In “A New Vision,” the authors elaborate that reproductive justice is about changing the societal structures that produce reproductive oppressions. They assert that a radical transformation is necessary in order to progress toward the establishment of full and equal human rights, reproductive rights, and economic rights to ensure equitable access to healthcare, education, and opportunity.

Founded in 1989, Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice was the group that collectively wrote “A New Vision” in 2005. Based in California, the organization addresses the reproductive health needs of the Asian and Pacific Islander communities, taking into account the effects of systems of oppression based on race, class, and gender on women’s lives and the choices they make about their reproductive health. While “A New Vision” does not name an author, its acknowledgments state that many ACRJ members, leaders, and staff all contributed to the paper through the work they do with ACRJ on a daily basis. With the goal of advancing social and economic justice, the organization became one of many organizations led by women of color to adopt an approach to advocacy that they would later recognize as reproductive justice.

SisterSong defines reproductive justice as a human right, the right of all people to maintain personal bodily autonomy, to be given the right to choose whether to have children, to not have children, and to raise the children they have in safe, healthy, and sustainable communities. The reproductive justice approach combines reproductive rights advocacy with advocacy for other issues of social justice, such as education, healthcare, housing, employment, child care, and environmental safety. At SisterSong’s 2005 national membership meeting, ACRJ presented a briefing paper titled “A New Vision for Advancing Our Movement for Reproductive Health, Reproductive Rights, and Reproductive Justice,” to convey the goals of the reproductive justice approach. According to Loretta Ross, one of the creators of the term reproductive justice in 1994 and a cofounder and the national coordinator of SisterSong from 2005 to 2012, ACRJ was the first member organization of SisterSong to reorganize itself around the reproductive justice concept, in order to better reflect their mission of working towards social, political, and economic justice for Asian women and girls through community-organizing and movement-building.

The authors of “A New Vision” divide the publication into seven sections. Initially, the authors describe the mission and founding of the ACRJ, briefly define the terms reproductive justice and reproductive oppression, and give an overview of the rest of the paper. In “Reproductive Health, Reproductive Rights, Reproductive Justice,” the authors explain the differences between reproductive health, reproductive rights, and reproductive justice, which are complementary approaches but address different aspects of reproductive oppression.

In the following section, “Historical Context,” the authors trace the development of each framework throughout history and explain how women of color created and led the reproductive justice movement. Next, in “Attacking Reproductive Oppression: ACRJ’s Reproductive Justice Agenda,” and “Translating Vision into Action: ACRJ’s Impact,” the authors describe their mission and organizing strategies, followed by a list of several achievements at the local and state levels in California. In “Where Do We Go from Here?” and “Help Us Advance Reproductive Justice,” the authors describe how ACRJ plans to contribute to strengthening the reproductive justice movement, while listing several ways readers can get involved at the community, state, and national levels.

In the introduction, the authors define reproductive oppression and reproductive justice. The term reproductive oppression encompasses all the ways in which women’s control over their lives and bodies is denied and all the ways in which their well-being is undermined. As an example, they state that laws which restrict women’s access to abortion services are a form of reproductive oppression, in addition to economic inequality, bias in healthcare, environmental pollution, and domestic violence. They assert that those examples are oppressive because they influence the choices women can and cannot make about their lives, bodies, and reproduction. The authors understand reproductive oppression as systematic and widespread denial of women’s control over their bodies and reproductive choices, originating from and helping to strengthen systems of oppression based on race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, age, and immigration status.

The authors define reproductive justice as one of three frameworks that challenge reproductive oppression. Whereas reproductive oppression is the denial of women’s control over their own bodies, lives, and reproductive choices, reproductive justice is defined, in the authors’ words, as the complete physical, mental, spiritual, political, economic, and social well-being of women and girls. For reproductive justice to be achieved, the authors state that women and girls must be able to make healthy decisions about their lives, bodies, and reproduction for themselves, their families, and their communities. The authors argue that radical transformation at all levels of society, from the individual outward, is necessary to make reproductive justice a reality.

In the next section, “Reproductive Health, Reproductive Rights, Reproductive Justice,” the authors define the reproductive justice perspective by comparing it to the reproductive health and reproductive rights perspectives. Each framework is a different way to address women’s reproductive health needs and achieve women’s empowerment. The authors equate the frameworks of reproductive health, rights, and justice with three of the core components of a successful movement for social change, which includes service, advocacy, and organizing. The authors continue to clarify how each framework defines and solves the problem of reproductive oppression and summarize the key components of each framework in a full-page table with three columns, one for reproductive health, one for reproductive rights, and one for reproductive justice.

In the first column of the table, “Reproductive Health,” the authors state that the reproductive health perspective focuses on women’s access to reproductive health services but that such access is unevenly distributed. Strategies that arise from the reproductive health framework include providing comprehensive sex education, working to increase access to contraception, abortion, counseling, and family planning services, and improving care and education needed to prevent and treat illnesses like HIV/AIDS. The authors argue that there are societal factors that keep people from accessing reproductive health services, and those large-scale societal factors need addressed to create long-term change.

The next column in the table is “Reproductive Rights,” which the authors define as a model for protecting women’s rights to reproductive healthcare services through legal advocacy. The reproductive rights framework expands upon the reproductive health framework to encompass the protection of women and their rights to access reproductive healthcare services. The authors identify a primary challenge of the reproductive rights perspective as the focus on protecting and encouraging individual choice, claiming that it obscures the social context in which those individual choices are made. They identify a primary strategy of the reproductive rights approach as the advocacy for legislation and policies that protect and expand women’s rights.

The final column in the table is “Reproductive Justice,” in which the authors discuss how the reproductive justice approach differs from the reproductive health and reproductive rights approaches

by its focus on the effect of power inequity on ending reproductive oppression. The authors assert that government policies, societal institutions, and cultural practices have all served to limit women's power. Reproductive justice focuses on improving such things at the societal level, working to organize people into movements that bring about large-scale social change and address the structural roots of reproductive oppression.

In the next section, "Historical Context," the authors explain that throughout history, women's liberation movements have always been linked with control over the reproductive status of women. For example, the authors describe how in the early 1900s, access to birth control increased, but only due to the eugenics movement, a now-discredited movement that sought to control the genetic composition of the population by preventing so-called unfit individuals from reproducing. For the first half of the twentieth century, society supported family planning for population control and not in the name of women's empowerment. Such policies disproportionately affected and controlled the reproductive decisions of marginalized groups. Then, the women's health movement of the 1970s arose from both the civil rights movement and women's liberation movement to combat ideas of imposed population control and advocate for returning the control over their own reproductive lives to women. The authors then explain that by the 1990s, many activists had begun to realize that advocating for individual rights was too narrow a focus to achieve full women's empowerment.

Under the heading "Oppression and Reproduction," the authors discuss the need to focus on addressing systemic structures of oppression that limit the choices women can make about their reproductive options. The authors give several historical and current examples of economic and social policies that affect the lives and reproductive health of women of color, who experience oppression in many forms, such as racism, xenophobia, and sexism. An example the authors provide is the forced sterilization of indigenous women, women with disabilities, and incarcerated women that occurred throughout United States history. Additionally, they recall the US government's history of penalizing low-income women of color and their children on welfare, in addition to the systematic distribution of potentially dangerous contraceptives to women living within low-income communities of color. The authors argue that such instances are examples of long-term reproductive harms. It demonstrates that for women of color, including Asian American and Pacific Islander women, the focus on protecting individual reproductive choice is not enough to prevent reproductive injustices when that focus does not consider systemic conditions such as poverty, lack of access to healthcare, and institutionalized racism. Thus, the authors insist that advocates must address the broader social context in which women of color live and the structural harms they face when championing reproductive justice.

Under the heading "Creation of the Women of Color Reproductive Justice Movement," the authors describe that women of color had been organizing for reproductive justice for decades and had long been advocating for a deeper analysis of reproductive oppression that takes into account factors such as race, class, gender, sexuality, immigration or nationality status, and ability. They name the first women-of-color-led reproductive health organization as the National Black Women's Health Project, which was founded in 1984. In 1994, a group of Black feminists called Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice coined the term reproductive justice when they met at a pro-choice conference. They felt the language of the pro-choice movement did not reflect the barriers that Black women face that prevent them from making reproductive choices, nor did the pro-choice movement cover the right to have children and to raise children in safe communities in addition to the right not to have children. In 1997, SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective was founded.

In the next section, "Attacking Reproductive Oppression: ACRJ's Reproductive Justice Agenda," the authors explain ACRJ's three main strategies to affect change with the greatest impact. ACRJ uses strategies such as analysis, organizing, and movement building to achieve its primary goal of creating a world in which Asian women and girls, and all women and girls within their communities, have the resources they need to thrive and make informed decisions about their own lives. The authors describe one of ACRJ's main strategies, organizing, which they define as bringing Asian women and girls together and developing their leadership capabilities to achieve specific gains at the state and local level. Then, in "Translating Vision into Action: ACRJ's Impact," the authors provide examples of how ACRJ had previously worked with environmental justice organizations

to shut down a toxic medical waste incinerator that was operating in Oakland, California, and how ACRJ was working at the time to help pass state legislation that would ensure students in public high schools in California would receive comprehensive sex education. The authors illustrate how the reproductive justice approach also values social issues such as improving workers' rights, ending violence against women, and supporting the rights of immigrants and LGBTQ+ people.

In "Where Do We Go from Here?" the authors describe the increasing need for a reproductive justice movement due to increasing societal instability, including conditions such as public assistance program reductions, abortion access restrictions, and environmental regulation diminishment. They describe the aims of the reproductive justice movement as addressing the needs of a diverse group of women, empowering women and girls to be agents of change in their communities, integrating the needs of different grassroots movements into one unified movement, and forging cross-sector relationships between movements for different social justice issues based on shared values. In the final section, the authors describe how the readers can contribute to the efforts of the organization to achieve reproductive justice.

In the 2000s, under the leadership of executive director Eveline Shen, ACRJ developed a national network of reproductive justice organizations around the US, called Expanding the Movement for Empowerment and Reproductive Justice, or EMERJ. As the organizations in that network began to connect with organizations focused on different areas of social change, thus aligning with the goal of reproductive justice, ACRJ changed the name of the network from EMERJ to Strong Families. As the Strong Families initiative became more central to the organization's work, in 2012 ACRJ became Forward Together, a name that reflected the organization's growth into a multiracial organization and the connections of the reproductive justice movement with other movements for social change. As of 2020, Forward Together is one of many organizations leading the reproductive justice movement.

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