

REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS AS HUMAN RIGHTS

WOMEN OF COLOR AND THE FIGHT
FOR REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE



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Sociology

Reproductive Rights as Human Rights

Women of Color and the Fight
for Reproductive Justice

BY ZAKIYA LUNA

Instructor's Guide

Reveals both the promise and the pitfalls associated with a human rights approach to the women of color-focused reproductive rights activism of SisterSong

How did reproductive justice—defined as the right to have children, to not have children, and to parent—become recognized as a human rights issue? In *Reproductive Rights as Human Rights*, Zakiya Luna highlights the often-forgotten activism of women of color who are largely responsible for creating what we now know as the modern-day reproductive justice movement.

Focusing on SisterSong, an intersectional reproductive justice organization, Luna shows how, and why, women of color mobilized around reproductive rights in the domestic arena. She examines their key role in re-framing reproductive rights as human rights, raising this set of issues as a priority in the United States, a country hostile to the concept of human rights at home.

An indispensable read, *Reproductive Rights as Human Rights* provides a much-needed intersectional perspective on the modern-day reproductive justice movement.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Overview — 2

Introduction — 3

Chapter 1 — 4

Chapter 2 — 5

Chapter 3 — 6

Chapter 4 — 7

Chapter 5 — 8

Chapter 6 — 9

Chapter 7 — 10

Chapter 8 — 11

Conclusion — 12-14

OVERVIEW

Thank for you engaging with my book! When you look up various definitions of reproductive justice (RJ), what usually appears is a variation of a definition from SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective: the right to not have children, the right to have children, the right to parent the children we have. And the various definitions identify that it is “human rights–based.” I started this project wanting to know why a contemporary organization would choose human rights. How did the SisterSong coalition create the link? What did it look like in practice? And finally, (how) was SisterSong successful at this?

How did reproductive justice, defined as the right to have children, to not have children, and to parent, become recognized as a human rights issue? In *Reproductive Rights as Human Rights: Women of Color and The Fight for Reproductive Justice*, Zakiya Luna highlights the often-forgotten activism of women of color who are largely responsible for creating what we now know as the modern-day reproductive justice movement. Focusing on SisterSong, an intersectional reproductive justice organization, Luna shows how, and why, women of color mobilized around reproductive rights in the domestic arena. She examines their key role in re-framing reproductive rights as human rights, raising this set of issues as a priority in the United States, a country hostile to the concept of human rights at home. An indispensable read, *Reproductive Rights as Human Rights* provides a much-needed intersectional perspective on the modern-day reproductive justice movement.

INTRODUCTION

This introductory chapter begins with a festive occasion: a SisterSong conference where activists from related social movements—reproductive health, reproductive rights and reproductive justice (RJ) —gathered to talk about sex and engage in movement education. AN RJ movement founder that reproductive justice “exists because of human rights.” This provides Luna a starting point for examining how these ideas connect in movement practice. The introduction provides readers with a brief overview of the primary literatures that underpins the project—social movements, women’s health, and human rights—and how an intersectional approach to understanding identities and power informs the analysis that provides the answer to the question of why would a U.S. social movement organization choose international human rights framing. This introduction ends with a synopsis of each of the following eight substantive chapters of the book.

Questions for Discussion

- In what context did you first hear the phrase “human rights”?
- What are the origins of the phrase “women of color”?
- In what context did you first hear the phrase “reproductive justice”?
- How is intersectionality related to reproductive justice?
- How does the Hyde Amendment illustrate limits to “choice” framework around reproductive issues?
- What are some reasons the book might start with a vignette from a conference?
- Have you ever been to a conference? How did its structure represent the wider goals of the organizations sponsoring it?

CHAPTER ONE

Restrictive Domestication: Human Rights and U.S. Exceptionalism

Luna reviews the development of human rights in the international arena, includes how the United States government was central to establishing the United Nations and global human rights norms yet largely exempts itself from them. The U.S. government insisting on its status as a human rights leader based on a restrictive focus on civil and political rights, while ignoring the range of human rights including economic and social rights, exceptionalism is the norm for the U.S. government. The chapter then shifts attention to how African Americans of the early U.S. civil rights movements historically engaged with the United Nations. While the historical content of the chapter may be familiar to some readers, it is Luna's theorization of the U.S. government's strategy of restrictive domestication that provides the crucial backdrop for the rest of the book.

Questions for Discussion

- Who or what defines human rights?
- What impact did the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, United Nations, and the UN Conference on Internal Organization have on civil and human rights policy?
- What events and actions taken historically exhibit the hypocrisy and contradiction of the US government regarding human rights?
- How does exceptionalism operate and what does United States exceptionalism look like?
- How is schooling and education in the United States an example of how the government takes part in restrictive domestication?
- What are the differences between first-generation human rights and second-generation human rights?

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER TWO*Pushed to Human Rights: Marginalization in the U.S. Women's Movement*

This chapter documents key push dynamics of the women's rights movement sector that provided conditions for SisterSong's embrace of human rights. Women of color organizers' repeated disappointment with the mainstream women's movement resulted from feeling marginalized within it and distrusting its organizations. As abortion became more controversial, the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* ruling mobilized a nascent pro-life movement whose advocates enacted the Hyde Amendment. The Amendment's restriction on federal funding disproportionately affected women of color. As women of color fought for reproductive rights, population control in various forms continued to manifest in various forms (e.g., forced sterilization) thus women of color fought for the right to have children as well.

Questions for Discussion

- Why did women of color decide to create alternative organizations?
- What issues did women of color face in the mainstream US women's movement?
- What are some of the criticisms of the Hyde Amendment? Who does the Amendment benefit?
- How was Black women's activism crucial to the development of the reproductive justice movement?
- What is the difference in framing reproductive issues in mainstream organizations and women of color organizations?
- What was the result of the first Women of Color and Reproductive Rights NOW conference?
- What are the criticisms of the liberal approach to reproductive rights focused on individual choice?
- What kind of reproduction-related issues would you raise in your community?

CHAPTER THREE

Pulled to Human Rights: Engagement with Global Gatherings

The chapter narrates the formation of SisterSong, emphasizing the contingent, identity-driven nature of the process and its unfolding alongside—rather than preceding—the turn to the global arena and the discourse of human rights. Key events discussed include the United Nations Conference on Population in Cairo and the World Conference on Women in Beijing. U.S. women of color also learned they had to create space for themselves in international meetings as key documents assumed U.S. women were a monolithic group. While in these international fora, U.S. activists saw the possibilities for engaging human rights, which women's movements elsewhere were already doing.

Questions for Discussion

- What is the harm of treating abuse of women as a private issue as opposed to being a public issue?
- What are the problems with prioritizing the security of certain rights before others and how does this connect to women's issues?
- Why do you think reproductive health is seen as a “women's issue”?
- If reproductive health had a significant impact on international human rights laws, what kind of impact do you think this would have on U.S. policies?
- What is meant by “population control”? What kind of implications does this phrase have on activism?
- How did the events at the UN International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo impact the results of the UN conference in Beijing?

CHAPTER FOUR

Training the Trainers Amidst Backlash

This chapter examines key competing imperatives that were present in the early years of the collective, which affected the visibility of human rights. Then, Luna discuss some of the early challenges as activists and organizers struggled to reconcile different understandings of human rights, weighed the pros and cons of adopting them as a frame, and began tackling the practicalities of how to put the frame into action. Though understandings of what human rights meant shifted and were contested over time, the chapter highlight the emergence of radical reaffirmation process as a more specific tactic within the broader strategy of revolutionary domestication, one that repositioned diversity within the RJM as not a problem, but—to the contrary—as a unifying force.

Questions for Discussion

- How did Clinton's welfare "reform" impact the lives of women of color? Do you think his policies worked the way they were intended to?
- How have stereotypes about Black and Latina women's reproductive behaviors been constructed to serve the government's agenda?
- Why are organizations like SisterSong important to creating a sustainable reproductive justice movement?
- Why did SisterSong founders decide to use a human rights framework for US-based advocacy?
- List some of the reproductive justice challenges faced by women of color and explain how you might address some of those challenges through a human rights discourse.
- Why might certain forms of human rights in the US (such as civil rights) garner so much more support than other rights (such as cultural rights)?

CHAPTER FIVE

Marching Toward Human Rights or Reproductive Justice

This chapter analyzes the role SisterSong played in the 2004 March for Women's Lives to show the positive consequences can become a part of the social movement field even after a formal coalition ends. As the first time "reproductive justice" was on such a prominent stage, the story of the march remains a popular part of the SisterSong narrative. Initially conceived of by four large national women organizations to protect abortion rights, the dynamics and focus of the march shifted when SisterSong was invited to join the main organizers for what would become one of the largest march to that point. The chapter also included analysis of how one of the national organizations began to engage with the idea of reproductive justice as demonstrated by shifting language on its website. In exploring how different frames were brought together, this chapter contributes to the answer about the visible impacts of this human rights-based reproductive justice frame on the women's movement. This chapter suggests that even subtle deployment of a human rights frame can result in large movement gains.

Questions for Discussion

- Explain the "for-not-with" approach taken by many mainstream organizations in the women's movement and how it is detrimental to the advancement of women of color and issues that they face.
- How did engaging with a human rights framework shift the focus of the mainstream women's movement?
- Why might the older members of SisterSong have been more reluctant to endorse the 2004 march than younger optimistic members?
- Why did the initial "choice" framework of the 2004 Women's March fail to resonate with women of color?
- How did the posters and signs produced by SisterSong and distributed at the March advance a frame transformation?
- Explain what Loretta Ross meant when she said, in an interview after the march, "despite the success of the march, the four mainstream organizations that started all of this mess, I think they saw diversifying the organizing as a great way to mobilize for the march, but I don't think they saw it as a great way to transform the movement into the future."

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SIX*Writing Rights and Responsibility*

This chapter highlights how SisterSong educated about human rights through various fora. The printed newspaper SisterSong produced and other written material, were important since more people could interact with these materials and at their leisure without the costs associated with travel to an event. Using examples from the SisterSong newspaper, this first part of the chapter focuses on rhetorical devices in revolutionary domestication of human rights, namely radical reaffirmation and the leveraging of the productive ambiguity between “social justice” and “human rights.” The second half offers analysis of human rights education from an in-person workshop titled RJ 101. Both halves highlight how education emphasized the right to have human rights and the responsibility of both government and individual in protecting human rights. Finally, SisterSong’s emphasis on its responsibility to a global community of women appears throughout the chapter.

Questions for Discussion

- Why is making the concept of human rights familiar such a large part of SisterSong’s radical reaffirmation approach?
- What was Loretta Ross’s intention when describing reproductive justice as “reproductive rights married to social justice?”
- How does the reflection exercise in “Reproductive Justice & Human Rights - Victimized Violators” facilitate an understanding of human rights as not just a state-centric model but as a relational practice between individuals as well?
- Loretta Ross said that the US is “obsessed with only talking about abortion isolated from other human rights issues.” How does this tie into SisterSong’s goal of expanding knowledge of “women’s issues” as “human rights?”
- How does SisterSong, which is primarily focused on domestic organizing, work to connect to women of color on a global scale?
- What are some ways SisterSong emphasized the intersectionality of human rights and the reproductive justice movement through the Collective Voices newspaper?

CHAPTER SEVEN

"They're all intertwined": Developing Human Rights Consciousness

This chapter focuses on the epistemology of human rights. Specifically, it grapples with different ways interviewees learned about human rights, whether through formal education, engagement with SisterSong or some other avenue. Then it focuses on different metaphors to describe human rights, such as a foundation on which to build or an umbrella that protects people. Finally, the motivations of a subset of interviewees who integrate human rights into their daily practice are examined. What emerges is a more nuanced understanding of human rights as not so much a static frame, but a continually evolving language and lens through which SisterSong participants assess movement strategies and envision future goals.

Questions for Discussion

- How do most people in the United States understand the definition and scope of human rights in a domestic and international context?
- What is restrictive domestication? What are the consequences of restrictive domestication?
- Explain the different ways of learning about human rights. How does restrictive domestication affect how people in the United States learn and understand human rights?
- What are the different frameworks in which human rights can be understood?
- How do the different frameworks for understanding human rights affect movements trying to organize using human rights?
- How are human rights like social justice? How do they differ?
- What is the importance of creating a human rights consciousness? What are the different methods for producing a human rights consciousness?

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Puppies and Rainbows" or Pragmatic Politics?: Organizations Engaging with Human Rights

This chapter focuses on a tension many social movement leaders face: possibility and pragmatism. These interviewees responsible for their organization's programmatic efforts talked about how these organizations utilized human rights in their practice (or not). Member and allied organizations had different, yet overlapping audiences, who had a range of knowledge on their substantive issues (reproduction) and varying levels of receptivity including hostility toward human rights. One example discussed in depth is SisterSong's lobbying efforts around opposing the Stupak-Pitts Amendment during Obama-era health care reform. Further, the outright skepticism some leaders offered gives a different view on who is allowed to be "human." An analysis of SisterSong's mission statements over the years also shows the balancing of multiple imperatives. Ultimately, this chapter shows the complexity with which social movement organizations struggle as they balance values with the demands of the political environment.

Questions for Discussion

- How did President Obama's election as the first African-American president affect beliefs on the future of human rights policy in the United States?
- Explain the difference between "universal rights" and "universal human rights" and how the Obama administration's use of the former was detrimental to the global human rights movement.
- How did organizations like SisterSong reframe concerns on reproductive rights as human rights violations?
- Define the advocacy strategy of "naming, blaming, and shaming" and determine how US exceptionalism plays a role in the global fight for human rights.
- Why do you think that human rights are viewed as idealistic instead of pragmatic and how has that affected the way that reproductive justice movements in the United States are defined?
- How is SisterSong's mission embedded in human rights and how does that set the tone for broader movements?

Conclusion

Making Utopias Real

The conclusion notes that the contemporary environment while unique also shows the predictable consequences of restrictive domestication. The U.S. government continues to have disproportionate power in the international arena, in some cases beyond restrictive domestication to outright destruction of United Nations efforts. The conclusion argues that irrespective of why SisterSong chose human rights initially, and even with changes in leadership, composition of the Management Circles, and organizational structure, human rights remain a part to SisterSong's vision. As more everyday people engage in protest in the name of democracy, whether through Women's Marches and stated embraces of intersectional feminism, or fighting climate change, the conditions for larger mobilizing around human rights appear favorable if leveraged with attention to complexity of human experience.

Questions for Discussion

- How is a comprehensive understanding of a human rights framework related to recognizing and dissecting privilege?
- Explain why human rights progress is delayed or ignored among federal bodies.
- How do the inactions of the Trump administration and SisterSong v. Kemp demonstrate the status and acceptance of reproductive justice in the United States?
- What is the trajectory of reproductive justice movements if a human rights framework can be fully and appropriately embraced?

Activities

- Compare the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Bill of Rights. Who is the audience? How are individuals and communities imagined? What expectations are set for governments?
- Pick an Article of the UDHR and explain how it connects to reproductive justice
- Review the Blueprint for Sexual and Reproductive Health, Rights and Justice (<https://reproblueprint.org/>). Then compare the Bill of Rights and/or the UDHR to it. How does these help us understand the relationship of the reproductive justice to human rights?
- Pretend you're a SisterSong founder. How would you train reproductive justice advocates and what aspects would you focus on? (Mollie Kraus)
- Review a transcript from the Sophia Smith Collection Voices of Feminism Project and compare how themes from it relate to the book (<https://compass.fivecolleges.edu/collections/voices-feminism-oral-history-project-oral-histories>)

CONCLUSION

- Review a transcript from the University of Michigan Global Feminisms Project and compare how themes from it relate to the book (<https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/globalfeminisms/>)
- Write three exam questions about a chapter. Then write a paragraph reflecting about the process of developing the questions (what I had my RAs do! As one RA noted “It was interesting to look at the chapter from an instructor’s perspective, and I had fun imagining myself in a class discussion answering these questions.)
- Find the website any of the reproductive health, rights or justice organizations mentioned in the book. What is its mission? (Where) does human rights appear? Why do you think that is the case?
- Find and discuss a podcast /online interview/social media post that explores the themes raised in a specific chapter
- For grad students: Read Luna’s acknowledgements section and Appendix A on methods. Write a memo on what this suggests about the research process and the writing process. How can you apply this to your own work?

Media (there are many items available online, these are just some that my RAs found most interesting)

- Jacobs, Mia. How Reproductive Justice is Part of an Anti-Racist Agenda. At Liberty ACLU. Podcast Audio. July 9, 2020. <https://www.aclu.org/podcast/how-reproductive-justice-part-anti-racist-agenda-ep-109> (Renee Bracey Sherman discussing reproductive justice and the “White washing” of abortion rights activism)
- “Legislate THIS! 2021”. @sparkrjnow. SparkRJNow. Instagram. Instagram Live. March 5, 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/tv/CL9-wr3JFp8/> (Discussion as part of Legislative Advocacy Day on current and potential legislation regarding reproductive rights and issues, specifically SB266, a bill to prevent trans girls from participating on the sports teams that aligns with their gender identity. Further, discussion of RJ as wholly inclusive of trans rights, not just trans reproductive rights)
- Loew, Nicole, Stephanie Edmonds. Grassroots Perspective of Reproductive Justice, Abortion, & Religion with Toni Bond Leonard. Women Centered Health Podcast. Podcast Audio. March 1, 2018. <http://womancenteredhealth.com/ep-7-grassroots-perspective-reproductive-justice-abortion-religion-toni-bond-leonard/>
- Post on ACCESS_RJ (@access_rj) commemorating Professor Luna’s work https://www.instagram.com/p/CL0kV7TAoDc/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link
- Ramjohn, Rhea. Reproductive Choice & Reproductive Justice. Hormonal. November 2, 2020. <https://helloclue.com/podcast/hormonal-podcast-clue/reproductive-choice-and-reproductive-justice> (Loretta Ross talking about

movement history , differences and Repro justice vs pro-choice movement relationship between and White supremacists roots of birth control)

- West, Caroline. Reproductive Justice. Glow West. Podcast Audio. January 31, 2021 <https://tortoisheshack.ie/reproductive-justice-ep-54/> (Interview w/ Irma Garcia)
- Wetter, Jennie. Prioritizing Reproductive Justice. RePros Fight Back. Podcast Audio. January 14, 2021. <https://www.reprosfightback.com/episodes-blog/prioritizing-reproductive-and-racial-justice> (Interview w/ Monica Raye Simpson from Sister Song)

Note about this Instructors guide: I worked with my undergraduate research assistants to develop most of this guide because I think that students are often be better positioned to craft questions and find media resources of interest to their peers. I revised the questions for clarity and flow and added some of my own. These RAs had worked with me for anywhere from one quarter to a year by the time I gave them this assignment. While one had assisted me with developing the book before publication and a couple had read it in a class, for many this assignment was their first exposure. Base questions for chapters developed by: Introduction - Zakiya Luna, 1-Christine Hoang (Sociology & Asian American Studies), 2 -Courtney Poon (Sociology and Communication), 3-Angelica Quintana (Sociology), 4-Mollie Kraus (Financial Mathematics and Statistics), 5-Tara Mandrekar (Political Science), 6-Celeste Natera (Sociology), 7 -Myra Morazan Marin (Sociology), 8-Jagruti Kolla(Biology), Conclusion-Quinn Greene (Sociology). Thank you all for your hard work and inspiration-the future is in great hands (and minds).

Please let me know what you/your students think of the book: www.ZakiyaLuna.com