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Reproductive Justice: The Ultimate Political Countermove for Black Women

Author(s): La'Tasha D. Mayes

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Reproductive Justice:

The Ultimate Political Countermove for Black Women

By La'Tasha D. Mayes

Let's put the cards on the sociopolitical table. Abortion is rarely discussed publicly and remains painstakingly taboo in Black communities—while arguably impacting Black women disproportionately. Statistics about the rate of abortion *are* abominable for Black women—three times the average of White women and double the average of all women, from what has been reported for 2002. However, there is more to the story and Blacks often miss the crux of this political matter when we continue to treat this issue in shrouded in secrecy or steeped in shame. With the Bush-following faith-based radical right machine inclusive of Black clergy fighting in one corner and the historically White face of feminism and liberalism defending in the other, Black women, women of color and low-income women continue to be the pawns in this irreconcilable difference.

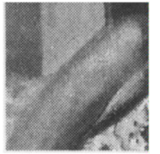
However, I am one concerned Black voice of many who believe in reproductive justice—the socially unencumbered freedom to control one's own fertility or to decide for oneself whether to bear children. Reproductive justice is a countermove in what can be called the political game. When I say justice, I mean that there are social, economic, political and cultural reparations owed to women of color for injustices of the past and present—the breeding in slavery, the preventable deaths from illegal abortion, the sterilization of poor women, the taxation without representation, the federal laws and policies imposed on women's bodies—particularly the Hyde Amendment and Welfare Reform Act—and the intended consequences of ignorance and divisiveness, among many others.

Reproductive justice presents a fundamental paradigm shift and goes beyond the narrow and culturally irrelevant political constructions of

“pro-choice” and “pro-life.” This framework of thought, action and power-building addresses the vast array of interconnected issues and social problems that impact the lives of women of color. With a larger cross section of stakeholders—men, midwives, the middle class and others, we struggle to achieve reproductive justice, recognizing systemic oppression, discrimination, poverty, violence, lack of healthcare and the general lack of access and power in our society as the main causes of social inequity for Black women and women of color.

The infinite line items for reproductive justice include, but are not limited to, preventing the pandemic spread of HIV/AIDS here and abroad, comprehensive care for pregnant women for their own health and to prevent infant mortality, effective contraception for family planning, access to safe and legal abortion, combating the slave health deficit, the redistribution of global wealth, unbiased education on sex and sexuality, political representation coupled with civic engagement, the creation and implementation of policies that address our specific and unique concerns in Black communities, self-determination for our communities and sovereignty over our bodies.

Surely we can agree on the above; however, this vast undertaking is continually cast aside when political actors intervene and tell us we should *only* be concerned about abortion and same-sex marriage. Oh, by the way, abortion has little or nothing to do with homosexuality in the public policy realm—except that they are strategic ploys for the radical right neo-conservatives to capture the Black vote in every electoral cycle. It looks and sounds like divide and conquer to me. What disturbs me most is that the debate on abortion portrays all women as if we do not have the capacity to make decisions about our



"Julie" by Catalina Viejo

"If we want to reduce abortion, we begin with compromises on the most superficial level—abortion should be safe, legal and rare."

lives, especially when it comes to reproduction and sexuality.

Making abortion illegal does not prevent abortion. In fact, the demand for abortion was "inelastic," meaning unchanging, from 1873 to 1973, the period of time from when abortion was originally criminalized in the United States (1873), to the *Roe v. Wade* decision (1973). So telling women not to have abortions does not in fact stop women from seeking abortions. Castigating women does not reduce abortions; it only renders them more vulnerable to the intended consequences of ignorance, powerlessness and more abortions. Further, when Black communities support restrictions on abortion, we restrict our general access—as individuals and as a collective—to any type of health care.

If we want to reduce abortion, we begin with compromises on the most superficial level—abortion should be safe, legal and rare. And we cannot

make it rare without considering what someone else might need despite our own personal beliefs. Black communities must be politically astute, meticulous and intentional about how we morally and politically legislate Black women's bodies, particularly in regard to abortion. To that end, reproductive justice is the only international social justice movement that presents a sound, strategic and comprehensive plan to consider abortion within the totality of experiences in the lives of Black women and in our Black communities. ❁

LA'TASHA D. MAYES is the founder and executive director of *New Voices Pittsburgh: Women of Color for Reproductive Justice* (www.myspace.com/newvoicespgh). She holds an M.S. in Public Policy and Management from Carnegie Mellon focusing on Reproductive Health and Justice Policy. Currently, La'Tasha is a Management Circle Member of *SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective*.