

Reproductive Justice

Gender & Queer Issues

Group 7

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Introduction

The reproductive justice movement was created as a response to the pro-choice movement, which troubled to fully and completely support all people's decisions to their rights.

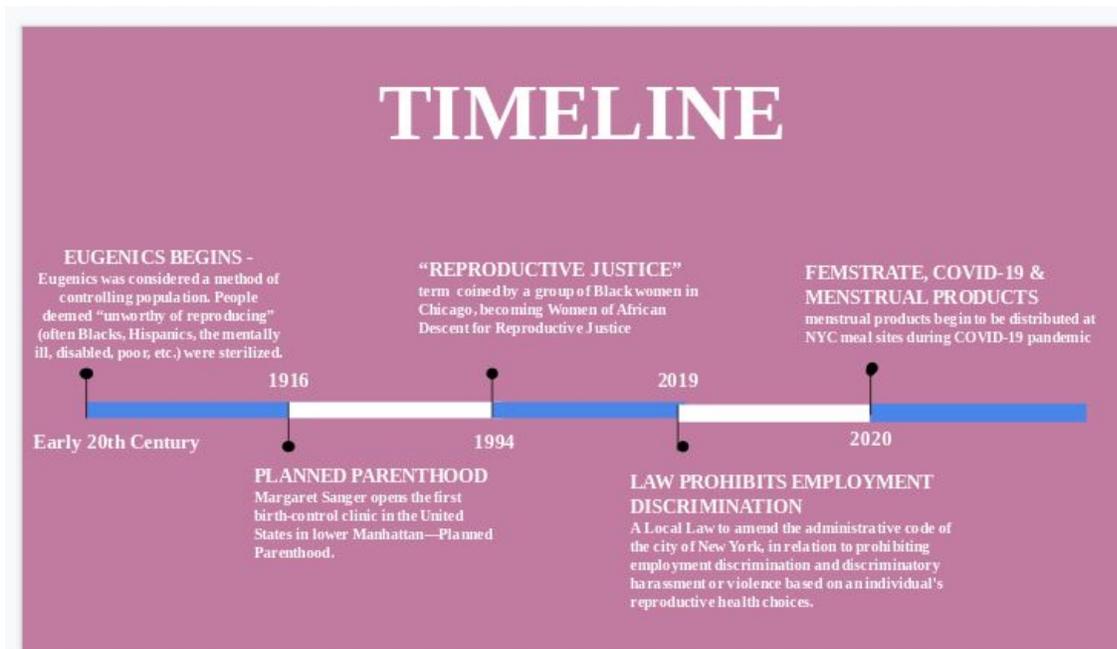
The term reproductive justice was coined by a group of Black women in Chicago in 1994 prior to the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo who went on to become Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice. They did not feel that second-wave feminism and the women's liberation movement adequately represented all women, including women of color and trans women.

Reproductive Justice reveals that one's ability to live out their rights and access to necessary reproductive health services is shaped by prominent injustices in society: lack of education, poverty, sexism, gender identity, racial discrimination, etc. We are aware that such burdens disproportionately fall on marginalized women and queer folks.

Components of reproductive justice include the rights of people to have the children they want, raise the children they have, plan their families through safe, legal, access to abortion & contraception, and express their sexuality without the oppression of any sort.

Our group was interested in many different facets of reproductive justice including access to contraception and abortion, access to menstrual products, sex education, and workplace policies.

Timeline



1873 - Comstock Laws, also known as “chastity laws” made contraception and anything associated with family planning illegal to distribute through the mail. Family planning products were deemed “obscene” by the law. As a result, women and families around the nation, and in New York, lost access to contraceptives.

Early 20th Century: Eugenics begins - Eugenics was considered a method of controlling the population. People deemed “unworthy of reproducing” (often Blacks, Hispanics, the mentally ill, disabled, poor, etc.) were sterilized. Eugenics was motivated by racist and nativist elements and was practiced all over the world, from Nazi Germany to the Cold Spring Harbor lab here in New York State.

1916- Margaret Sanger opens the first birth-control clinic in the United States in lower Manhattan which will eventually become Planned Parenthood. Known as the founder of the Birth Control Movement, Sanger wanted to encourage family planning but was also motivated by racism and eugenics. This movement was not intersectional

1918- New York v. Sanger ruling occurs, where Margaret Sanger wins her suit to allow doctors to advise married patients about birth control in a medical context in New York.

1936- United States v One Package of Japanese Pessaries: this historic SCOTUS ruling essentially disabled the Comstock laws and legalized doctor-prescribed contraception all over the nation.

1970s- 1/3rd of Puerto Rican women of child-bearing age and 25% of native American women living on reservations are sterilized.

1993 - Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 requires larger employers to allow a new parent up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave after the birth of a child. Guarantees that new parents can take time off from work if they can do so.

1994 - term reproductive justice coined by a group of Black women in Chicago, becoming Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice

July 2015 - Sexual and Reproductive Justice Community Engagement Group formed by NYC Health

July 2018 - state law enacted requiring all schools in New York to distribute free menstrual products as part of Women's Opportunity Agenda

January 2019 - Reproductive Health Act enacted in New York, repealing laws restricting abortion in the State and protecting abortion access if Roe V. Wade were to be overturned

January 2019 - NYC will prohibit employment discrimination based on an employee's "sexual and reproductive health decisions," which the new law defines as "any decision by an individual to receive services, which are arranged for or offered or provided to individuals relating to sexual and reproductive health, including the reproductive system and its functions."

May 2020 - menstrual products begin to be distributed at NYC meal sites during COVID-19 pandemic in response to youth-driven activism of Nicole Soret and Mya Abdelwahab from Femstrate organization to get free menstrual products distributed in schools

Key Figures

Margaret Sanger was a racist and eugenicist who wanted to promote family planning to prevent the reproduction of “undesirable” people. Her family planning clinic in New York City was the first in the country and would become Planned Parenthood.

Faye Wattleton was an American abortion rights activist who was the first African American and the youngest president ever elected of Planned Parenthood Federation of America, and the first woman since Margaret Sanger to hold the position.

Elizabeth Ann Karlin was an American doctor of internal medicine and women's health as well a leading advocate for women's reproductive rights in New York City. By mentoring the founders of Medical Students for Choice, Karlin helped clinicians to provide women with comprehensive care, including timely access to abortion.

Nicole Soret and Mya Abdelwahab are the founders of Femstrate and student activists from Young Women’s Leadership School of Astoria who fought to get menstrual products distributed at NYC meal sites during COVID-19 pandemic.

Jennifer Weiss-Wolf is the co-founder of Period Equity, an organization fighting for access to menstrual products for all through petitioning the tampon tax, developing the menstrual equity package with the NYC City Council, as well as ensuring the First STEP Act provided access to menstrual products for incarcerated folks nationally. She is also the Vice President for Development for the Brennan Center for Justice at the NYU School of Law.

Chanel Porchia-Albert is the founder and Executive Director of Ancient Sound Doula Services, providing doula services, training, and other holistic and culturally relevant resources to Black women and women of color. She is a member of the Sexual and Reproductive Justice Community Engagement Group of NYC Health and a member of the NYC Commission on Gender Equity. She has also been a consultant to the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, a maternal health strategist in Uganda, and serves on the boards of Ariadne Labs at Harvard Medical School, The Foundation for the Advancement of Midwifery and Village Birth International, and March for Moms.

Norma McCorvey, better known as Jane Roe, was the plaintiff in the Roe v. Wade case in 1973. The Supreme Court’s decision in Roe v. Wade represented a watershed moment that cemented a woman’s right to choose whether to have an abortion or not.

Local Government

The Mayor has a great deal of influence over the budget which funds reproductive justice programs through city agencies and initiatives such as the Department of Education and Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. The Mayor also appoints the commissioners of the aforementioned agencies. While the City Council may pass laws upholding reproductive justice, the Mayor has the power to veto them (a two-thirds majority is required for the Council to override the veto). The Mayor also appoints many judges who decide how these laws on reproductive justice such as gender-based discrimination and the criminalization of sex work are upheld and how violations are charged.

The City Council in New York City's legislative branch. The City Council can write and pass laws that uphold reproductive justice and can also fund reproductive justice programs. For example, the City Council has the power to ensure there are free menstrual products in public schools, end employer discrimination on the basis of an employee's reproductive health choice, and allocate funding for abortion clinics in the City's budget. Councilmembers are also members of groups like Commission on Gender Equity (Diana Ayala, Laurie Cumbo, Carlina Rivera, Helen Rosenthal) and Women's Caucus (Vanessa Gibson, Farrah Louis, Margaret Chin, Diana Ayala, Laurie Cumbo, Carlina Rivera, Helen Rosenthal, Adrienne Adams, Karen Koslowitz, Alicka Ampry-Samuel, Inez Barron, Deborah Rose) that specifically fight for legislation on these issues.

The District Attorney has the ability to choose which cases will be brought to court, and which are dismissed. As such, the DA can champion reproductive justice and set precedent on gender issues. In the context of reproductive justice, the DA can choose to prosecute gender discrimination in the workplace, those accused of sexual harassment or assault, while not choosing to prosecute cases involving sex work. Through their choice of prosecution, DAs are able to enforce reproductive justice measures while also de-escalating the criminalization of inequitable laws.

Borough Presidents can champion a piece of legislation related to reproductive justice to the City Council with the backing of a current Councilmember. Borough Presidents also appoint Community Board members, who can be local champions of issues like reproductive justice. They currently control 5% of the City's budget and are able to grant funding to nonprofits and city agencies around reproductive justice.

The role of the Public Advocate is ensuring that all New Yorkers receive the City services that they deserve. Also, to ensure that all New Yorkers have a voice in shaping the policies of their government. The Public Advocate is also known to be the voice of those too easily overlooked by City Hall (children, working families, poor, etc.); helps create reforms that engage NYC residents in the democratic process and make the NYC government more accountable to the people. In the context of reproductive justice, the Public Advocate can push such elected leaders accountable and help aid women in their needs regarding reproduction

The Comptroller has the ability to oversee the city budget and advise additions for reproductive justice funding. The Comptroller also has the ability to enforce employers paying their employees. In the context

of reproductive justice, this can include ensuring employees are adequately compensated during maternity or paternity leave and women aren't dismissed for pregnancy-related matters.

The role of each New York City Community Board is to encourage and facilitate the participation of citizens within the City government within their communities; it is the official municipal body whose main mission is to advise elected officials and government agencies on matters affecting the social welfare of the district. In regards to reproductive justice, the NYC Community Board can counsel elected officials and government agencies on the reproductive injustices at hand; the Community Board can further push and advocate the needs of the community—in this case, reproductive justice.

First Lady Chirlane McCray also influences reproductive justice as Co-chair of Commission on Gender Equity and as the former leader of the Domestic Violence Taskforce with Police Chief James O'Neill.

Advocacy Groups

WHARR: Womxn's Health and Reproductive Rights is a New York City based organization which promotes gender equity, womxn's health, sexual and reproductive rights, safe and dignified childbirth, and secure parenthood. WHARR focuses on legislative change, including electing progressive candidates, and fighting against regressive policies that harm womxn's health and well-being.

Planned Parenthood of New York City provides reproductive justice resources to the greater New York City area through medical clinics, sex education curriculum, workshops, and online services.

New York Civil Liberties Union —Reproductive Rights is the only New York State based legal organization focusing on reproductive rights. The NYCLU provides legal services in cases involving reproductive rights.

The Commission on Gender Equity is a city agency formed by Mayor De Blasio in 2015. It is led by First Lady Chirlaine McCray (Co-chair), Jacqueline M. Ebanks (Executive Director), and Silda Palerm (Co-Chair). Members include politicians such as Councilmembers Carlina Rivera and Helen Rosenthal and non-profit leaders such as Chitra Aiyar, Executive Director of the Sadie Nash Leadership Project, and Sherry Hakimi, Executive Director of GenEquality. Their reproductive justice efforts include access to free contraceptives, ThriveNYC maternal mental health services, and increasing access to menstrual products in shelters and jails.

The Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence is another city agency working to support survivors of domestic and gender-based violence, which includes intimate partner and family violence, elder abuse, sexual assault, stalking, and human trafficking. They also operate the New York City Family Justice Centers across the city which provide comprehensive services to survivors and their families.

Sexual and Reproductive Justice Community Engagement Group is a working group of the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene founded in 2015. Member organizations include reproductive justice organizations such as New York Abortion Access Fund and Ancient Sound Doula Services, institutions such as Columbia University and Mount Sinai, and other nonprofits such as Child Center of NY and Korean Community Services.

Period Equity is a nonprofit organization founded by Jennifer Weiss-Wolf and Laura Strausfeld. They are fighting for access to menstrual products for all through petitioning the tampon tax, developing the menstrual equity package with the NYC City Council, as well as ensuring the First STEP Act provided access to menstrual products for incarcerated folks nationally.

Femstrate is an organization founded by student activists Nicole Soret and Mya Abdelwahab. Its mission is to ensure all students have access to free menstrual products. They originally sought to enforce the distribution of these products in all New York City schools, but in the pandemic they shifted their focus to

a successful effort to have menstrual products distributed at DOE meal hubs along with food. They are currently working to expand their reach to the nation's second and third largest school districts, Los Angeles and Chicago.

Caribbean Women's Health Association provides high quality, comprehensive, culturally appropriate health, immigration and social services to Caribbean women in Brooklyn and throughout New York City since 1982. Reproductive justice services include sexual health education, doula services, services for survivors of domestic violence, and access to contraception. They also run several support groups including new moms and moms-to-be group, women's support group, and know your rights workshops.

Interview Summaries

Dawn Rafal

Nicole Soret and Mya Abdelwahab

Nicole Soret and Mya Abdelwahab are co-founders of Femstrate and rising high school seniors from Queens at The Young Women's Leadership School of Astoria. They are inspired by their experience attending an all-girls school in standing up for reproductive justice and began studying the lack of access to menstrual products in their Global Exchange class. They learned that although state law requires schools to provide menstrual products for students, they were not seeing this in their own school or other New York City schools. Once COVID-19 hit and schools shut down, they saw an opportunity to have menstrual products distributed at meal sites along with food. They wrote a letter to Mayor De Blasio and Chancellor Carranza calling for them to implement this, and started a GoFundMe to raise money for these products. Through social media, their efforts gained the attention of local politicians including Assemblymembers Cathy Nolan and Aravella Simotas, Congresswomen Grace Meng and Carolyn Maloney, and State Senator Julia Salazar. With the help of these politicians, their plan successfully reached the Mayor's Office, and the Department of Education implemented their plan in May. They would encourage other young people to find an issue they are passionate about and work on a small scale in their local community to make a difference.

Dawn Rafal

Jordana Lusk

Jordana Lusk is a 26 year old Black trans woman running for City Council. Her vision of reproductive justice looks like equal reproductive justice for Black women. She wants to address the higher mortality rates that Black women face due to systemic racism. Her fully pro-choice platform asserts everyone has the right to control their own bodies. As a survivor of sexual violence, she seeks to prioritize the seriousness of sexual assault and harassment. She will always believe survivors and wants the Council to take these issues more seriously so known harassers like Andy King do not end up on City Council. She believes that survivors need more spaces to heal and go to immediately after being assaulted, and she has proposed turning Jeffrey Epstein's former mansion (located in her district) into a center for survivors. Other policies in this sphere she is prioritizing are the repeal of the Walking While Trans Ban and the HALT Solitary Confinement Act. She hopes young people will take a stand and not "wait their turn" if they see their elected officials not standing up and representing their values, and that more young progressive queer people of color run for office.

Charlotte Ritz-Jack

NYC High School Teacher

I interviewed a 20 year veteran teacher in New York City public schools. Over the course of these twenty years, she has taught in four different high schools for three separate grades. Throughout her professional career she has seen a change in how reproductive justice is treated in schools. She spoke about how initially sex education and condom distribution were the two major services NYC high schools delivered

under the “reproductive justice” umbrella. Today there are new conversations in schools surrounding reproductive justice. Many public schools are reassessing the gendering of bathrooms or how lgbtq+ and reproductive justice is integrated in interdisciplinary curricula. As a teacher, she understands the responsibility of a school in both the information they ensue in their students and the culture which is set. In the context of reproductive justice, she taught both need to consistently be reassessed; school administration and teachers need to develop inclusive and holistic curricula and build a school where students are able to thrive.

Zainab Jabeen

Fordham University Student

I interviewed an incoming Fordham University student who decided to keep herself anonymous. She started off by discussing the lack of education and information schools give in regard to reproductive justice and the LGBTQ+ community as a whole—claiming that it is a serious topic and should be mentioned. She continues by saying that the lack of education on such topics will be something that she plans on addressing. It is crucial for reproductive rights, justice, and LGBTQ+ history to be taught in high school, as that is when students are first developing and curious about life itself. “It is important for this to be taught to youth as they are the voice of the future.” Furthermore, she discusses the seriousness of rape and sexual assault and how it is important for these *survivors* to be heard as well—3 out of 4 people go unheard and unreported yearly. It is really, really, important for these people to be heard but how would that be possible if we’re not providing them a safe place. She hopes things change, especially in regards to City Council—hopefully, they start taking things seriously. Although she is studying in hopes of becoming a lawyer, she wants to partake in future actions on providing a safe space for those impacted by the unjust laws.

Conclusion

Reproductive justice has had a long, complicated history. It has grown from being exclusive and based in supremacy, to intersectional and comprehensive. Reproductive justice is unique in its consistent expansion and growth.

Oftentimes, issues of reproductive justice are medical, urgent, and determine the health of an individual. Reproductive justice issues are symbolic of wider inequalities, and impact everyone's life. It's a lot harder for a young woman to focus on her future when she doesn't have access to menstrual products, an abortion, or safe childbirth. All of these issues are exacerbated across racial and economic lines.

There are numerous opportunities for young people interested in getting involved:

1. Vote!

Choose candidates who champion reproductive justice issues and are committed to furthering them. The people we vote for should reflect our values, so do your research before you cast your ballot to ensure you are electing the right representative.

2. Lobby

Call, email, and visit your elected officials to urge them to advocate for reproductive justice policy. In a democracy, it is the responsibility of the people to set the agenda for those who represent them. So tell your elected officials what you care about and how you expect them to represent you.

3. Educate Yourself, Friends, & Family

Read, watch, and listen to informative content about reproductive justice. Commit to educating yourself, and encourage those you know to do as well!

4. Volunteer with an Advocacy Group

There are many NYC-based reproductive justice organizations who take volunteers or are looking for new members for their teams. Independent of your age or occupation there is a way you can help. The following organizations need your help:

- a. Planned Parenthood
- b. NYCLU
- c. Period.
- d. Caribbean Women's Health Association

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