The utilization of grassroots organizing by Black women pioneers to achieve reproductive justice.

Madison Ruth Ellsworth

University of Louisville

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THE UTILIZATION OF GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING BY BLACK WOMEN PIONEERS TO ACHIEVE REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

By

Madison Ruth Ellsworth
B.A., Oregon State University, 2018
M.A., University of Louisville, 2024

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ORGANIZING BY BLACK WOMEN PIONEERS
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A Thesis Approved on

April 4, 2024

by the following Thesis Committee:

_____________________________
W. S. Tkweme

_____________________________
Shelby Pumphrey

_____________________________
Yvonne Jones
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mom who was the most loving woman and always put others before herself and my dad who has always supported me and given me the strength to achieve my goals.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my entire committee. First Dr. Jones, who has shown me love and support throughout this entire process. Dr. Pumphrey, who inspires me in more ways than one but mainly because she is so graceful, kind, and her classes are incredible. And Dr. Tkweme, who has been the most challenging professor I have ever had, the dedication he has to my growth as a student and the wisdom he shares is forever inspiring.
ABSTRACT

THE UTILIZATION OF GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING BY BLACK WOMEN PIONEERS TO ACHIEVE REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

Madison R. Ellsworth

04/04/24

Since enslavement in the United States Black women have cultivated different ways to fight for their Reproductive Justice. After emancipation Black women have continued to utilize the practices learned from our ancestors to obtain Reproductive Justice. Despite the women’s movement becoming mainstream in the 1960s many Black women continued to grassroots organize to adequately address the issues that were unique to them. The efforts of various Black women organizers tend to go unacknowledged because the mainstream women’s movement attracts the attention of most. In my research I focused on Byllye Avery, Loretta Ross, and Toni Bond to explore and showcase how Black women have utilized grassroots organizing to achieve Reproductive Justice. The method that guided my research was primary sourced archives from Smith College and the Chicago Regional Library. My research proved that for Black women to obtain Reproductive Justice, the utilization of grassroots organizing must be present.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: PURPOSE

One of the consistent strategies throughout the history of Black women and the struggle to obtain Reproductive Justice is grassroots organizing. From the Colored Club Women’s Movement to contemporary organizations Black women have utilized grassroots organizing as a fundamental aspect within their organizations. Within my research I analyzed how Byllye Avery, Loretta Ross, and Dr. Toni Bond focus on grassroots organizing within the organizations they are a part of. This is imperative to understand how Black women engage their communities and help achieve Reproductive Justice for all women not just those in the mainstream movement.

Within this paper I explore various critiques that Byllye Avery, Loretta Ross, and Dr. Toni Bond pose on the mainstream women’s movement. This exploration has proven to be thought provoking because their critiques expand past the mainstream women’s movement. Their work does not solely critique the mainstream women’s movement; rather, a theme through my research has also been their critique of various Black leaders, the government, and the church. This is useful information because each woman addresses different concerns, from different points in history as well as provides an array of solutions.
I have researched Byllye Avery, Loretta Ross, and Dr. Toni Bond Leonard to understand how Black women pioneers of the Reproductive Justice Movement used events, speeches, marches, meetings, campaigns and other forms of grassroots organizing to support Black women and their ability to access safe abortions as well as educate on other forms of Reproductive freedoms. My hope is this information provides the reader with an understanding of how Black women have demanded their needs be met through grassroots organizing despite the challenges presented by the mainstream women’s movement.

**REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE… WHAT IS IT?**

1973 was not the beginning nor was it the end of the Reproductive Justice Movement. Since the 1900s Black women have been collectively organizing and educating their communities on how one can obtain abortion access. However, once abortion access was legalized the goal of the movement slowly began to broaden. What started as a movement to gain abortion access transitions into a Reproductive Justice movement. Reproductive Justice was a concept created in 1994 by a group of twelve Black women who believed it was time to advocate for greater change within the pro-choice movement. Additionally, the decision to create the term Reproductive Justice allowed for Black women to establish their racial and gender needs separate from the white women’s movement. Reproductive Justice identifies three goals within the framework of the term: the right to

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1 Archives are inconsistent on if the Reproductive Justice framework was coined by twelve or thirteen women.
have a child, the right to not have a child, the right to parent that children, as well as the right to control birthing options (Understanding Reproductive Justice L. Ross). This new framework was inspired by the work that had previously been done by Black women and created a broader yet more definitive framework that allowed Black women organizers to collectively work towards a specific goal.

The importance of creating the Reproductive Justice Movement was crucial to the needs of Black women being met. This is due to the difference in goals between organizations within the mainstream women’s movement and the organizations within the Reproductive Justice Movement. Black Women felt and continue to feel that the mainstream women’s movement did not embody the needs of all women, rather it focuses primarily on the needs of white women. Despite differences Black women have continued to integrate themselves into the women’s movement in order to achieve Reproductive Justice for all women. The inclusion of the Reproductive Justice framework into the women’s movement has forced many white feminist and white women led organizations to reevaluate the structures of their organizations to better meet the needs of Black women. Additionally, it birthed a dialogue between white and Black feminist to create a movement that addresses the issues of all women not just the issues that concern white women.

INTRODUCING THE WOMEN
I chose these three Reproductive Justice pioneers to examine because they offer a perspective from different points in history. Byllye Avery offers insight on organizing in the 1960s into the early 2000s, Loretta Ross begins her activism in the 1960s but begins her mass organizational efforts in the 1980s, and Dr. Toni Bond explores her activism efforts in the late 1980s into the present. All three of these women share a common goal of achieving Reproductive Justice but their strategies and experiences can be compared.

**BYLLYE AVERY**

Byllye Yvonne Avery was born in Waynesville, Georgia however she spent most of her young life in Florida before returning to Georgia to pursue her career in Women’s health. Avery earned her undergraduate degree in Psychology from Talladega College and an M.A. degree from the University of Florida in 1969.

Avery’s career in Reproductive justice is expansive, in 1978 she co-founded the Gainesville Women’s Health Center and Birthplace. This Center was extremely useful; however, Avery realized the services were being used by predominantly white women. In addition, Avery realized there was a disconnect between resources and information and what was being made available to Black women. Inspired and determined Avery then founded The National Black Women’s Health Project in 1984. The NBWHP utilized grassroots organizing to create one of the most expansive and effective Black Women’s health organizations in the country. The strategy behind The NBWHP was to encourage
self-help, create community amongst Black women, educate Black women around women’s health issues, and to create awareness of the Reproductive Justice Movement. Byllye Avery has also served on the Board of the New World Foundation and the Reproductive Rights Access Project of the National Campaign to Restore Abortion Funding (Speakers Biographies, Avery). During the twentieth century Avery can be observed supporting, sponsoring, and endorsing less established Human Rights Organizations.

The NBWHP has now transformed into the Black Women’s Health Imperative. With similar goals in mind the Black Women’s Health Imperative focuses on health policy, education, research, knowledge, and leadership in order to improve the health of Black women. Avery spent the 1980s expanding her knowledge on women’s health, learning from places like Brazil and South Africa. Avery has also founded the Avery Institute for Social Change in 2002 which focuses on health-care education for all Black Americans. In 1999 Avery published *An Altar of Words: Wisdom to Comfort and Inspire African-American Women* this book provides discourse regarding the power of language and how it relates to the health of Black women.

Byllye Avery is a powerful woman that is considered a pioneer of the Reproductive Justice Movement. Her utilization of grassroots organizing to support Black women from all demographics and to expand the knowledge of all Black people in the United States is inspiring and should be analyzed by all women’s health leaders in order to understand how the Reproductive Justice Movement has and will continue to grow.
LORETTA ROSS

Loretta June Ross was born and raised in Texas with a large, blended family of ten. Her career in Reproductive Justice activism did not begin officially until 1979; however, through her own personal experiences and those of her close friends her activism in the Reproductive Justice Movement started as early as her eleventh year of life. Ross attended Howard University in 1979, the decision to attend Howard University is a catalyst in her career as an activist. Between the years of 1979 to present Ross has been one of the most involved and highly respected women in the field of Reproductive Justice.

In 1979 Ross began working at the D.C. Rape Crisis Center shortly after in 1980 she organized the first National Conference on Third World Women and Violence. She also co-founded the National Organization for Women (NOW) in the early 1980s. Ross spent the latter years of 1980 serving as the director of Women of Color Programs for the National Organization of Women (1985-1989). We begin to see Ross primarily focus on Reproductive Justice in 1987 when she organized the first National Conference on Women of Color and Reproductive Rights. Ross takes her efforts internationally where she is one of the co-founding members of the International Council of African American Women and of the Network of East-West Women.
Ross has also made efforts in organizing at the grassroots level. In 1966 Ross created the National Center for Human Rights Education which focused on the training and education of local activists. Additionally, Ross has spent a significant amount of her career on numerous organizational boards. A few of these organizations include, National Women’s Health Network, SisterLove Women’s AIDS Project, and currently she serves as the National Coordinator of SisterSong.

Loretta J. Ross has contributed to the Reproductive Justice movement in multiple different facets. Tangibly we see her effort through the various organizations she has participated in, but we can also observe this through her speeches, conferences, writings, and other forms of organizing. Ross is currently a professor at Smith College teaching a course titled, *White Supremacy in the Age of Trump and Race and Culture in America and Reproductive Justice*. From 1979 to the contemporary Loretta J. Ross has served as a pioneer of the Reproductive Justice Movement as well as a teacher to the next generation of women’s health leaders.

**DR. TONI BOND LEONARD**

Chicago native Toni Bond Leonard has devoted much of her life advocating on behalf of the Reproductive Justice movement. Toni Bond Leonard has been involved in a plethora of organizations that focus on the health and well-being of Black women and women of Color. Although starting her career later then Byllye Avery and Loretta Ross, she has
proven to be a pioneer of the Reproductive Justice Movement as well. Toni Bond Leonard has earned her PhD in religion, ethics and society at Claremont School of Theology with a focus on Black women, religion, Reproductive Justice, womanists’ theology, and womanist ethics. Her combined lived experience as a Black woman who has been a victim of sexual abuse, her scholarship, and her involvement in numerous organizations provides grounds for why I consider Toni Bond Leonard to be a pioneer of the Reproductive Justice movement.

Starting in 1985 Toni Bond Leonard became the first Black women Executive Director of the Chicago Abortion Fund. The Chicago Abortion Fund was started as a financial aid option for women who needed financial support for first and second trimester abortions. She served as the Executive Director of the Chicago Abortion Fund (CAF) for seven years, and within that time the Chicago Abortion Fund gained national notoriety for being an effective independent abortion funder. While Executive Director of the Chicago Abortion Fund Bond Leonard was also involved at the Harriet M. Harris Center and the YWCA of Metropolitan Chicago both positions were centered in medical and rape advocacy.

In 1994 Toni Bond Leonard was one of thirteen women that coined the term Reproductive Justice. The group of women who coined the term are called the Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice (WADRJ). The women that make this group are known as the “mothers” of the Reproductive Justice Movement. The main
accomplishment of WADRJ was to address the Clinton administration and demand a healthcare plan that included reformed healthcare and abortion services.

As the Chicago Abortion Fund expanded Bond made the decision to co-found African American Women Evolving in 1996. African American Women Evolving exemplifies the expansion of goals and objectives surrounding abortion access. AAWE focused primarily on the educational aspect of abortion access. It is with this organization that scholars observe a shift in language. No longer is the goal to provide abortion funds it was now to provide Reproductive health education and resources. The values of AAWE were to (1) increase the activism and leadership of African American women around Reproductive health and (2) examine and draw the connections between other social justice and basic human rights issues that directly and indirectly affect African American women’s ability to exercise complete autonomy over their lives and bodies (source1). On April 11, 2009, Toni Bond Leonard made the decision to change the name of the organization from African American Women Evolving to Black Women for Reproductive Justice. Despite the organizational name change, Leonard stated that “The mission of the work of the organization has not changed” (paper). Unfortunately, as many organizations that primarily focus on Black women and women of Color the funding was nearly nonexistent and after fifteen years, 2012 was the last year of Black Women for Reproductive Justice.

As Toni Bond Leonard was serving as CEO and President of Black Women for Reproductive Justice, she was also the Board President of SisterSong Women of Color for Reproductive Health Collective. SisterSong was founded in 1997 in Georgia and
focused on Reproductive Justice for Indigenous women and women of Color. SisterSong began as a grassroots organization focusing primarily on reproductive health of Indigenous girls and women but overtime has developed into a Reproductive Justice as human rights advocacy group, that has entered the mainstream women’s movement. Part of the SisterSong model is representation from five different ethnic groups and a management circle which includes a representative from diverse organizations. This is done as an effort to increase the network and support of Indigenous women and women of Color operated organizations. Although SisterSong has entered the mainstream women’s movement they have committed themselves to maintaining advocacy and education at the local levels.

I find Bond’s experience within the Reproductive Justice movement to be unique due to her combined passion of religion and Reproductive Justice. Throughout my research of Toni Bond Leonard her relationship with religion did not intersect immensely with her work with Reproductive Justice. However, I noticed a theme regarding a critique and a call to action to the Black church. I will dive into this critique more thoroughly further into my paper, but I do consider her relationship with the church as a differing factor between her, Loretta Ross and Byllye Avery.

HISTROICAL ANALYSIS
It is a common belief that the Reproductive Justice movement is a relatively new movement beginning with the overturning of Roe versus Wade in 1973. However, to correctly analyze the Reproductive Justice movement in the United States it is imperative that one takes a step back to acknowledge the efforts of Black women throughout time. The history of Reproductive Justice is divided into four different time frames in order to offer a brief historical examination of the Reproductive Justice struggle that Black women have faced.

New World enslavement in the United States began in 1619 and technically ended in 1865. During this period Black women were seen as producers. The ability to produce not only on the field but also in their enforced breeding of children. Producing two forms of income for their enslavers was a large factor in the economic success of the slave economy. Because of this, Black women were continually raped by both their enslavers and enslaved men and forced to give birth to children at an extremely high rate, with little time to recovery. Despite this horrific treatment Black women cultivated methods of resistance that should be discussed when considering the Reproductive Justice Movement. The use of midwives was a heavily practiced tactic due to their impeccable ability to utilize natural herbs to induce abortions. Enslaved women would also fake symptoms of pregnancy in order to avoid rape or use rustic nails to manually induce an abortion (A distinct Consciousness, L. Ross). These examples were extremely dangerous exemplifying the bravery and commitment of the enslaved women to achieve autonomy of their bodies. Resistance in the form of infanticide, more specifically, the life of Margaret Garner is a valuable woman in this historical analysis. The difficult decision to
kill one’s child for them to avoid enslavement serves yet another example of Black women expressing their longing for Reproductive freedom. Exercising the right to have an abortion regardless of repercussions exemplifies the first documented form of the Reproductive Justice struggle.

As Black women continued to fight for control over their autonomy the years of 1865 through 1950, served as a new era for Black women, an era of introducing abortion education. This era is valuable in the Reproductive Justice movement because Black women were now resisting the label of breeders, they were focused on family planning and education. The Colored Club Women’s Movement played a pivotal role in this new forming idea surrounding Black women and reproduction. The Colored Club Women’s Movement started in the nineteenth century and progressed into the twentieth century, focusing on several issues. One of those issues being the lack of education regarding contraception, this is the first collective action taken to achieve Reproductive Justice. In addition, collective education on contraceptive exemplifies Black women exploring grassroots organizing. The Colored Club Women’s Movement also discouraged Black women from sterilization, educated on birth control options, and promoted family planning. Despite these efforts it has been recorded that dangerous forms of illegal abortions were still being utilized. The Baltimore Afro- American stated tools such as pencils, nails, and hat pins were commonly utilized as abortion methods (African-American Women and Abortion, L. Ross). The introduction of abortion education was and still is an important achievement for Black women fighting for Reproductive Justice.
The 1865-1950 era of abortion education created a slight increase in Black women feeling as if they held autonomy of their bodies. However, with that came a huge influx of people that became incredibly outspoken about how Black women should view abortion. On one hand the church, Black led organizations, and Black nationalists such as Marcus Garvey and the NAACP viewed abortion and family planning as a form of racial genocide. On the other spectrum, Margaret Sanger who was a eugenics supporter, birth control advocate, and founder of the Birth Control Federation of America (now Planned Parenthood) aided in the mass sterilization of Black girls and women throughout the twentieth century. Although Marcus Garvey and Margaret Sanger were trying to achieve two very different end goals, one attempting to avoid racial genocide and the other attempting to commit a racial genocide the theme of making decisions on behalf of Black women is consistent.

The opinions from both Black Nationalists and white women feminist proved to be effective, through the years of 1950-1970 one can see a new time for Black women and Reproductive Justice, the underground movement. The underground abortion movement was as a period where Black women had no other choice but to illegally use midwives and doctors to access abortions. This was an interesting period in United States history because the Civil Rights Movement was being introduced to the country. The Civil Rights Movement is imperative to include in discourse surrounding the Reproductive Justice Movement. Despite the intersection between the two movements, many Civil Rights leaders found themselves either denouncing or uninterested in the Reproductive Justice Movement. Multiple NAACP leaders are quoted speaking as if access to abortion
was the foundation of racial genocide. Marvin Davies leader of the Florida NAACP chapter stated, “Our women need to produce more babies, not less… and until we comprise 30 to 35 percent of the population, we won't really be able to affect the power structure in this country” (African- American Women and Abortion, L. Ross). Being that the NAACP was an extremely well-known Black led organization at that time, comments such as these denouncing a Black women’s choice to get an abortion were extremely harmful to the Reproductive Justice Movement. Pan Africanist, Du Bois was one of the only very prominent Black men to openly support Black women having the ability to choose abortion. Fear of sterilization from white led organizations, and fear of judgement from Black led organizations, are two of the leading factors the underground abortion movement became a practice utilized by Black women.

The mainstream women’s movement started in the 1960’s and was a pivotal time for women in the United States. The movement mainly focused on women’s right to have an abortion, work outside the home, participate in the government, and women’s sexuality. The title is deceiving, for many Black women felt the Women’s movement catered to a specific woman, white and middle class. Despite Black women being at the foundation of fighting for autonomy of their bodies, white women were now at the center of the women’s movement. This is noted not to shame white women in their fight for equality, rather to highlight the unrecognized struggle that Black women had been experiencing and fighting against for years. Additionally, at this time Loretta Ross notes that many Black women were reluctant to join the mainstream women’s movement because “Although the majority of African American (women) have favored abortion rights, most
hesitated to work with a women’s movement which was racist and seemingly exclusive” (Reproductive Rights and African American Women, L. Ross).

As I have stated the Black women’s movement started as early as the late 1800s with the Colored Club Women. However, more Black women led organizations were coming to the surface in the 1960s. The Black Women’s Liberation Committee a branch of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was openly advocating for Black women’s right to an abortion in 1969. A huge moment in the Reproductive Justice Movement comes to fruition on January 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 1973, when the Supreme Court voted to legalize abortion. This decision allowed for women within the first trimester to have the option of proceeding with an abortion, and the following trimesters have the option of abortion if health reasons permitted. For many this is when the Reproductive Justice Movement begins, but as I have explored this is a victory for Black women who have been in the struggle for Reproductive Justice since enslavement. Black feminist became increasingly more outspoken about the right to have an abortion and continued to turn to grassroots organizing to support Black women both educationally and, in their ability, to access abortions. It can be observed that the 1980s were another pivotal period for Black women led organizations and activism. To list a few accomplishments, Byllye Avery founded The Black Women’s Health Project in 1983, in 1987 the first National Conference on Women of Color and Reproductive Rights was held, Loretta Ross and her organization, the National Organization for Women (NOW) organized massive demonstrations in 1986 and 1989. The surge of Black women activism received far less mainstream coverage yet created mass engagement from Black women.
Although Roe versus Wade insinuated change would be enforced in the United States and women would be given the option to have an abortion, many women activist would mark 1973 as a moment in the struggle not the end of a struggle. Since Roe versus Wade access to abortions was made accessible for women of certain demographics. However, for Black women specifically poor Black women access to safe abortions has continued to be challenging. Therefore, the efforts of Black women Reproductive Justice leaders are a necessity in the fight for Reproductive Justice for all women. Unfortunately, June 24th, 2022, was a very disappointing time in the Reproductive Justice struggle. In Dobbs versus Jackson Women’s Health Organization, the U.S Supreme Court overturned Roe versus Wade and declared abortion access was to be dependent on state legislators. U.S Representative Mary Miller of Illinois critiques the overturning of Roe versus Wade stated it was a victory for “white life” (*Repercussions of overturning Roe v. Wade for women across systems and beyond borders*).

The brief timeline I have provided has exemplified the over century long struggle of Reproductive Justice that Black women have been up against in the United States. Despite various criticisms, lack of mainstream recognition, and government legislations, Black women continue to be at the forefront of the Reproductive Justice movement. Achieving Reproductive Justice for Black women should be a top priority for all human rights activists due to the intersection of race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Nonetheless, Black women continue to use strategies from our past Black women leaders to embark on this struggle.
STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Since enslavement Black women in the United States have been fighting for reproductive freedom. Once the women’s movement became mainstream in the 1960s Black women were faced with a new problem. Although Black women have historically been the victims of reproductive abuse the mainstream women’s movement was attempting to achieve reproductive freedom but, focused on the issues concerning primarily white women. Recognizing the mainstream women’s movement was centered around the issues of white women Black women turned to grassroots organizing to adequately support Black women and girls in their struggle for reproductive freedom. Despite the work of Black women through enslavement, post emancipation, and through the mainstream women’s movement their work at the grassroots often gets overlooked and Reproductive Justice is solely credited to the work of the mainstream movement. Two issues are at the forefront of this topic. First, in order to achieve Reproductive Justice for Black women grassroots organizing must be utilized. Secondly, Black women continue to pioneer the Reproductive Justice movement despite not being adequately represented in the mainstream women’s movement.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE
The term "Reproductive Justice" was coined in 1994 by a group of twelve Black women. Since then, literature has been published regarding how Black women and women of Color have different reproductive needs than white women. In 1996 Catherine Fisher Collins published a book titled *African-American Women’s Health and Social Issues*. This book addresses the health and social issues that Black women face in the United States, while also attempting to combat the literature that was published by white men and women. Collins identifies AIDS as one of the worst pandemics that Black women in the United States have faced, she addresses cancer as one of the leading causes of death for Black women who live on low-incomes and discusses the effects of diabetes on Black women. Additionally, Collins addresses the effects that stress has on Black women, discussing substance abuse, mental health, and violence. This text offers the reader unique insight into the reality of health concerns for Black women in the United States, during and prior to the year of 1996.

The women’s movement became mainstream in the 1960s; however, the work of Black women to fight for reproductive and health freedom can be dated back to enslavement. Susan L. Smith published *Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired: Black Women’s Health Activism in America, 1890-1950* in 1995. This book is divided into two sections: the first details the creation of the Black Health Movement and the second discusses the implementation of Black Health Programs. The first section focuses on the efforts of Black Club Women and supports the argument that they were among the first women to practice grassroots organizing and to educate about reproductive and health related issues. Additionally, this section discusses the 1915 Negro Health Week from Tuskegee
Institute in Alabama. This event was created by Booker T. Washington with the goal of advancing Black people in society through health-related education. Finally, this section discusses the implementation of the Office of Negro Health Work during the 1930s. The purpose of the ONHW was to educate Black people about health-related issues; however, it failed due to the lack of respect and financial support from the government. Despite efforts of the Black Health Movement to become mainstream, most people found the largest impact was made when organizing and educating locally. The second section of Smith’s work focuses on the public health work of rural Black women, specifically the increase of Black women midwives between the years of 1920 and 1930. Furthermore, the implementation of clubs such as the Forrest County Midwife Club from Mississippi sourced most of the health-related education for Black community members. Finally, Smith discusses the decline of midwives and the introduction of Black sorority women, specifically the Alpha Kappa Alpha Mississippi sorority. According to Smith, between 1935 and 1942, the AKA’s used government support to attempt racial uplift through health education.

To highlight the efforts of women of Color in the Reproductive Justice movement Jael Silliman, Marlene Gerber Fried, Loretta Ross, and Elena R. Gutiérrez published the book *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice* in 2004. This book spends fifteen chapters diving into the organizational efforts of Black, Native American, Asian and Pacific Islander, and Latina women within the Reproductive Justice movement. Additionally, the authors describe the maintenance of white supremacy within the women’s movement and detail how various women of Color have attempted to
combat the racism and sexism they experience. The authors also converse about the health-related organizations created by women of Color that directly address health related issues specific to their ethnic groups. The book argues that working together to form multicultural organizations can improve the overall reproductive freedom and health for all women.

Understanding the various ways in which Black women have been denied autonomy of their bodies is an important aspect of my research. Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty by Dorothy Roberts focuses primarily on the reproductive injustices that Black women have experienced in the past and present. This book was published in 1997 and uses several chapters to discuss birth control, sterilization, Black women on welfare, and the politics that surround a Black woman’s body. Roberts provides the reader with a historical analysis of Black women and their experiences with various reproductive injustices and stereotypes to explore how reproductive injustices are maintained through the mainstream women’s movement and the civil rights movement. This book is imperative to understanding the complexity in how the issues that Black women are facing in the contemporary are directly connected to the sexual abuse that enslaved Black women experienced.

To fully understand the need for Reproductive Justice one must also understand the racism within western medicine. In 2011 Dorothy Roberts published Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics, and Big Business Re-Create Race in the Twenty-First Century. In this book Roberts provides her readers with the history of the ideology of race, and how
the ideology of race is at the center of United States politics. Roberts argues the ideology of race in the United States has been misrepresented as a biological inheritance; rather, than a political relationship, which has created a divide based off the myth that race alone is to blame for social inequities.

As I stated previously the term ‘Reproductive Justice’ was coined in 1994 by twelve Black women. This term was created because both the women’s movement and the idea of pro-choice did not completely encompass the various issues of Black women and women of Color. In 2017 Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger published *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction*. This book lays the foundation for one to understand the various aspects of Reproductive Justice. The book defines Reproductive Justice which is the right to not have a child, the right to have a child, and the right to parent children in safe and healthy environments. Based off this definition the authors address issues such as HIV/AIDS, midwifery, abortion rights, health disparities, abstinence, teen pregnancy, breast cancer, environmental justice, police brutality, and immigrant rights. Furthermore, the book argues that the women’s movement limits its discourse to pro-life/pro-choice which, does not adequately address the issues that Black women and women of Color experience.

As Black women continue to be at the forefront of grassroots organizing and other efforts geared to the improvement of reproductive and health rights for Black women and girls one’s mental health must be considered. In 2020 Mary-Frances Winters published the book *Black Fatigue: How Racism Erodes the Mind, Body, and Spirit* to examine how
fatigue affects freedom fighters, civil rights leaders, and social justice advocates. Although all leaders run the risk of fatigue Winters focuses on the many layers of Black fatigue sourced from obtaining many marginalized identities. Additionally, Winters addresses Black women fatigue by exploring police brutality, domestic violence, faith, body image, and the workforce. The author provides strategies for Black people to use to avoid Black fatigue while arguing Black fatigue will not be solved until white supremacy is dismantled.

An important aspect of the Reproductive Justice Movement is connecting the experiences Black Women endure to a broader Human Rights struggle. In 2020 Zakiya Luna published the book *Reproductive Rights as Human Rights: Women of Color and the Fight for Reproductive Justice*. In this book Luna focuses on the efforts of SisterSong particularly and how women of Color within that organization have adjusted its framework, to view Reproductive Justice through the lens of Human Rights. However, Luna also acknowledges the power that the United States holds internationally and how that interferes with achieving Reproductive Justice through Human Rights.

My research explores how Black women have utilized grassroots organizing to achieve Reproductive Justice rather than include themselves in the mainstream women’s movement. I examine the work of three pioneers: Byllye Avery, Loretta Ross, and Dr. Bond to understand why Black women do not feel the mainstream women’s movement addresses the issues unique to Black women. Although these women have made efforts to achieve Reproductive Justice, I believe the women’s movement continues to center the
work of white women rather than acknowledge the work of these Black women pioneers, which is why I have chosen to highlight their efforts throughout the years.
CHAPTER TWO
DEFINING THE PROBLEM

Each of the women I have discussed have pioneered the Reproductive Justice movement not because they were outspoken on the topic but because they made efforts to include Black women in the Reproductive Justice movement, something that the mainstream movement fell short of. Byllye Avery created the NBWHP, implemented self-help groups, held conferences, and even helped to produce a film for Black women and girls. Loretta Ross engaged with the mainstream movement and helped to include Black women, so their voices would be acknowledged. Dr. Bond created the AAWE organization, supported various grassroots organizations, and held symposium events.

As pioneers of the Reproductive Justice movement, it is useful to understand what their critiques of the mainstream women’s movement were. Understanding their critiques provides a space for the women’s movement to improve their methods to achieving Reproductive Justice for all women. Additionally, analyzing their critiques helps the reader to understand why Black women utilize grassroots organizing as an essential aspect to the Reproductive Justice movement. Without grassroots organizing the reproductive issues that women with low-incomes and Black women experience would be underrepresented or ignored entirely.
I have highlighted the various contributions that Byllye Avery made to helping Black women receive adequate Reproductive Justice. Despite NBWHP being a large organization, Avery continued to utilize grassroots organizing to guarantee the issues that Black women experience were at the center of NBWHP. But why did Avery believe grassroots organizing was a better strategy compared to NBWHP entering the mainstream women’s movement? In this section I will be analyzing some of Avery’s published work to understand her motive for separating the NBWHP from the mainstream movement. The work I have collected includes various papers, speeches, and newspaper articles published from Avery on behalf of the NBWHP. The main themes within Avery’s critiques include the conspiracy of silence, the anti-abortion and pro-life movements, and hypocrisies of the government and the mainstream movement.

Byllye Avery uses the term ‘conspiracy of silence’ to describe the condition Black women are living, regarding health-related issues. Black women living in the conspiracy of silence means their concerns, struggles, and issues are ignored while simultaneously being perceived as careless or helpless. In her paper “Black Women’s Health Issues” she discusses why the NBWHP uses the phrase coined by Fannie Lou Hamer “We are sick and tired of being sick and tired” to illuminate the voices of Black women. She details the history of racism, classism, and gendered violence that have contributed to the silencing of Black women, which has led to Black women feeling “sick and tired of being sick and
tired.” Because of the normalization of abuse and the distrust society places on Black women, Black women tend to internalize the problems they face. Regarding the effects of this ‘conspiracy of silence’ Avery states, “At the conference in 1983, many African American women started to talk about their experiences. One woman stated that she thought that only white women were victims of abuse because “… That’s who I heard talk about it”” (Black Women’s Health Issues, Avery). This statement alone explains the relationship between Black women and the mainstream movement. The mainstream movement has been centered in the issues of white women; therefore, Black women are essentially being told their issues are not worth concern. Avery’s focus on self-help groups and educating Black women and girls on the issues that are unique to them is an effort to combat this specific issue of the mainstream movement. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that the ‘conspiracy of silence’ was ultimately a position enforced onto Black women and does not reflect one’s feelings or actions.

WOMEN’S MOVEMENT

Since enslavement Black women have been told what to do regarding their bodies. After emancipation, Black women were told what to do with their bodies by both the mainstream movement and Black liberation movement. Avery expands on the “conspiracy of silence” in her article “African American Women for Reproductive Freedom.” She points the finger at two different forces. First, because Black women have been told what to do for so long, the belief that “African American women can’t think for
themselves, and therefore, can’t be allowed to make serious decisions” (African American Women for Reproductive Freedom) has become a common myth within the pro-life, anti-abortion movement, and mainstream movement. Black women not being taken seriously in the mainstream movement is a valid concern, that can be supported by referencing the lack of concern over issues such as, sterilization, HIV/AIDS, infant mortality, Black mother mortality, abortion access etc. At the foundation of these issues specific to Black women is the denial of choice. Avery expresses the consequences if Black women continue to live under the conspiracy of silence stating, “… when women are forced to make choices without protection — the coat hangers and knitting needles that punctured the wombs of women forced to seek back-alley abortions on kicking tables at the hands of butchers. The women who died screaming in agony, awash in their own blood. The women who were made sterile. All the women who endured the pain of makeshift surgery with no anesthetics, risked fatal infection.”

In the same article Avery is critical of both the pro-life and anti-abortion movement. The pro-life movement was created as a response to the women’s movement and Reproductive Justice movement. We see the idea of pro-life being promoted in the past within religion, politics, and legislative decisions. Avery points out, the hypocrisy that exudes from the pro-life movement stating, “They’re not out there fighting to break the stranglehold of drugs and violence in our communities, trying to save our children, or moving to provide infant and material nutrition and health programs. Eradicating poverty isn’t on their agenda. No – somebody’s too busy picketing, vandalizing, and sometimes bombing family planning clinics, harassing women, and denying funds to poor women
seeking abortions” (African American Women for Reproductive Freedom). Avery argues the same people who claim to be pro-life have not contributed to the safety and well-being of Black women that are alive. Identifying as pro-life while being solely concerned about Black women getting abortions suggest a misogynistic and racial agenda.

Avery believes that the anti-abortion movement is a worldwide issue. The women who are directly physically and psychologically affected by it are Black women and women with low incomes (The Next Step, Avery). In Avery’s “The Next Step” paper, she argues the mainstream women’s movement should be concerned with the anti-abortion movement because it will first restrict abortion access for low-income women and Black women but, it will soon affect all women. Avery states, “We know that many women don’t have illegal abortion in their histories. The pain, the deaths, the toils and risks women before them suffered have failed to make an impression” (The Next Step).

Additionally, Avery recognizes the mainstream women’s movement has not included all women in the movement; therefore, they are unfamiliar with the gruesome affects anti-abortion laws can have on women. The mainstream women’s movement must respond to the anti-abortion movement regardless of what demographic of women is currently being affected, because an attack on one woman is a potential attack on all women.

Another aspect of Avery’s critiques includes her discourse around trustworthy education. She connects the myth that Black women do not care or are silent about reproductive health issues to the false information that is published on behalf of the mainstream women’s movement. In a magazine article published by Avery she explains the
frustration she felt when she realized how the issues that Black women experience were being ignored by the mainstream movement. She expresses “First, I wanted to do an hour-long presentation on Black women’s health issues, so I started my research. I got all the books, and I was shocked at what I saw. I was angry – angry that the people who wrote these books didn’t put it into a format that made sense to us, angry that nobody was saying anything to Black women or to black men” (Avery papers). The lack of information that centers the issues of Black women was astonishing to Avery and ultimately inspired the NBWHP self-help groups and the First Conference on Black Women’s Health Issues in 1983.

Avery continues by stating, “When sisters take their shoes off and start talking about what’s happening, the first thing we cry about is violence. The violence of our lives. And if you look in statistic books, they mention violence in one paragraph. They don’t even give numbers, because they can’t count it: the violence is too pervasive” (Avery Papers). Avery uses the example of violence that Black women endure and the lack of discourse around the issue to expose a larger problem. The U.S. Department of Justice released their 1983 violent crimes report which included rape and assault, the findings suggest Black women were victims of violent crimes at a higher rate than white women or members of other minority groups (US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics). The issues that Black women are facing can be attributed to racism, sexism, and classism but the education provided to Black women and on behalf of the issues Black women face is astonishingly insufficient. In result Black women are silenced, their issues are ignored, and the blame is directed to us.
The threat of the anti-abortion movement is not limited to picketing, vandalizing, or other forms of direct physical altercations. Anti-abortion ideology is rooted in legislation and rhetoric produced by the United States government. Avery spends most of her article “Reproductive Choices and The Scarlet Letter” to critique the Reagan administration and their hypocrisy. The concept of choice is an idea that has been heavily restricted by our government since its foundation and is maintained through legislation. During enslavement Black women’s bodies were controlled, and although enslavement has ended, the efforts to control Black women’s bodies is maintained. Avery discusses how the Reagan administration advocated in support of the pro-life movement while simultaneously cutting reproductive health resources. She continues to question the goal of the pro-life rhetoric by asking, “How could a concern about the right to life not use influence to help provide adequate prenatal care for all families? How could a concern for a right to life not include in its agenda a plan to end homelessness and hunger among its population? How could a concern for right to life constantly state that there are no babies to adopt when millions of children have no homes? What babies are they talking about” (Reproductive Choices and The Scarlet Letter, Avery)? The hypocrisy that Avery points out argues that the pro-life movement, which includes the government, is not concerned with life, they are concerned with controlling Black women’s ability to make a choice. The hypocrisy of the Reagan administration can be observed through his letter addressed
to Congress titled “Message to the Congress Transmitting the Pro-Life Act of 1988”. In this letter Reagan proposes the “President’s Pro-Life Act of 1988” he urges the passing of this measure by stating “This important legislation carries out my commitment to protect the rights of unborn children by prohibiting any Federal dollars from being used to fund abortion unless a mother’s life would be physically endangered by carrying the fetus to term” (*Message to the Congress Transmitting the Pro-Life Act of 1988*, Reagan). The Pro-Life Act measure supports Avery’s argument which is that the government is more concerned with the unborn, then they are with supporting the health and well-being of women.

Throughout Avery’s work she addresses the conspiracy of silence, the hypocrisies within the anti-abortion and pro-life movement, and the lack of correct educational information from the mainstream movement. One can find similarities between the mainstream women’s movement and the anti-abortion movement. The anti-abortion movement aims to control the choices of Black women through legislation and protests while the mainstream women’s movement essentially ignored the issues of Black women. Their tactics are different but both are aiding in the suppression of Black women’s voice and ability to achieve Reproductive Justice. The information that Avery has provided establishes why the NBWHP as a grassroots organization separated themselves from the mainstream women’s movement. The NBWHP broke the conspiracy of silence, created useful educational resources, and provided a space where Reproductive Justice was accessible to Black women.
Loretta Ross took a broader approach when achieving Reproductive Justice. She focused on combining the Reproductive Justice movement with the Black Lives Matter movement, making her grassroots efforts focused on Human Rights education.

Additionally, Ross recognizes the isolating position that Black women experience in the United States. Her Human Rights approach is examined with her attendance to the International Conference on Population and Development in Nairobi, Kenya. I will be analyzing a handful of individual pieces published directly by Ross, as well as papers she published while working with NOW, and the NBWHP. Ross’s critiques of the mainstream women’s movement explore how it lacks understanding of the issues that Black women face, utilizes tokenism, and its overall inability to treat Black women as equal members within the movement.

Ross believes Black women face a “triple burden of oppression” due to our racial, gendered, and economic position in society (Black Women: Why Feminism, Ross). Ross encourages Black women to organize despite the isolation and alienation from the Black liberation movement and the women’s liberation movement. In tandem with this encouragement, she also recognizes multiple reasons why Black women would not want to work with the mainstream women’s movement. First, Black women do not feel as though the feminist or women’s movement clearly combats issues that Black women experience, leading Black women to feel it is unnecessary to join the movement.
Secondly, Ross points to the distribution of power within the women’s movement, which has created both a class and race problem. In May 1981 Loretta Ross published a paper titled “Black Women: Why Feminism?” In this paper she states, “Even though Black women did become involved from the beginning, they were often repelled by the reproduction of the racist and classist tendencies in the feminist movement inherited from the larger society. The participation of Black women in this movement has been characterized by racism and struggles for power”. Ross made it clear that for Black women to willingly enter the mainstream movement, white women must confront the movement’s racist past and find a solution to the power dynamic that centralizes white women in the movement.

While attending the 9th Annual Anti-Rape Week POWER Panel in 1987, Ross gave a speech titled “Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement”. She took a unique position on the current condition of the women’s movement, suggesting that it was moving too fast without accounting for all women. She explained that because the movement was centered on white women issues, it was forgetting about issues that were still affecting Black women. For example, to effectively include Black women into the women’s movement access to safe abortions and contraception needs to consistently be at the forefront of issues. New technologies such as surrogacy should still be in discourse, but one must not lose focus on basic issues. Although contraception and access to abortion is a freedom that many women have, to include all women in the mainstream women’s movement you must not move past issues that Black women and women with low incomes are still struggling to receive.
Because the demographics of NOW suggest a predominantly white organization, it is of importance to discuss Ross’ critiques of NOW. These include the group’s inherent racism, tokenism, middle class membership demographic, and recruiting style. In the article titled “BLacks AND FEminists A Long, Tentative Partnership” published in 1986 Ross discusses the shift in membership demographic. She explains that NOW was founded in 1966 as a NAACP for women and it included many prominent Black women members such as Fannie Lou Hamer. Despite that beginning, Ross explains that NOW was currently an organization that was filled with membership from middle class white women. In addition to membership demographic Ross explains that NOW was becoming mainstream and growing “while a large portion of the Black movement was deteriorating (due to assassination, subversion, and internal wrangling) (which) gave rise to the perception that the women’s movement had caused the decline of the Black movement and that white women were going to reap the benefits the Black movement had sown” (BLACK AND FEMINISTS A Long, Tentative Partnership, Ross). The statement made by Ross alludes to the hesitancy and lack of trust between Black women and the mainstream women’s movement. Surveys that were conducted in 1988 showed 87% of Black women while only 67% of white women were in support of the Equal Rights Amendment. Despite Black women supporting feminist initiatives they felt unwelcome
into NOW, due to the white middle class orientation additionally, Black people blamed organizations like NOW for deteriorating the Black movement.

Ross expands on the inherent racism that NOW and other mainstream women’s organizations were not acknowledging in multiple newspaper articles. In 1987 the New York Times published an article titled “Reporter’s Notebook: NOW Bracing to Stop Bork” in this article Ross is interviewed and critiques the inadequate effort of NOW to include Black women in their organization. She describes their strategy to include Black women as the “scatter-gun approach” and continues by stating, “It’s not good enough to have a brown face or black face in a picture if she’s just there to add color, (NOW) must fight the tendency to tokenism” (Reporter’s Notebook: NOW Bracing to Stop Bork). This statement is directed at the efforts of NOW but can be used to describe the entire mainstream movement. If the mainstream movement is serious about including Black women they must treat Black women as equals, and not as a method to check off their diversity quota. In The Boston Phoenix newspaper Ross published an article titled “Women” on July 9th, 1993. Ross provides guidance to her NOW colleagues, explaining that Black women want “genuine outreach” (Women, Ross). Although these words appear simple, genuine outreach is what the mainstream movement had been missing. Despite our rich history of organizational leadership, Black women are treated as a liability rather than an asset to the women’s movement.

To effectively conclude this portion of discussing NOW one must be aware of the solutions that Ross has provided her organization. On August 4th, 1988, Loretta Ross
published a manuscript titled “NOW And Women of Color” to her colleagues. In this text she establishes the two largest issues that NOW was facing, racism and recruiting. Within this text she explains the efforts made by NOW to recognize the inherit racism of the organization and steps to becoming anti-racist. To combat the inherit racism of the organization she cites NOW’s sponsorship of anti-racist conferences, reproductive rights forums, and participation in “survival” issues such as basic reproductive rights, employment, and affordable housing (NOW and Women of Color, Ross). Additionally, she describes how NOW has shifted its focus from recruiting to attracting. Ross’s goal of shifting the focus from, recruiting Black women to attracting Black women due to its practices, goals, and values is a tactic that exudes a genuine intention.

Ross then provided her colleagues with a document focused on how NOW could attract Black women rather than recruit them. This document included three objectives: “the elimination of racism within NOW, attraction of more women of color into NOW’s ranks; and tapping into the feminist majority of women of color in America to support NOW’s agendas” (NOW and Women of Color, Ross). To eliminate racism within the organization they created the Combatting Racism Committee in 1986. This committee mainly focused on providing accurate history regarding the Black women who had been involved in NOW, combatting institutional racism, and connecting global feminism with struggles that women of Color experienced in the United States. She also included information about how engaging in projects that concern Black women such as hair discrimination, housing discrimination, and reproductive rights will attract Black women to join NOW. Despite the effort to implement anti-racist programmatic changes within
NOW, Black women have recognized the mainstream women’s hesitancy to becoming anti-racist. Angela Davis in her book *Women, Race, and Class* discusses her point of contention with the mainstream women’s movement stating, “Birth control—individual choice, safe contraceptive methods, as well as abortions when necessary— is a fundamental prerequisite for the emancipation of women. Since the right to birth control is obviously advantageous to women of all classes and races, it would appear that even vastly dissimilar women’s groups would have attempted to unite around this issue. In reality, however, the birth control movement has seldom succeeded in uniting women of different social backgrounds, and rarely have the movement’s leaders popularized the genuine concerns of working-class women. Moreover, arguments advanced by birth control advocates have sometimes been based on blatantly racist premises”.

NBWHP

While working with the NBWHP Ross asserts a new critique which leads to why Black women feel isolated from the women’s movement. One of the reasons Black women are hesitant to join the mainstream women’s movement is because it does not address the basic human rights that only Black women and women with low incomes are being denied. Ross published a paper titled “Black Women and Reproductive Rights” in this paper she illustrates the fact, Black women and low-income women have been neglected and poorly serviced for so long, they are in a constant state of survival. Denial of proper reproductive health resources has led to issues such as homelessness, substance abuse,
unemployment, and violence. This paper suggests that Reproductive Justice affects Black and low-income women incredibly different than those who are at the center of mainstream movement. Supporting the critique that Black women in many ways are in a state of survival, and do not want to join a movement that has no concern with their safety and wellbeing.

INTERNATIONAL

As an effort to demand respect and challenge the mainstream movement she encourages Black women and grassroots organizations to broaden their network scope. A great example of this is the 1985 World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women when Ross and over 1,000 Black women traveled to Nairobi, Kenya to meet with about 7,000 women from Africa, and 800 Black women from the surrounding diaspora. The conference supported the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa during daily press conferences. It hosted rallies with women from Kenya, Zimbabwe, Egypt, Soviet Union, United States, etc. regarding the issues and experiences of women from a global perspective. And held over 100 workshops available to those in attendance with topics ranging from “Working Class Women of Color”, “Anti-Apartheid Work in the U.S.”, “African Women in America” etc. In an independent paper titled “Black Women Challenge the Women’s Movement” published in December 1985, Ross reflects on the conference stating, “Black women in the U.S. must utilize our collective power and challenge the U.S. women’s movement to change its agenda--to recognize us as an underdeveloped sector of American society and place our needs firmly
at the top of their priorities. No longer will we tolerate U.S. women ignoring our underdevelopment while romanticizing the plight of our sisters in Africa” (Black Women Challenge the Women’s Movement, Ross).

Unsatisfied with the mainstream women’s movement and the lack of genuine attempt to include Black women, Ross and other Black women took their efforts to Kenya. Focused on building unity with other women of color, learning about international women’s issues, and discussing plans of action despite cultural differences were ultimately the goals of the conference. This international effort, exemplifies the ability of Black women in the U.S. to create a movement that is separate from the white women’s movement, centered on Black women’s issues locally, nationally, and internationally. Despite Ross aiding the women’s movement to become anti-racist and more inclusive for Black women, she supports expanding the Reproductive Justice movement to Africa to gain support and form community with other women of the African diaspora.

Through the work of Loretta Ross one can understand how racism and classicism within the mainstream women’s movement has isolated and unwelcome Black women to join the movement. Not understanding the issues that Black women face, the utilization of tokenism, and overall inability to treat Black women as equal members within the movement all are critiques that Ross establishes. On behalf of the Nairobi conference Ross states, “We challenged the U.S. government in its attempt to stifle our militancy. We challenged women in our own ranks to forge bond of unity to cross barriers of class and age to achieve common goals. And we changed forever the course of the
international women’s movement by our collective impact on the Nairobi conference” (Black Women Challenge the Women’s Movement, Ross). The decision by Ross and other Black women to take their organizational efforts internationally is an act of resistance and proves Black women can create an effective Reproductive Justice movement, outside of the United States mainstream women’s movement.

DR. BOND

Dr. Bond has made tremendous efforts specifically in Chicago, Illinois to achieve Reproductive Justice. Dr. Bond’s work critiques of the mainstream Women’s Movement allow present and future leaders to learn why many Black women are hesitant to enter the movement. Dr. Bond provides a particularly unique perspective due to her background in religion. Therefore, her defining the key issues when achieving Reproductive Justice for Black women were not just focused on the mainstream women’s movement; rather, they include Black leaders, Black media, and the Black church as well. I am including her critiques on various Black people and institutions because I believe it emphasizes the point that Black women have been in a position where decisions regarding their bodies are heavily criticized. Black women feel unwelcome by the mainstream Women’s Movement and they feel heavily judged by outspoken Black people. Dr. Bond makes a powerful sentiment regarding what Black women are up against in her *Barriers Between Black Women and the Reproductive Rights Movement* article, “women of color organizations are expected to develop and implement amazing programs, do massive
grassroots organizing, incorporate the perspectives of all women of color into one homogeneous and unified voice, do legislative advocacy work, public education, and recruitment and leadership development all on budgets of only a couple of hundred thousand dollars” (Barriers Between Black Women and the Reproductive Rights Movement, Dr. Bond pages 3-4). I include this statement made by Dr. Bond to emphasize the critiques made by her are not with ill intent, rather they are to create awareness and recognize the exhaustion that comes with being a Black woman trying to organize within the mainstream women’s movement.

THE MAINSTREAM MOVEMENT

Dr. Bond makes various points regarding why Black women are hesitant to join the mainstream Women’s Movement. The first point Dr. Bond makes is that the movement does not adequately address the issues that Black women are facing, she explains that abortion is not the only issue within Reproductive Justice, yet that is the only aspect being addressed due to the concern white women have with the issue. She states, “As one of the few black women working in reproductive rights, this separation of the issues impacts my own personal life as I constantly work to balance my belief in reproductive autonomy, family, community and what it means to be a Black woman in a movement where White women continue to be at the forefront” (Barriers Between Black Women and the Reproductive Rights Movement, Dr. Bond pg.1). Looking at Dr. Bond’s life we can see as a child she was sexually assaulted, she then devotes her entire life to various
organizational efforts such as BWRJ, SisterSong, and CAF. Although Dr. Bond has devoted her life to achieving Reproductive Justice for Black women and has been recognized through awards for her efforts, she argues white women continue to be in the center of the women’s movement discourse.

Within this article Dr. Bond also recognizes that the mainstream Women’s Movement has made efforts to create programs within their white led organizations that are focused on engaging Black women and women of Color. However, these efforts for the most part have failed, and Dr. Bond explains that “They (white women) cannot figure out how to communicate with women of color and low-income women in a way that will make them want to be a part of this movement. There is a certain amount of irony behind the fact that this brilliant group of female activists actually sits in meetings and complains that they have tried everything to build relationships with women of color but still, to no avail their invitations are ignored” (BBBWRRM, Bond, page 3). This issue, that women within the mainstream Women’s Movement are facing is not because Black women are careless or unaware of these issues; rather, Dr. Bond explains these leaders lack the ability to converse with Black women and low-income women. Because of this, the feeling of “invited guest” has been manifested through organizations within the mainstream women’s movement. Furthermore, the inability to effectively communicate with Black women and women with low incomes is paired with what Dr. Bond describes as “an inherent lack of understanding and sensitivity to the reproductive health issues confronting Black women” (Barriers Between Black Women and the Reproductive Rights Movement, Dr. Bond pg. 4). Black women’s reproductive issues do not end with
abortion access other prominent issues include HIV/AIDS, STI’s (Chlamydia, PID, Bacterial Vaginosis, and Cervical Cancer), Breast Cancer, access to contraceptive methods, and access to well-woman care (Access to Reproductive Health, Nov. 8th 2004, Bond). The lack of broad understanding of how different women have different reproductive needs is crucial to understanding why Black women feel unwelcome in the mainstream women’s movement.

October 2003 was an important time for women in the United States, because preparation for the National March for “Freedom of Choice” was in full swing. Dr. Bond released a manuscript titled, *A Solidarity Statement from SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective*. It is with this public manuscript that Dr. Bond highly encouraged Black women and women of Color to take part in the historical 2004 National March. However, with this encouragement to participate she also provided a list of four demands on behalf of SisterSong. The demands included purposeful inclusion of diverse voices for the march’s decision making, the priority of women of Color making decisions for other women of Color, a reanalysis of narrow and exclusionary language within the mainstream movement’s framework, and an improved understanding of various access issues that affect predominately women of Color. Why did I include these demands within the critique portion of my thesis? Because in the same manuscript Dr. Bond states, “Who will define the Women of Color agenda? We must be the ones to proactively define exactly what we need from this movement instead of having it decided for us” (*A Solidarity Statement from SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective* Dr. Bond). Black women and other Women of Color would not be included and their
issues accurately represented in the mainstream Women’s Movement without Black women having to demand their issues be taken seriously. Black leaders such as Dr. Bond are in a difficult position, understanding that the Women’s Movement march is imperative to the struggle of Reproductive Justice for Black women, but also recognizing the mainstream movement has hardly included Black women and recognized their issues. Providing this list of demands while also showing support for the movement provides grounds for the reader to believe that Dr. Bond is critical but open to working with the mainstream Women’s Movement.

BLACK LEADERSHIP

Highlighting Dr. Bond’s critique on the mainstream Women’s Movement is incredibly important; however, including her critiques on Black leaders, the Black church, and Black media is also imperative to understand the unique and isolating position of Black women in the Reproductive Justice movement. I will be discussing three different public letters written by Dr. Bond and published by the Black Women for Reproductive Justice organization, to explore some of these critiques.

In a press conference statement published on September 23, 2010, Dr. Bond directly critiques Alveda King, niece of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., due to her outspoken anti-abortion rhetoric, as well as her support of the anti-abortion conservative movement. Dr. Bond states, “Alveda King’s profane attempts to turn the black community against Black
women clearly shows she is willing to trade the dignity and human rights of Black women and the larger Black community for her own personal gain. Her offensive remarks about Black women’s right to reproductive integrity and her offensive anti-gay marriage rhetoric makes it evident that she has allowed herself to become a pawn of the conservative right-wing movement” (Black Women for Reproductive Justice, Press Conference Statement, Dr. Bond). In my research thus far, I had yet to observe Dr. Bond show such distaste for the opposing movement. I believe it is both King’s connection to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as well as King’s experience as being a Black woman that manifested such an intense critique. In response to Alveda King and other outspoken Black and white leaders, Black Women for Reproductive Justice joined the Trust Black Women campaign to support Black women and girls in their struggle for Reproductive Justice. Dr. Bond continues to point out issues of Alveda King’s rhetoric stating, “We will not fall for, or stand silently by while those who are against human rights attempt to divide the Black community around reproductive and sexual justice issues. Alveda King does not trust us to make our decisions and she is attacking us for making decisions about our reproductive lives” (BWRJ Press Conference Statement, Bond).

Dr. Bond’s final remarks in this press conference are critical as she states, “Alveda King and her cohorts do not speak for all Black women. They do not hold the moral and spiritual authority over Black women’s bodies or lives. Ours is a righteous indignation at yet another effort to rob us of our self-determination and to divide the Black community. We do not consent and we will not be silent” (Black Women for Reproductive Justice, Press Conference, Bond). This statement is powerful especially if one reflects on the
divide that has already been created between the mainstream Women’s Movement and Reproductive Justice. The point of contention between Alveda King and the Reproductive Justice movement suggests a divide between Black women and conservative Black people.

In the same year of 2010 Dr. Bond published a manuscript announcing her organizations name change from African American Women Evolving to Black Women for Reproductive Justice. In this same manuscript she lists the various programs that Black Women for Reproductive Justice would be offering. Programs included “Pretty Girl Beauty Initiative,” “Don’t Get Caught Up, Wrap it Up,” “Safer Sex Educational Experiences,” “Health Education, and Sexuality Awareness and Women in Worship.” All these programs focused on educating Black women, girls, and men on Reproductive Justice topics. However, the “Health Education, and Sexuality Awareness” program stood out to me. Dr. Bond explains that this program was working to “forge critical relationships with the Black church in order to move them to be more responsive to the reproductive health needs of the Black women who comprise the majority of many of their congregations” (Black Women for Reproductive Justice, Dr. Bond). This program does not pose a direct critique of the Black church but insinuates a problem needs to be solved. Like Alveda King, the Black church was highly critical of the Reproductive Justice movement, without recognizing many of their members are Black women. This issue proves Black women’s isolation from the mainstream Women’s Movement as well as their isolation from common places, such as the church. Providing a solution to this
issue Dr. Bond and the Black Women for Reproductive Justice created the “Sexuality Awareness and Women in Worship” to attempt to gain support from the Black church.

Although efforts were made by Dr. Bond to improve the relationship between the Black church and Reproductive Justice, during 2022 she gave a lecture titled “Loosening Our Tongues: Black Women, Sexuality, and the Black Church”. During this lecture Dr. Bond identified six themes she found through her research on how Reproductive Justice is still poorly received by the Black church. Those themes included the sinfulness of sexuality, reproductive sin and reproductive loss, promoting patriarchy, respectability norms, the church and the black body, and experiences of God, religion, and the church. After identifying these six themes she argued that Black women and girls often experience extreme guilt and alienation from the Black church when expressing their right to reproductive freedom, due to the fear of sin. During her lecture she also argues that there is a need for “deeper examination of this residual shame and guilt that’s often internalized due to oppressive theology teachings about human sexuality and reproduction.” Dr. Bond identifies that the main issue within the Black church is the guilt and shame that is manifested through theological teachings. This lecture suggests that the relationship between the Black church and Black women and girls suffers, because of the ideology around conservative Christian morality.

The final critique made by Dr. Bond, that I will be addressing, is that of mainstream media. Specifically, her response to continuous insulting comments made about Black women in sports, by commentators between the years of 1996 to 2007. Dr. Bond refers to
over ten comments made by sports commentators that call Black women “nappy-headed hos,” “Jigaboos,” “national geographic” material, “tough monkeys” as well as comparing them to male athletes. Although, these statements were made by white men Dr. Bond creates multiple points with her response. First, she argues that Black women have been disrespected and degraded by white men for much of history. Secondly, she makes it known that these comments and attitudes towards Black women are due to society not viewing Black women as deserving of respect. She ends her response with a bold statement regarding mainstream media, “Women, women of color, have been reduced to serving as distorted caricatures used to further the financial agendas of record labels. The financial support by some in the Black community of many of these artists by purchasing their music makes us co-conspirators in the oppression of all women. The negative images of women must stop on all fronts. It is just as degrading when Black men call us bitches and whores. We must be consistent and diligent in calling out all forms of disrespect from any and everyone” (Imus, McGuirk, and Rosenberg Need to Feel the Consequence of Their Racist and Sexist Comments, Dr. Bond). Dr. Bond blames not only the white men for these racist and sexist comments but also points her finger at a larger issue, being that Black communities continue to support celebrities that disrespect and degrade Black women. Although, this example Dr. Bond is not directly addressing Reproductive Justice, she is suggesting that it is through the countless acts of disrespect against Black women that go unacknowledged, that the isolation of Black women in the Reproductive Justice movement is manifested and maintained.
I have discussed a few of Dr. Bond’s critiques of the mainstream Women’s Movement. First, the mainstream movement does not adequately address issues that are unique to Black women, because of this, Black women and other women of Color have created smaller grassroots organizations to adequately address issues within their communities. Secondly, mainstream organizations within the Women’s Movement do not know how to converse with women of Color and women with low incomes, which creates what Dr. Bond describes as an “invited guest” relationship between Black women and women within mainstream organizations. Finally, she critiques a poor attempt made by mainstream organizations to truly understand Black women in our struggle for Reproductive Justice, this lack of understanding only further divides all women. It is clear through Dr. Bond’s public support of Black women participating in the National Women’s March that she recognizes the importance of incorporating Black women’s struggle in large-scale events. However, her critiques support the idea that grassroots organizing is the most effective form of organizing for Black women, low-income women, and women of Color, because it is with grassroots organizing where white women are not at the center of discourse. Providing an opportunity for all women to be heard and their issues be supported.

I have also explored multiple critiques on Black leadership, the Black church, and even Black community members to explain the isolation that Black women feel from their own people. My hopes, that with this information one can understand why the authentic needs and support of Black women in the Reproductive Justice movement, is imperative to the achievement of Reproductive Justice for all women.
CHAPTER THREE
IMPLEMENTATION OF GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING

When one learns about the history of Reproductive Justice, the efforts made by Black women tend to go unacknowledged. Issues that are specific to Black women have gone unnoticed due to the mainstream women’s movement being overpowered by white women and men. The use of grassroots organizing has been a strategy that Black women leaders have used in order to create a collective Reproductive Justice movement that holds the issues Black women encounter at the center of discourse and decision making. Grassroots organizing can be described as “collective action from the local level to implement change at the local, regional, national, or international levels” (Undivided Rights, Ross). Grassroots organizing provides an opportunity for communities to work as a collective and engage in issues that are important to them. Grassroots organizing is an essential component in the Reproductive Justice movement, because the mainstream movement has historically been centered in the issues of white women. This method of organizing can be achieved through different practices, working at the local and regional level, advocating at the national level, and even learning internationally.
I specifically chose Byllye Avery, Loretta Ross, and Dr. Toni Leonard Bond to analyze because of their utilization of different forms of grassroots organizing. Through their experiences, beliefs, and independent work their efforts make discourse around grassroots organizing both interesting and educational for future leaders. Grassroots organizing is extremely authentic because it allows leaders to truly understand the issues within their communities and create direct action plans that address those issues head on. Individually, the mainstream movement addresses the issues of a privileged group of women; therefore, I believe that without grassroots organizing Reproductive Justice for all women would not be achievable.

Byllye Avery is known as one of the pioneers of the Reproductive Justice movement due to the National Black Women’s Health Project (NBWHP) which she founded in 1984. Prior to the NBWHP she founded the Women’s Health Center and Birthplace in Gainesville, Georgia but she quickly realized there was a disconnect between the services she was providing and the demographic of her patients. She has since spent her time in grassroots organizing focusing on the health of Black women and supporting other grassroots organizers in order to achieve Reproductive Justice and improve the overall health of Black women. Avery created a nationally recognized organization with the National Black Women’s Health Project that still was considered a grassroots organization. In a letter addressed to the public Avery states the purpose of the National
Black Women’s Health Project, “The National Black Women’s Health Project is a self-help and health advocacy organization that is committed to improving the overall health status of Black Women. The core program of the NBWHP is based on the concept and practice of self-help and the inclusion of all African American women, with a special focus on Black women living on low income” (National Black Women’s Health Project Public Education/ Policy Office, Avery). I will be exploring four different efforts made by Byllye Avery, for the reader to understand how grassroots organizing can help achieve Reproductive Justice. Avery’s efforts range from providing public education, organizing conferences, implementing self-help groups, and supporting other organizational events.

A consistent aspect within Byllye Avery’s work is her focus on educating Black women on anything and everything health related. In letters titled “Public Education” Avery provided all members of NBWHP with current event issues, reproductive injustices, and information on other health related topics. Looking specifically at one of her public letters titled “Health Status of African American Women” she details the Rust versus Sullivan case and what the implications of that decision had on Black women stating, “By a vote of 5-4, the court upheld Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) regulations forbidding family planning programs that receive federal Title X funds from engaging in any abortion-related activity, including making referrals to abortion services upon direct request of a client” (NBWHP Legislative Alert, Avery). Black women being aware of laws that regulate autonomy of their bodies is an essential aspect to their future decision making; therefore, Avery’s public educational letters are imperative to her effective grassroots education efforts. Her emphasis on educating Black women
continues when she released a public education letter titled “Abortion and African American Women”. This paper included an easily understood bullet point list of Black women and abortion statistics. One of those statistics was, “Because Black women experience unintended pregnancies 2 ½ times more often than white women, they are twice as likely to have abortions” (Public Education Abortion and African American Women, Avery). Although this statistic may seem basic to some readers, it may spark conversation about contraception, abortion access, etc. amongst community members. The public education letters also included information about general health, reproductive abuse, cancer, public funding, etc. The concept of public education often goes overlooked, and mainstream leaders wonder why resources are not being adequately utilized. Avery providing proper education to her members, asserts a foundation of knowledge that unfortunately, Black women may have never received.

Avery’s effort educating at the grassroots level continues when she and other members of NBWHP produced the documentary titled “On Becoming a Woman: Mothers and Daughters Talking Together”. The documentary is a conversation amongst eight Black mothers and eight Black daughters and is broken into three different sections. The first section is about the experience of getting a period, the second section is about contraception, birth control and anatomy, and the third section is about developing communication styles amongst Black mothers and daughters to effectively converse about sex and resources. This unique educational piece engages with the lives of Black women and girls and spreads awareness about different reproductive topics that many women haven’t discussed in a public setting. As I learned more about the different
strategies Avery utilized when attempting to achieve grassroots organizing, it was clear that she understood, Black women have been ignored for so long; therefore, one must start at the very beginning. Providing basic education and a safe space for Black women and girls to have a honest conversation, where their voices aren’t being overshadowed by the mainstream women’s movement, is exactly what Avery and the NBWHP created with this film.

In addition to the public educational letters provided to NBWHP members and the documentary provided to the public, Avery also organized a multitude of national conferences. As I analyzed Byllye Avery’s archives she highlighted three different conferences that she both organized and participated in, the First National Conference on Black Women’s Health Issues in 1983, the Second National Conference on Black Women’s Health Issues in 1990 and the Seventh Annual Conference in 1993. It is with these three conferences that one can explore Avery’s expansive but still grassroots focused organizing.

The First National Conference on Black Women’s Health Issues was June 24-26\textsuperscript{th}, 1983 at Spelman College. The conference was dedicated to activist and freedom fighter Fannie Lou Hamer, who coined the term “I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired”. This conference included a handful of workshops, keynote speakers, and model programs. Workshops included but were not limited to, “Black Women as Healers and Midwives: Then and Now”, “Black Women and Self-Esteem”, “Hope Is Not a Method: Birth Control Information”, “Natural Childbirth and Breastfeeding”, “Abortion: Genocide or A
Women’s Choice”, “The Black Adolescent and Her Pregnancy”, “Black Infant Mortality-It can be Reduced”, etc. All these topics were relevant to the Black women and girls in attendance, the conference provided an opportunity for questions to be asked, conversations amongst those in attendance, and for Black women to leave with a better understanding of Reproductive Justice. The Second National Conference on Black Women’s Health Issues on June 25-30th, 1990 was in Atlanta, Georgia. This conference had a similar structure and outcome; however, the slogan of the event was “Empowerment Through Wellness”. This slogan I believe reflects Avery’s educational efforts. It is important to remember, these conferences were before the term Reproductive Justice was created; therefore, Avery was providing Black women critically important reproductive information before the term became mainstream. She is a pioneer.

Avery’s ability to bring Black women together and discuss reproductive health issues is a great example of effective grassroots organizing. Although the impact of this event on individual woman is not documented, the St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church sent a letter to Avery after the first conference. The letter includes congratulations, it notes Avery’s efforts as noble and worthy, and ends by stating “St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church, Jacksonville, FL pledge our support to this worthy endeavor. Please add our name to your mailing list for continued support” (St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church James M. Proctor). This letter proves Avery’s ability to successfully combine the issues that are disproportionately affecting Black women who have low incomes with an educational event, specifically addressing their issues.
The final educational event I will be discussing is The National Black Women’s Health Project 7th Annual Conference on July 16-18th, 1993. The focus of this conference was *Body and Soul: The Black Women’s Health Agenda*. After years of conferences focused on education this conference was focused on creating a “national and global health agenda for Black women” (NBWHP 7th Annual Conference). One can observe how Avery and the NBWHP evolve their organization, first focusing on educating Black women and girls and slowly expanding to create legislative changes based off the issues they witnessed in the beginning. This conference included four days of workshops and keynote speakers discussing reproductive and health related topics. One workshop was titled “A Global Perspective” and is described as “African Women in the Diaspora- Are the forces of culture and religion stronger than genetics and tradition? Black women from the Caribbean, South America, North America, and the Continent will dialogue about stereotypes and myths across cultures and examine our similarities and our common agenda” (NBWHP 7th Annual Conference page 6). This workshop supports the expansiveness of the 7th annual Conference. A theme throughout my research was the hesitancy to enter the mainstream women’s movement and work with white women. Working internationally with Black women to understand the Reproductive struggle creates community and empowers Black women to continue to fight against Reproductive Injustices, without having to enter directly into the United States’ mainstream women’s movement.

An important component of Byllye Avery’s efforts to achieve Reproductive Justice was the implementation of self-help groups in the National Black Women’s Health Project.
For the NBWHP self-help groups can be described as a safe place where Black women talk about life experiences, engage in action steps and gain support from other Black women. The goal of these groups is to empower Black women and increase their self-worth, well-being, and health (What is Self-Help, Avery). To grow the usage of self-help groups Byllye Avery led a “Self-Help Development Community Empowerment Training Session” in 1991. In this training Black women discussed how to implement self-help groups in their communities, and how to identify and develop community skills. Avery’s passion for Black women empowerment is showcased perfectly here. Training community members provides an opportunity for long term health education and a network of support to be maintained.

To further develop self-help groups Avery held a NBWHP Self-Help Summit Weekend in 1995. The goals of the summit were to understand how different chapters within NBWHP were implementing self-help groups at the grassroots level, and to create a collective self-help model for each chapter to share. The model addressed eleven questions that helped define principles, characteristics, and implementation strategies of NBWHP self-help groups. But why do Avery and the NBWHP value self-help groups specifically at the grassroots level so tremendously? In an article titled ‘Local Hero: Health Care for the Whole Woman’ Avery explains that she was continually meeting young Black women with health-related issues and realized that these women are expected to take care of their children and husbands and tend to forget about themselves (Local Hero: Health Care for the Whole Woman). Not all women have the privilege of daycare, flexible work hours, support systems, or access to healthcare which is exactly
why the implantation of self-helps groups at the grassroots level is important. Being that the NBWHP was the only national organization at the time that focused on the self-esteem of Black women and girls as a strategy to achieving Reproductive Justice and an increased overall health and wellness, Avery states, “As we start to feel better about ourselves, and when we know how we are, we start doing more of the things that we want to do. When we as women feel empowered, we start taking better care of ourselves. We go for our Pap smears; we examine our breasts” (Local Hero: Health Care for the Whole Woman). This statement explains exactly why Avery has made a large effort to engage Black women and girls in self-help groups. She recognizes that with conversation and support, confidence and empowerment will manifest which will lead to increased feeling of autonomy over one’s body.

As Avery continued to grow the National Black Women’s Health Project, she was also focusing on supporting other Black leaders. The March for Women’s Equality/ Women’s Lives was an event that the mainstream movement endorsed. However, Loretta Ross as the director of the Women of Color Program within NOW was actively trying to get Black women involved in this march. Avery, recognizing the value of Black women showing up for this march and making their presence known, strongly encouraged members of NBWHP to participate. In a 1989 letter addressed to the sisters of NBWHP, Avery expresses the value of member participation stating, “We are entering a phase that is crucial in our struggle to retain reproductive freedom. The conspiracy that threatens our right to make reproductive choices also threatens our survival as women. It is time for us to become visible and vocal about maintaining our rights. The National Black Women’s
Health Project validates and appreciates you for making a commitment to creating an awareness among sisters and organizing them to attend the March in Washington on April 9” (National Black Women’s Health Project, Avery). This support adds another layer to Avery’s grassroots organizing. I have explored her emphasis on education and self-help groups but now we observe her supporting NBWHP members being involved in the mainstream movement. I appreciate this letter by Avery because it exhibits the value of Black women in the mainstream movement and how through leaders like Avery, Black women at the grassroots level are made aware of these events.

Finally, I will be discussing an effort that I believe embodies Avery’s ability to value grassroots organizing, while advocating against the anti-abortionist movement. In a public letter written by Avery in 1991 titled ‘The Next Step’ she warns the public about the anti-abortion movement. After she cautions her readers, she then provides what she considers to be the next plan of action for NBWHP. First, she encourages membership growth and active member participation in order to continue to develop health reform. Secondly, she discusses the implementation of the Walking for Wellness Program. This program encourages Black men and women to engage in daily or weekly walks independently or with a group of people. In this letter she is also suggesting that the topic during these walks be Reproductive health related, to increase awareness. She ends this letter by powerfully stating, “The sleeping giant is arising. She is powerful. She carries the whole race upon her shoulders. Health care for all must be a right. The health status of one affects the whole……………” (The Next Step Avery page 3). While analyzing the work of Avery, it is impossible to ignore her efforts in improving the overall confidence
of Black women. This statement is not for the members of the NBWHP; however, it is a directed to anti-abortionist as a warning, that as Black women continue to increase our self-esteem and learn more about health and reproductive related issues, we will only become more powerful.

With the National Black Women’s Health Project, Avery has created an organization that can be studied in its entirety. She was able to consistently utilize grassroots organizing as a method to increase the health of Black women and educate them on how to achieve Reproductive Justice. Her educational conferences and film teach Black women and girls about health-related topics, increases self-awareness and dialogue amongst Black women. Her implementation of self-help groups empowered Black women to have full autonomy of their bodies and find support in each other. And her support of Black women to get involved in their community, and not rely on the mainstream movement to make choices for them, are all examples of how Bylyle Avery has pioneered the Reproductive Justice Movement through the utilization of grassroots organizing.

LORETTA ROSS

For many Black women Reproductive Justice is not only an idea but a lived experience. A valuable component within Loretta Ross’s career is her lived experiences with teen pregnancy, abortion, and sterilization. It is with these pivotal moments in her life she was able to cultivate a passionate career within the Reproductive Justice Movement. In Ross’s 1993 paper titled ‘Why A Black Woman Fights for Abortion Rights’ she explains her
decision to work within the women’s movement and the Black liberation movement and
details what it means to herself and other Black women fighting in the same struggle,
“We have an unwavering commitment to improve the quality of life for African
American women by ending racism, and poverty, and by advancing gender equality”
(Why A Black Woman Fights for Abortion Rights). This statement by Ross can be
supported through her work, because she recognizes Reproductive Justice as a broader
Human Rights issue; therefore, her work is not limited to Reproductive Justice it expands
to other issues that Black women face.

Loretta Ross, being one of the mothers of the Reproductive Justice framework, has an
array of organizations that she has contributed to or worked with throughout the years. In
this section I will be focusing on her work with the National Organization for Women
(NOW), National Black Women’s Health Project (NBWHP), SisterSong, and her
independent work. I chose these specific organizations because it is through them one can
begin to observe her belief in grassroots organizing. Loretta Ross worked with larger
organizations but she offered a unique perspective, which was insight and firmness to
include Black women while achieving Reproductive Justice.

The National Organization for Women (NOW) was founded in June of 1966 with a goal
of achieving women’s rights, civil rights, LGBTQ rights, and Reproductive rights. It
appears NOW had large participation; however, the participation was from primarily
white women. Loretta Ross became the director of the Women of Color Program within
NOW and participated in creating the 1979 organization’s updated goals. One of the
updated goals within the NOW framework was “Dramatically increase minority participation and action in NOW at all levels” (Organizational files of NOW page two). As this goal is described in more depth Loretta Ross is encouraging the organization to prioritize Black women and other women of color. The framework states, “Minorities and minority issues must be made an integral part of all NOW’s programs. There must be a systematic effort to include minority issues and people in NOW’s materials, brochures and pamphlets” (Organization files of NOW page seven). Ross is not only demanding the increased participation of Black women and other women of Color, but she is also encouraging updated educational tools that include information relative to Black women and women of Color. This is important when one considers a mainstream organization like NOW, and the amount of Black women’s issues that were being ignored prior to Loretta Ross’s intervention.

Additionally, the updated framework of NOW included a goal titled “Improve communication among all levels of NOW” (Organization files of NOW page ten). Within this goal Ross discusses that NOW pledged to prioritize quarterly debates that allows for all women to share issues, discuss current events, and plan future endeavors of NOW. Why is this important? Loretta Ross’s leadership within NOW supported the ability for all women to achieve Reproductive Justice, not just women who had the privilege of Reproductive Justice.

Like Byllye Avery, Loretta Ross values the utilization of self-help groups. Self-help groups for Black women are described by Loretta Ross as “a supportive environment in
which Black women learn to come together to be truthful, supportive and validating of each other’s personal experiences and life choices. Any Black woman, regardless of educational or economic background, can enhance the quality of her life, her family and community by organizing for personal and group health” (Loretta Ross Papers: Series three Writings and Speeches). The history of self-help groups is of the utmost significance. Ross explains that Black women self-help groups can be dated back to the 18th and 19th century and segregation aided in this supportive avenue. However, with integration, the 1950s and 1960s led to a decreased utilization of Black women self-help groups. Ross advocating for Black women to utilize self-help groups is fundamentally grassroots organizing at its core. Self-help groups were a utilized strategy within the Civil Rights Movement. For example, Fannie Lou Hamer founded the Freedom Farm Cooperative in Mississippi for Black families in 1969. The Freedom Farm Cooperative provided land for Black families to work and provide for their families without white farm owners. Hamer describes this effort stating, “This is the first kind of program that has ever been sponsored in the country in letting local people do their thing themselves” (Freedom Farm Cooperative, SNCC). It is through Ross’s support of self-help groups that one can connect her passion for Black liberation to the Reproductive Justice struggle.

Ross worked with the National Black Women Health Project in implementing self-help groups for Black women across the country. To understand what one is trying to accomplish with organized self-help groups it is imperative to analyze the goals provided in a 1986 manuscript from Ross to the public. She offers five different goals that self-help groups for Black women aim to accomplish.
“The goals of the self-help group are to:

- Raise the consciousnesses of Black women to the severity and pervasiveness of Black women’s health problems;
- Provide a comfortable, supportive atmosphere for Black women to explore health issues;
- Provide opportunities for Black women to become knowledgeable health advocates for themselves and their communities;
- Increase well-being through knowledge of the availability and proper utilization of existing health services;
- Participate in a national network linking Black women together to address key health problems in their communities, rural and urban regions, and nationwide.”

(Loretta Ross Papers: Series three Writings and Speeches)

If done correctly, self-help groups provide a space for Black women to form sisterhood, learn about resources, discuss issues and concerns, and like Ross states, raise the consciousness of Black women. Comparable to Fannie Lou Hamer’s Freedom Farm Cooperative, self-help groups in the Reproductive Justice movement helps to solve problems that directly are affecting Black women at the local level, rather than having to rely on a mainstream movement that has proven to be racist and exclusive.

In addition to Ross supporting self-help groups, she has also advocated for Black women to share their stories. In a magazine article titled “Raising Our Voices” Ross details how Black women have been labeled ‘sleeping giants’ in the pro-choice movement. This article addresses why Black women feel misunderstood in the mainstream movement.
However, she also pleads for Black women to share their stories because currently white women and white men are debating issues that predominantly affect Black women. A powerful statement is expressed by Ross as she states, “Rather than abstract arguments about personhood or fetal rights, we need to start telling out stories- how illegal abortion killed our mothers and how legal abortion saved our lives. We have to talk to each other as Black women, sister to sister. We have to support sisters who are having abortions and others who have had to bear this decision alone in the past” (Raising Our Voices, Ross). This statement coincides with the idea of self-help groups, while also expressing the need for Black women to work together and create dialogue amongst each other. This dialogue alone will aid in the struggle of Reproductive Freedom because it provides a space for community building to occur. Grassroots organizing can be achieved through various methods, in this example grassroots organizing is empowering Black women to share their stories, feel heard, and support one another.

An important contribution to Reproductive Justice made by Loretta Ross is her organizational work for the National March for Women’s Lives. I will be discussing her contribution to the 1986 and 1989 National March for Women’s Lives. During this time Ross was still the director of the Women of Color Program within NOW. In preparation for the 1986 National March for Women’s Lives Ross participated in an interview titled “A Woman’s Rights, and Nothing Less” in the magazine People’s Daily World, to encourage participation in the march. In this interview Ross explains one of the goals of this march, which was to raise awareness of Webster versus Reproductive Health services, a case being taken to Supreme Court that was an extreme threat to women
especially Black women’s ability to obtain Reproductive justice. Additionally, Ross is asked why reproductive rights were so important. In response, Ross provides three ways in which Reproductive rights are imperative: “If woman can’t control when she has children, she controls very few aspects of her life. Secondly, women must have control over their reproductive life so that they can fully participate in the labor force. The last issue, of course, is around health” (A Woman’s Rights, and Nothing Less, Ross). Control of one’s bodily autonomy, equal opportunity, and health are essentially the main factors in Ross’s argument. This response reflects Ross’s broader view of Reproductive Justice, exploring how it intersects with women’s rights and socioeconomic status.

An important aspect of Loretta Ross’s organizational efforts is her ability to include Black women in the mainstream movement. As I stated previously, NOW was reaching disproportionality white women. Loretta Ross inserting herself into NOW provided the ability for Black women to be included not only with this march but also in conversations and debates regarding Reproductive Justice. In The Washington Post an article was published in March of 1986 titled “NOW Gains Support for March”. In this article Ross explains why she has focused on including Black women, specifically the inclusion of over 49 predominantly Black groups attending the march, and why including Black women is imperative to achieving Reproductive Justice for all women. Ross states, “More people are realizing that if abortion is outlawed, everybody gets hurt” she continues stating “Black women are finding that this is an issue that they can work on with white women. Others, who threw their birth control pills away to have a baby for the ‘revolution,’ have changed their minds” (NOW Gains Support for March, Ross). Ross
understands why Black women are hesitant to work with white women and the mainstream movement, but also has sought to include grassroots organizations because she understands Reproductive Justice cannot be achieved unless all women are accounted for. Furthermore, Ross states that everybody will get hurt if these laws are passed. The mainstream movement must realize the threat of antiabortion laws will first affect predominantly Black women but it will quickly begin affecting women who are considered privileged as well. Ross ultimately served as a bridge between the mainstream women’s movement and grassroots organizations. Realizing anti-abortion legislation disproportionately affects Black women, Ross attempts to include Black women in the March for Women’s Lives.

In addition to the outreach efforts made by Loretta Ross, she also made a strong effort to be acknowledged by the United States Government. A letter was sent by Ross to the president which is noted he did receive January 12th, 1989. In this letter Ross is requesting endorsement from the President for the 1989 March for Women’s Equality/Women’s Lives. In this page and a half document Ross is demanding the constitutional right for an abortion and that the right to Reproductive freedom be taken seriously by the government. In closing she states, “We’ve talked to many lawyers in the past several weeks. To a person, these attorneys believe the cause of legalized abortion must now be taken to the people- that the people speaking with one, loud voice is our best hope to protect this essential constitutional right. That’s why I’m writing to you. For this March to be truly the voice of the people, we need your participation” (March for Women’s Equality/Women’s Lives, Ross). I include this effort made by Ross to showcase the
various avenues she was involved in throughout her career. The marches explore her unique ability to work with the mainstream movement while also prioritizing the inclusion of Black women and grassroots organizations. Additionally, her role in NOW allowed her to communicate with government officials and advocate for Black women on a larger scale. I believe her work with NOW in organizing multiple marches can be defined as a large-scale development; however, her inclusion of smaller organizations is where we see the intersection of grassroots organizing.

A unique attribute that Ross offers to the Reproductive Justice movement is her belief that Reproductive Justice falls within Human Rights. Loretta Ross believes in the need to educate Black women and communities on human rights in order to truly understand why Reproductive Justice is important. In her paper titled “Human Rights Education to Counter the Right” she states, “Human rights has the potential to transform the struggle, creating a true shared agenda without detracting from specific issues of organizing. Builds on the strength of identity-based organizing (race, sexuality, religion) while moving beyond its limitations” (Human Rights Education to Counter the Right, Ross). Through this statement Ross alludes to the value of educating women and developing a broader understanding of the Reproductive Justice struggle. Through practices such as self-help groups, Black women can communicate and learn about human rights and connect their struggles in order to create what Ross defines as identity-based organizing.

Ross connecting Reproductive Justice to human rights is influenced by her growing understanding of Reproductive Justice at a local, national, and global level. In the book
“Radical Reproductive Justice” Ross discusses the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt which she attended in 1994. She notes the opportunity to connect with Black sisters on a global level to better understand how the Reproductive Justice struggle has affected Black women from a larger perspective. She learns that the women in attendance have human rights at the center of their argument for Reproductive Justice. The idea of connecting global human rights issues to a local Reproductive Justice struggle is very intriguing. Ross shares that she has learned from global movements the value in human rights education. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was written in 1948, which is relatively recent, explaining the lack of awareness regarding human rights in the United States. Ross argues that Reproductive Justice is a human rights issue and anti-abortion legislation needs to be treated as a violation of human rights. Black women learning about these violations through efforts like self-help groups will both raise awareness and provide support for their activism. Additionally, the inclusion of Human Rights information in Reproductive Justice discourse is an important component in refuting countering legislation.

I have discussed in length Loretta Ross’s emphasis on Black women sharing their stories and utilizing self-help groups. However, it is imperative that I also acknowledge her efforts in making sure those stories are heard, and respected. While working as the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health National Coordinator, Ross and others created the Trust Black Women Partnership in 2010. The goal of the Trust Black Women partnership was to decrease the number of anti-abortion billboards that were accusing Black women of committing genocide and fighting against anti-abortion legislation.
Black and Feminists: A Long Tentative Partnership, Ross). In addition to the creation of Trust Black Women, SisterSong also focused on intersecting the Black Lives Matter Movement and Reproductive Justice Movement, by working with other grassroots organizations. The book, Reproductive Justice by Loretta Ross and Rickie Solinger details the Reproductive Oppression, Gender Violence, and Mass Incarceration Summit held in 2014 by SisterSong. This event is critical to include because it is the first event that connected the Black Lives Matter movement to the Reproductive Justice Movement (Reproductive Justice an Introduction Ross and Solinger page 260). One must consider both race and gender oppression to fully understand Black women’s unique struggle in achieving Reproductive Justice, which supports why Ross connects the Black Lives Matter Movement to the Reproductive Justice Movement. Black women in the United States cannot be fully supported and encouraged to share their stories, if their community does not understand how achieving Reproductive Justice connects to a broader racial justice issue.

Loretta Ross has spent a large portion of her life advocating for Black women in spaces that have historically been dominated by white men and women. I have highlighted a handful of organizational efforts by Ross, her work with NOW in creating expansive goals that focus on the inclusion of Black women and women of color, her work with the National Black Women Health Project in creating self-help groups for Black women, her ability to recruit the participation of 49 Black led organizations for the National March for Women’s Lives, and the formation of the Trust Black Women campaign with SisterSong. Ross values the inclusion of Black women in the mainstream women’s
movement. She also recognizes the Reproductive Justice movement as a broader racial and human rights issue, connecting it to the Black Lives Matter movement and to a global Black women’s struggle. Grassroots organizing can be achieved in various ways; in Ross’s case grassroots organizing was achieved through her advocacy of Black women in mainstream spaces, her hands on implementation of self-help groups, and her ability to educate society on how Reproductive Justice needs to be included in the racial struggle.

**DR. BOND**

As I have previously established Dr. Bond was involved in various organizations that focused on achieving Reproductive Justice for Black women. African American Women Evolving which later changes its name to Black Women for Reproductive Justice can be explored to understand how Dr. Bond practiced grassroots organizing. Dr. Bond co-founded African American Women Evolving in 1996, and what started as an organization based on abortion access has now expanded to include education, abortion access, and overall Reproductive health of Black women. Dr. Bond and African American Women Evolving offers a more contemporary understanding of how Black women have achieved Reproductive Justice through grassroots organizing.

Dr. Bond discusses how AAWE continues to evolve as the idea of Reproductive Justice expands, in a manuscript titled “Confronting the Right” published on November 9th, 2006. She states “AAWE first started its fund in 1998 helping women with practical support to obtain abortions. That included paying for transportation and motel fare for
these women in need of second trimester abortions, as well as ultrasounds. Today, that support has been expanded to include funding for first trimester abortions and emergency contraception” (*Confronting the Right*, Bond). Dr. Bond continues in this same manuscript to acknowledge the various ways in which AAWE prioritize grassroots organizing. She states at length, “AAWE does a tremendous amount of education at the grassroots level in churches, colleges, and universities, community groups, etc. About safer sex and women’s right to be sexual beings… At AAWE we, (instead) work to support parents in engaging in effective, healthy intimate relationships, and positive sexuality. We have contributed to that body of work by producing a video of an intergenerational dialogue between Black mothers and daughters about reproductive and sexual health” (*Confronting the Right*, Bond).

Dr. Bond utilizes community events, speeches, educational presentations, and supporting other smaller organizations with similar visions within her practices of grassroots organizing. I will focus on her PowerPoint titled *Access to Reproductive Services*, her decision to support the Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health’s annual fundraiser, and the AAWE Symposium conferences. I chose these specific efforts of Dr. Bond because I believe they display the variety of ways she effectively used grassroots organizing to help achieve Reproductive Justice.

One of the important aspects of grassroots organizing is advocating for those who do not have the platform to advocate for themselves. In 2004 Dr. Bond represented African American Women Evolving at the American Public Health Association presenting on
behalf of all Black women. During this event in Chicago, Illinois Dr. Bond explored a survey that African American Women Evolving conducted between the years of 2000 and 2001 which surveyed about 300 African American women in the city of Chicago. She states, “The purpose of conducting this survey was so that AAWE could more effectively tailor its reproductive and sexual health education and policy efforts to the needs of the communities of its constituency” (*Access to Reproductive Health Services*). Surveying Black women was a strategy that Dr. Bond and the AAWE organized to both understand Black women in various communities and advocate for them in a larger setting. The survey focused on reproductive health, different practices, and general opinions regarding Reproductive Justice issues. Findings from the survey were very interesting; over half of the respondents said they douched, (washing away old blood after the menstrual cycle, before and after sexual intercourse, and to self-treat abnormal vaginal discharge and odor), and only 38% of women who were sexually active used contraceptives regularly (including using condoms, birth control pill, or Depo Provera shot).

Based on these findings Dr. Bond and the AAWE organization provided recommendations to the American Public Health Association and offered examples of the steps that they were taking. The most prominent recommendation was providing Black women with proper education. The next question that Dr. Bond addresses is what this education should look like. She explains that educating Black women about reproductive health, needs to be done in a way that values long-held cultural beliefs while simultaneously dispelling myths and stereotypes regarding Black women and their
sexuality. Recognizing the value of cultural beliefs and how those explain decision-making, may be obvious to those who are Black, but otherwise unknown to a larger demographic. Furthermore, Dr. Bond addresses topics that expand past abortion access. She highlights the need to educate Black women on menstrual cycles, annual pap smears, breast examinations, contraceptive health, HIV/AIDS and STI prevention, and menopause. The inclusion of these reproductive health topics exemplifies how Dr. Bond and the AAWE organization have broadened what it means to achieve Reproductive Justice for all Black women.

The presentation also provides the audience with ways in which AAWE are addressing these different educational issues at the grassroots level. Dr. Bond provides three different action steps, the first is the development of “Safer Sex Educational Experiences” (SSEX) which includes an expansive reproductive health curriculum; menstrual cycles, pregnancy, abortion, abortion alternatives, abstinence, and connections of douching and reproductive tract infections (Access to Reproductive Health Services). The second method is encouraging community members to become AAWE SSEX facilitators. The idea behind this strategy is that involving community members educates the community while creating longevity for an initiative, true grassroots organizing. And finally, Dr. Bond introduces the AAWE Healthy Vagina Campaign (HVC). The HVC includes three different components that attempt to educate in one specific fascist of Reproductive Health, douching. The HVC educates Black women on the repercussions of douching, it encourages medical professionals to educate their patients about douching,
and it demands that the Federal Drug Administration better regulates feminine hygiene products and is transparent on their labels and other marketing tools.

The decision of Dr. Bond to present her communal research addresses the main issue, which is the lack of available education and displaying different ways in which AAWE has created direct action initiatives. Through this presentation Dr. Bond is indirectly showing how Black women, such as herself, have the vision and ability to organize at a grassroots level and present information on a larger scale in order to help all Black women achieve Reproductive Justice. It is worth pointing out the authenticity of her presentation, Dr. Bond offered a unique perspective of understanding miseducated or uneducated community members while also understanding the value of Reproductive health education.

The second effort made by Dr. Bond as co-founder of AAWE to achieve Reproductive Justice that I will be discussing, is her ability and willingness to support other grassroots organizers. I am choosing to highlight this unique strategy because, as I have researched Black women in the fight for Reproductive Justice, the trend of Black women supporting other Black women was and still is extremely evident. Grassroots organizing is only effective if community members are passionate about the issues, and I believe Dr. Bond displays this with her support of the Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health’s annual fundraiser in July of 2006.
The Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health is an organization that provides reproductive education for elementary students up to eighteen years old and beyond. What started in 1977 in Chicago has now expanded its goals and target audience; however, still encompasses its initial Reproductive health educational values. During the early stages of the organization’s development Dr. Bond attended and supported the 2nd annual ICAH Annual Spring Affair in 2006. In a letter addressed to Dr. Bond from the Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health Board President, Courtney Bell wrote a detailed yet brief explanation of what was achieved, the goals of the future, as well as a message of gratitude to Dr. Bond.

Bell discusses that the ICAH achieved mandated sex education in Chicago Public Schools and the development of an initiative that provides access to health care for adolescents across Illinois (Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health, Bell). Bell also discusses that a goal of the ICAH was to engage more community members and leaders in the conversation regarding improving health and securing the rights of Illinois youth. This goal was achieved when about 200 people including Dr. Bond attended the event. Bell ends her letter of gratitude and optimism for the future with highlighting the importance of grassroots organizing, Bell states “We hope that the evening was an enjoyable opportunity to meet the ICAH staff and board, share in our successes, meet others who are interested in sexual health issues and how they impact youth, and find out more about our recent initiatives” (Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health, Bell). Bell may not have realized, but this statement embodies the power of grassroots organizing.

Grassroots organizing is about identifying issues that concern the community, connecting
with fellow community members that share similar goals or issues, and working together to continue demanding change. Dr. Bond and AAWE including themselves in this event exemplifies the various avenues in which one can support Reproductive Justice through grassroots organizing. A main part of grassroots organizing is engaging with other community led organizations. One does not always have to lead in order to enact change and Dr. Bond’s support of ICAH embodies this idea.

The third method in which Dr. Bond and African American Women Evolving utilize grassroots organizing to achieve Reproductive Justice for Black women is through her work in hosting Health Symposiums. Through the days of October 27th-28th Dr. Bond and AAWE hosted its fourth ever symposium event titled *Black Women: Loving, the Mind, Body and Spirit Health* at Malcolm X College in Chicago. This conference included discussion between Black female state legislators, a town hall meeting between Black community members, and workshops covering diverse topics within Reproductive health.

As I stated this event included workshops ranging in different reproductive health topics. Topics included HIV awareness, Black Women liberation, reproductive technology education, and Safer Sex Educational Experiences (SSEX) education. The various topics of these workshops are both relevant to the issues that Dr. Bond discovered in her surveying and informative on different ideas that community members may be unfamiliar with. When asked what this event’s purpose was, Dr. Bond states, “The Symposium really focuses on the intersections between women and girls being healthy, having healthy families, and living in healthy communities. This weekend is about looking at the
totality of women’s lives and understanding that the social and economic conditions under which we live have a direct impact on our ability to live in a balanced state of health and well-being” (Black Female Legislators and Clergy Part of Formulating Strategies for Reducing Black Women’s Health Disparities at AWWE’s Health Symposium, Bond). Through the incorporation of relevant topics that are directly affecting her community, providing information that is useful to the growth and health of the community, and including all Black women in the discussion of Reproductive Health and Justice this event is a great example of how one can successfully organize at a grassroots level.

A unique yet vital aspect of this conference was the accessibility to the community. Admission for adults was $10 and for students it was $5. Additionally, free childcare, food, and conference materials were provided. When one is attempting to organize at a grassroots level being aware of accessibility is crucial. Dr. Bond was not only aware but made the necessary steps to ensure all Black women had the ability to attend this educational event. Additionally, this event was held and co-sponsored by Malcolm X Community College. Hosting an event regarding reproductive health at Malcolm X college one can assume that students were heavily encouraged to attend. A theme within Dr. Bonds grassroots organizing is the different layers that are incorporated within the events or presentations that she addresses. This conference helps to educate Black women on a community level but it also provides a space for Black women legislators to meet and understand the needs of the communities they are serving. The topic for the Black women legislators was Black Women health disparities. Incorporating a panel into this
conference that the community can ask questions to understand Reproductive Justice from a broader sense, and exchange ideas.

Although I discussed in detail about the fourth Black Women Symposium held by Dr. Bond and the AAWE, the previous and forthcoming symposium events that were held achieved similar dialogue. As I explained Dr. Bond does a brilliant job creating a safe space for Black women within the Chicago community to connect with Black women legislators, and converse about different Reproductive health topics and concerns. Almost certainly, this dialogue inspired Black women within that community to continue to learn and spread awareness about Reproductive Health and Justice.

Prior to AAWE Dr. Bond worked with the National Network of Abortion Funds, founded during 1993. The NNAF was created as a nonprofit organization focused on supporting people in accessing and obtaining abortions and other Reproductive health services. Although NNAF is a large organization, it is built of 100 independent abortion funds that are working at the grassroots level (What we Do, Abortion Funds). After analyzing the organizational history, mission, and by laws it is evident that with Dr. Bond’s assistance they made efforts to prioritize grassroots organizing. Although Dr. Bond was not as involved as she was in AAWE I want to highlight one of the large contributions she made while working with NNAF.

On August 18th, 1998, Dr. Bond sent a manuscript on behalf of the National Network of Abortion Funds to Barbara Kibbe, a program officer of The David and Lucile Packard
Foundation. In this letter Dr. Bond is advocating for an organizational effectiveness grant, in order to continue expanding the NNAF. Dr. Bond lists three different components that the $70,000 grant would go to. First, expand the network second, strengthen existing member funds, and third, build the reproductive rights movement by organizing more grassroots organizing funds (National Network of Abortion Funds, Bond). Why does Dr. Bond believe that grassroots organizations should be financially supported? The Welfare Act of 1996 can be one of the main factors. Welfare reform was cutting off access to abortion and other Reproductive health resources. This was not of great concern to the mainstream women’s movement because it was primarily affecting low-income women and women of Color. Dr. Bond recognized that in order to combat this legislation the NNAF needed to acquire a grant to ensure financial abortion support to women of Color.

I chose to highlight this specific contribution to exemplify how grassroots organizers such as Dr. Bond do not always lead publicly. Rather, due to connections they can advocate on behalf of Black women, to ensure they are being valued and receive the same resources as all women in this country. As a leader Dr. Bond recognized how specific legislation had negative implications only to a certain demographic of people, low-income women and Black women. Therefore, in order to achieve Reproductive Justice for all women the financial support of grassroots organizations is crucial.

In the paper titled, Reproductive Justice: A Framework to Ensure the Health of Women, Our Families, and the Communities Where We Live Dr. Bond details why organizing at
the grassroots level is foundational to achieving Reproductive Justice. She states, “Statistics show that Black women and low-income women, who are disproportionately Black, are most likely to be affected by public policies and private agendas that prevent them from realizing optimum reproductive health”. Dr. Bond views Reproductive Justice as the ability for all women to not only achieve abortion access but also have the social and economic support to raise a child if one chooses to do so.

The educational presentation she gave at the American Public Health Association where she explores a survey and provides examples of how AAWE is supporting Black women in Chicago communities, her support of fellow grassroots organization the Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health, the AAWE Symposium events, and advocating for a $70,000 grant from The David and Lucile Packard Foundation are the various efforts of Dr. Bond I have provided. A theme throughout my research of Dr. Bond is how important education at the grassroots level is. She believes that Black women must exercise their fundamental human rights and in order to do so, one must be educated on the various ways that Reproductive Justice is directly affecting their lives. Based on the small handful of examples I gave we can see the various ways in which Bond supports, incorporates, and advocates on behalf of grassroots organizers and organizations such as African American Women Evolving and National Network for Abortion Funds.

As a Black woman I am realizing the value of grassroots organizing in the struggle for Reproductive Justice. Grassroots organizing focuses on otherwise forgotten communities, providing resources, education, and opportunities for community members to improve their livelihood. Recognizing that the mainstream women’s movement was catering to
mass organizing and uplifting a specific demographic of women rather than all women, Black women have focused their efforts on grassroots organizing. This is important for future Reproductive Justice organizational efforts because, although growth of an organization is valuable it is important to remember that Reproductive Justice will not be achieved until all women have access to rights, resources, and education. Black women’s ability to successfully grassroots organize can rarely be correctly duplicated by the mainstream women’s movement, making this form of organizing unique and forever necessary.
CHAPTER FOUR
CONCLUSION

When I initially began my research, I thought I would be discussing how Black women have worked within the mainstream women’s movement. However, as I continued to research, I realized that although many Black women work within the mainstream women’s movement it is centered on issues that predominantly pertain to white women. Which is why many Black women have turned to grassroots organizing to effectively have their issues recognized.

Avery identifies that the ‘conspiracy of silence’ is attributed to the issues Black women experience being ignored. She also identifies hypocrisies within the government and the mainstream women’s movement, and their unwillingness to adequately address issues beyond abortion. Ross’ concerns about the mainstream movement, are focused on the speed in which it is moving, despite Black women expressing concern over basic reproductive rights such as access to abortion not being met. Ross also identified the lack of trust between Black women and white women and the inherent racism that Black women experience in the mainstream movement to be an issue. Additionally, she
encourages Black women to look beyond the mainstream movement to the global movement as an effort to have their issues be taken seriously.

Dr. Bond’s work suggests that the mainstream women’s movement does not know how to effectively communicate with Black women or women with low incomes. Furthermore, she believes the mainstream women’s movement has a limited idea of what Reproductive Justice is for Black women, leading to the inability to address the issues that concern them. Dr. Bond also identifies issues within Black conservative leadership and the Black church which has created a divide amongst Black Americans regarding Reproductive Justice.

Based off the critiques that these women have identified it is important to understand how they organized to combat these issues. The utilization of grassroots organizing ultimately served as the primary way Black women could effectively focus on issues that pertained to them. All three of these women practiced grassroots organizing in different ways; however, the goal of including all Black women was consistent. Byllye Avery and the NBWHP focused on educating Black women on all health-related topics including reproductive health. Avery sent informative letters to all members focused on health-related current events, produced a film on how Black mothers and girls can converse about reproductive topics, and hosted a handful of NBWHP conferences aimed at amplifying the voices of Black women. All these efforts focused on the issues that were directly affecting Black women. Inspired by the work of Fannie Lou Hamer, Avery also implemented self-help groups within Black communities. Self-help groups encouraged
Black women to discuss health related topics openly and empower and improve self-esteem amongst Black women and men.

Loretta Ross had a unique position when achieving Reproductive Justice through grassroots organizing. Because Ross worked with NOW, a predominantly white organization, she advocated for the inclusion of Black women into the mainstream women’s movement and attempted to combat the inherit racism of the organization. She helped to increase the membership demographic to include more Black women through communication, anti-racist training, and through program initiatives. She also encouraged Black women to utilize the self-help groups that Avery implemented into the NBWHP. Ross served as one of the leaders of the National March for Women’s Lives, with this role she advocated for the inclusion of grassroots organizations and encouraged Black women and leaders to join the march. Interestingly, Ross also argued for the government to recognize Reproductive Justice as a human rights issue. Because of this she worked globally to enhance the relationship between Black women and women in the African diaspora. She also connected the Reproductive Justice movement to the Black Lives Matter movement to emphasize the intersection of race and gender.

Unlike Ross, Dr. Bond based most of her work in Chicago. Quickly, after founding AAWE the organization began funding abortions for Black women that needed/wanted them. She then primarily focused on educating both her community and others on how Reproductive Justice can be achieved. She utilized community events, speeches, and presentations to help increase awareness around reproductive issues such as HIV/AIDS,
cancer, abortion access, contraception, etc. Dr. Bond also expanded her target audience by speaking at larger events advocating on behalf of all Black women. On top of that she supported the development of other grassroots organizations that increased education about reproductive health. Finally, Dr. Bond hosted financially accessible health symposiums. It is with these symposiums that Black women and girls were able to raise concerns to their local politicians, converse about reproductive health-related topics, and continue to build community amongst each other.

Reproductive Justice is described as the ability to have a child, to not have a child, and to parent that child in a safe and healthy environment. The mainstream women’s movement for many Black women only addresses one component within the framework, the ability to not have a child. Additionally, it addresses the ability to not have a child being largely based on having the resources and ability to receive an abortion or access to contraception. The term Reproductive Justice was coined to both raise awareness to more issues and recognize Black women and low-income women in the struggles they experience.

Black women have dealt with continuous accusations of racial genocide from Black conservative leaders, efforts to control Black women’s bodies by white healthcare providers, and currently the ignorance of the mainstream women’s movement. Despite these challenges Black women have persevered through the utilization of grassroots organizing. Although I have discussed in great length about the different ways one can
organize at the grassroots level it comes down to being able to recognize the concerns of Black women and create direct-action plans that address the issues head on.

What makes Byllye Avery, Loretta Ross, and Dr. Bond pioneers of the Reproductive Justice Movement is their determination to develop organizations and create effective solutions, while also including the work of Black women from our past. Despite criticisms, lack of mainstream recognition, and government legislations Black women continue to pioneer a movement that whole heartily addresses the issues that Black women experience. To many their work goes unnoticed but to me and other Black women these women represent us without fail.

Although becoming a part of the mainstream women’s movement is tempting, you risk losing the authenticity, inclusion, and direct-action that is at the foundation of grassroots organizing. I am hopeful that with my research, people within the mainstream women’s movement will understand that grassroots organizing is arguably the sole solution to recognizing the issues that all Black women experience. Since I explored the solution that Black women utilized in response to the women’s movement, there is an opportunity for future research to examine how the mainstream women’s movement has addressed the critiques of their movement. Additionally, future research can inquire to the relationship between the Reproductive Justice movement and the women’s movement in the contemporary. If both topics are examined in addition to the information that I have provided, one will have a firm understanding of the relationship between the Reproductive Justice and mainstream women’s movement.
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CURRICULUM VITA

NAME: Madison Ellsworth

ADDRESS: 4497 SE Oakhurst St. Hillsboro OR. 97123

DOB: Hillsboro, Oregon- August 26, 2000

EDUCATION & TRAINING:
B.S., Business Management
Oregon State University
2018-22

M.A., Pan- African Studies
University of Louisville
2024