

A Bright Yet Challenging Future

By Belle Taylor-McGhee

Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice

Jael Silliman, Marlene Gerber Fried, Loretta Ross and Elena Gutiérrez
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When most Americans think of women's reproductive rights, they generally think of the right to choose abortion. Since abortion opponents control both Houses of Congress and enjoy the backing of an anti-choice White House, they have successfully dictated the terms of the debate. Moreover, mainstream prochoice forces failed early on to link reproductive rights to broader socioeconomic issues most Americans deem critical: basic healthcare, jobs, education, childcare, and in a broader context, family and community.

In *Undivided Rights – Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice*, authors Silliman, Fried, Ross and Gutiérrez provide a poignant history of women of color organizations that challenged the status quo by boldly confronting what mainstream prochoice forces have resisted for far too long—a concept of reproductive freedom that embodies a holistic approach to women's health and wellness with community, culture and family at its core.

Based in large part on candid interviews with women of color

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activists who formed organizations and networks outside the mainstream prochoice movement during the 1980s and 1990s, *Undivided Rights* profiles eight women of color organizations and their leaders. The book also provides a brief yet dense history of the systematic abuses perpetrated against women of color, including government-sanctioned sterilization and other harmful policies that often caused irreversible damage to women's reproductive and overall health.

Despite the complex history of the women of color health movement, the authors of *Undivided Rights* skillfully walk the reader through compelling stories of conflict, pain, triumph and self-analysis. What is more, the book highlights the unique experiences of the different challenges facing women of color and does not try to fit the numerous movements into a one-size-fits-all model.

For example, as Billye Avery, feminist health activist and founder of the National Black Women's Health Project (NBWHP), affirmed on the importance of race and class in the status of women's health, "I began to look at myself as a black woman. Before that time I had been looking at myself as a woman."

The genesis and subsequent growth of the NBWHP offers a glimpse of the challenges

many women of color organizations faced in integrating their issues into the broader women's health agenda. Founded in 1984, NBWHP brought together black women from all walks of life—forming chapter alliances across the country—who desperately longed for a forum to put black women's health in the forefront of the women's health movement. Although Avery and NBWHP co-founder Lillie Allen successfully moved the organization to national prominence—becoming the first women of color organization to publicly embrace a woman's right to choose abortion—NBWHP struggled for years to sustain its grassroots network as it fulfilled a need to sit at the national policy table. Today NBWHP is the Black Women's Health Imperative and focuses mainly on public policy issues at the national level.

NBWHP and other organizations that have followed opened new doors to access and culturally competent research that helped to shape national policy on the health of black women and other women of color. Moreover, women of color organizations have consistently taken the government to task on major health disparities among women of color that had not been addressed before.

The shameful U.S. history of involuntary sterilization, forced relocation and environmental abuse suffered by Native Americans gave rise to the triumphs of Native American activists like Katsi Cook, a Mohawk woman in Akwesasne along the St. Lawrence River between Northern New York and Canada. Katsi organized the Women's Health Dance Program and the Mother's Milk Project to promote Native sovereignty through Native women asserting control over the birthing process.

According to Katsi, “Without taking control over our lives, starting with the birth process, we would simply be wards of the state.”

The book shows the challenges facing the National Asian Women’s Health Organization (NAWHO), which represents the health interests of Asian women with multiple languages and dialects, have been uniquely different to the experiences of Latinas who are in turn challenged by strongly divergent views in their own communities on abortion rights and contraceptive use and access. Under the leadership of Mary Chung, NAWHO quickly grew as a national liaison to government and national mainstream prochoice groups.

Undivided Rights thoughtfully dissects the contrasting experience of the National Latina Health Organization (NLHO). While explicitly prochoice, NLHO promoted a stronger grassroots identity in the Bay Area and elsewhere in California. In fact,

NLHO responded to the call from California Latina women to strategically incorporate its educational programs within Latina communities statewide. The founders of NLHO believed that Latinas would respond affirmatively to improving their physical, mental, and emotional health and well-being if information, training, and program content were presented to them by other Latinas.

The authors note the strong alliances women of color activists have formed with mainstream prochoice organizations and the collaborative efforts that have been forged to build a more diverse and inclusive movement that mirrors America’s prochoice majority. In particular, the 2004 March for Women’s Lives in Washington drew large contingents of young women and women of color, due in part to the efforts of *Undivided Rights* co-author Loretta Ross, who served as a lead organizer of the March. The authors suggest that without her leadership, the March

would have been yet another example of how women of color have historically been on the periphery of the national women’s reproductive justice movement.

Undivided Rights paints a bright yet challenging future for women of color activists who are working to put the reproductive health of women back in the hands of women and their communities. Yet the authors readily admit that there are unresolved political tensions between women of color activists and white feminists from mainstream prochoice organizations around the direction of the prochoice movement and what that entails. An analysis on how the next generation of women of color activists will deal with these unresolved issues undoubtedly warranted a new chapter. Indeed *Undivided Rights* is a must-read for anyone who cares about women’s health and reproductive justice. The book is essential for anyone who considers herself/himself a leader in the prochoice movement. ■