

# An Introduction to Reproductive Justice ...and Faith

*Assembled by Rev. Rob Keithan, Faith Organizing Consultant and Training Consultant*

## WHAT IS REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE?

The term “reproductive justice” (frequently abbreviated as “RJ”) was coined in 1994 by a group of black women as the combination of reproductive rights and social justice. *Notably, it is not simply a different phrase that is interchangeable with reproductive health or reproductive rights, and nor is it intended to replace these concepts.* Instead, reproductive justice is a framework created by women of color that grounds both the goals of the work *and* the process of how it should be done in the particular experiences, values, priorities, and leadership of women of color.

The SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collaborative speaks to the value of a broader framework on the “What is RJ?” section of their website:

Human rights provide more possibilities for our struggles than the privacy concepts the pro-choice movement claims only using the U.S. Constitution. Reproductive justice emerged as an intersectional theory highlighting the lived experience of reproductive oppression in communities of color. It represents a shift for women advocating for control of their bodies, from a narrower focus on legal access and individual choice (the focus of mainstream organizations) to a broader analysis of racial, economic, cultural, and structural constraints on our power.<sup>1</sup>

For people who want to be supportive of reproductive justice and who are not women of color already familiar with the framework, it best to see yourself as seeking to play a supportive role, or trying to be in alignment with a reproductive justice approach. This is critically important because it helps to avoid misappropriation, meaning situations where people are claiming to do reproductive justice work without knowing what it means and without being accountable to the experiences and leadership of women of color.

## CHOICE REQUIRES ACCESS

The reproductive justice approach recognizes that “choice” does not really exist unless there is actual access to resources such as healthcare. As such, reproductive justice offers a different view of the role of government. Rather than a “hands off” approach of protecting legal rights, government is viewed as having a proactive responsibility to help ensure that all individuals and communities have access to the resources they need.

## GOVERNMENT RESPONSIBILITY FOR UPHOLDING RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

Working for reproductive justice from a faith perspective also affirms a proactive role for government related to religious liberty. Rather than imposing one religious viewpoint on everyone, our nation’s laws should protect every person’s ability to make decisions according to their own beliefs and values.

---

<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from “What is RJ?” at <http://www.sistersong.net>.

## THE REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE APPROACH: CHANGING STRUCTURES OF POWER

**The foundational concept: It's about power.** Reproductive justice is not just an advocacy agenda focused on policy change—it's about changing structures of power. It's about making sure that every individual and every community has access to the resources they need for self-determination. Creating this kind of social transformation requires a long-term approach that builds relationships, changes hearts and minds, and nurtures new leaders. **Notably, it is not enough to focus on reaching a set of end goals through any means possible: our approach must reflect the world we are trying to create.**

### Three Corollary Concepts

**1. Identity, power, and privilege are always on the table.**

*In order to effectively dismantle oppressive institutions and practices, we must openly and constantly consider who has power—or not—and why. This is not an abstract exercise about how systems impact others, but rather a very concrete and very personal process that requires each of us to examine our own identities and experiences, understand how we have been shaped, and adjust our beliefs and actions as needed. It requires recognizing who is in the room and who's not; who's speaking up and who's not—and talking about why. It requires listening to other people's stories, sharing our own, and understanding that our experiences of the world—and thus our beliefs, both conscious and unconscious—can vary widely based on identity.*

**2. Leadership comes from the most affected.**

*Changing structures of power means that leadership must come from the groups most affected by the denial of access to rights and resources, including women of color, women living in poverty, and young people. It is not enough to simply advocate on behalf of these groups—individuals with these identities must be supported and respected as leaders.*

**3. Intersectionality**

*The work must be intersectional, which means engaging multiple identities and building coalitions rather than trying to keep people and issues confined in separate boxes. An individual is not a woman one day, low-income the next, or white the next. Identities including gender, class, race, sexual orientation, immigration status and many others which are always present and always intersecting. Changing structures of power requires that we view identities as linked and formulate solutions that are based on collaboration and solidarity.*

**Note:** For people of relative privilege, including white people, men, and wealthy people, the first and second concepts might be particularly new and/or challenging. This is one of the ways privilege operates: it allows those who have it to move through life without thinking about it. By contrast, reproductive justice calls us to cultivate self-awareness, to be open to learning, and to be willing to change.

## FOUR PRINCIPLES OF REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

The understanding of reproductive justice has evolved over time, and there is no universally accepted definition. However, all definitions recognize that the need for access to resources goes far beyond abortion alone. These four principles are accepted by many as representative:

**1. People have a right to have children.**

*This includes access to reproductive technologies and pregnancy-related healthcare, parental leave policies in all labor sectors, LGBT adoption rights, ending forced sterilizations and human trafficking.*

**2. People have a right not to have children.**

*This includes access to safe and legal abortion, contraception, and accurate sexuality education.*

**3. People have a right to raise their children in safe and healthy environments.**

*This includes access to quality food, housing, healthcare, childcare, education and living wage jobs; humane immigration policies that keep families together, and eliminating domestic violence, identity-based discrimination, crime, and toxic pollution.*

**4. People have a right to health and self-determination regarding their bodies and sexuality, free from oppression and shame.**

*This includes ending all related forms of harassment and violence, ending discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people; respecting different forms of gender identity and gender expression; and increasing access to information, counseling, training, and other resources that counter fear and stigma with healing, honesty, openness, and joy.*

## WHERE TO FOCUS

In any kind of organizing for social change, it is appropriate to consider how the work can make the most difference. While the reproductive justice framework presents a broad agenda, people of faith who support reproductive health, rights, and/or justice can have the most impact by concentrating on the issues where the opposition is primarily religious, since this is where our faith voice is particularly needed and meaningful. This includes supporting access to sexuality education, contraception, and abortion; as well as reducing the shame and stigma associated with them (and with sexuality generally).

While equality for LGBT people is also an issue where the opposition is religious, there are considerably more supportive faith-based organizations and individuals currently engaged in that work than there are faith voices engaged in organizing for reproductive health, rights, and/or justice. Ideally, more and more people will do both, since the opposition is the same: an extreme conservative minority that is imposing their religious views on the entire nation.

# Faith Values that Support Reproductive Health, Rights, and Justice

## Compassion

Whether from a belief in a loving God who knows what is in our hearts, or a reverence for the well-being of every person, we are called by our deepest values to offer **compassion** and support to individuals and families in difficult situations. Our role as people of faith is not to stand in judgment, or pressure others to accept our views, but to walk with those in need as they find their own path.

## Equality

We believe in the fundamental worth and **equality** of every person. In many faith traditions, this inherent value comes directly from our Creator, because we are all made in the image of God. We are called by our religious principles to create a world where every individual, every family, and every community can thrive.

## Respect

The ability to make moral choices is a sacred part of what it means to be human. We believe that every person deserves the right to make decisions according to their own conscience and values. **Respect** for differing opinions and beliefs is a core principle of American democracy, enshrined in both the Declaration of Independence and Constitution.

## Joy

We believe that sexuality is a sacred gift from our Creator, from the Universe, from God. Recognizing that our culture's relationship with sexuality is badly damaged by fear, shame, and exploitation, our approach is grounded in openness, gratitude, and mutuality. We believe that bodies are good, that knowledge is good, and that sexuality is good. Our bodies are beautiful, and we can use them to bring more **joy**, more connection, and more love into this world.

## Justice

One of the common themes across our religious traditions is the importance of caring for the people and groups who, for reasons of poverty, race, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status or other factors, struggle against hardship and oppression. This ethical obligation to **justice** is central to our understanding of faith, and it calls us to eliminate the enormous disparities which exist in access to rights and resources like healthcare.