

Introduction to Reproductive Justice

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newcomb@tulane.edu

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A couple of weeks ago, the Young Women with a Vision program participants were able to attend the annual Let's Talk About Sex conference organized by SisterSong, the National Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective. This year's conference theme was "Resist. Reclaim. Redefine." As SisterSong states, women of color "must resist the systems of oppressions that plague our daily lives, reclaim our human right to bodily autonomy, and redefine our futures." Since the conference, at YWWAV, we have been working to unpack this message through several workshops that seek to teach the fundamental definition of reproductive justice, as well as the ways in which various oppressions Black women experience relate to reproductive justice. Aiding us in the creation of the curriculum for these workshops is Lakeesha

Harris, the new Reproductive Justice and Sexual Health Program Manager at WWAV.

In preparation for discussions, the young women have been reading relevant texts such as Dorothy E. Roberts' *Killing the Black Body*, which touches on a wide range of issues including eugenics, the devaluation of Black motherhood, harmful stereotypes of Black women and their sexuality, and the history of violence against Black female bodies in the United States. Participants have also been introduced to the work of Kimberle Crenshaw, who coined the term "intersectionality," and watched videos depicting the personal accounts of everyday women of color like themselves who have in some way experienced a violation of their human rights. The discussions surrounding these texts and videos have served to create a space of learning through the sharing ideas, but also a space of healing through the sharing of feelings and emotional support. I've consistently been able to connect the concepts covered in our conversations to my studies back on campus and my own personal experiences. In the process I've learned more about the women who came before me, the young women who will go on to lead the fight for reproductive justice after me, and myself.

One conversation that has stood out to me in particular focused on the stereotype of "the angry Black woman." The curriculum of our program often focuses on addressing the multitude of ways in which Black women are oppressed in our society and in the process, illustrates that it is a fact that Black women are constantly treated unfairly due to the structures of the social systems in place. When Lakeesha posed the question of "How do you feel when you're treated unfairly?" to the girls, at the core of all their responses was "angry." She in turn responded to this reaction by saying "but you can't get angry." In this statement, she was making the point that all too often, when Black women respond to injustice by allowing their true feelings to come to light, the major consequences are a reinforcement of the negative stereotypes applied to them day in and day out, and very real negative implications in their personal lives. When they express dissent, they are labeled as "sassy," "insubordinate," or "aggressive;" they are expelled from their schools and fired from their jobs. Their responses to injustice are seen as unjustified. The result is young girls who are forced to repress their feelings and undergo chronic stress that wears them down physically and mentally, leading to a multitude of adverse health outcomes. Another consequence is that young girls are led to themselves doubt whether or not their emotions are valid and in the process internalize the harmful myths and stereotypes regarded as "truth" by the systems that oppress

them.

YWWAV gives girls the space to be angry, to accept that that anger is not only okay, but valid, and to transform that anger into motivation to break down the social constructs that are barriers to their health and wellbeing. It gives me the opportunity to do the same.