

How to Create Your Own Reproductive Justice Working Group

Why a guide?

When CRRJ first publicized its new RJWG in September 2012, we received numerous responses from people in other parts of the state and country who wondered if there were similar groups in their area. We did not know of any but committed to documenting our experiences for their use. In response to this interest, and in the spirit of community-minded resource sharing, we've captured the stories, lessons, and tips from our inaugural year in this guide. Our experiences are by no means singular or superior. We offer what we have in the hope that you can avoid our mistakes and build on our successes.

What is the RJWG?

The RJWG is a biweekly meeting of students, faculty, people affiliated with reproductive health, rights, and justice (RHRJ) organizations, and community members interested in RJ. Sessions focused on discussing readings about RJ and giving participants feedback on RJ-

related works-in-progress (e.g. dissertation prospectus, work plan for a community organization's RJ program, article draft, conference presentation). We met for a total of 16 hours each term. The Center for Race and Gender at UC Berkeley cosponsored.

What is a *working group*?

The name "working group" emphasizes that participants will be engaged in an active process of discussing, reading, and providing feedback. It isn't a class with an instructor in front lecturing or a group of people casually gathering to discuss an issue, but rather a firm group with clear commitments, shared goals, and structures for ensuring people stay committed to the group for the term.

What need does the RJWG fill?

CRRJ is the nation's first research center to take a broad look at laws, structures, and social conventions, studying how they influence the reproductive experiences of individuals, families, and communities.

It furthers scholarship, bolsters law and policy advocacy efforts, and influences public opinion through innovative research, teaching, and convenings. Three of CRRJ's goals are to: 1) provide a physical and intellectual hub where scholars and advocates from various disciplines find community, exchange ideas, and collaborate on projects; 2) nurture a new generation of thought leaders who will influence policymakers and public opinion; and 3) develop new research to better understand underlying social, legal, and cultural issues, distributing it widely to key stakeholders. The RJWG is one program that helps achieve these goals. Other benefits include building coalition with people who work on related issues, raising awareness of issues and organizing in the local community, increasing publicity and attendance at events, identifying possible interns for organization's projects, and movement building.

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Description

In fall 2012, we used the following description: “Are you interested in the theory and practice of reproductive justice (RJ), or the right to have children, the right to parent and the right to not have children? This interdisciplinary working group explores questions that have plagued efforts to secure reproductive rights and eliminate reproductive oppression. How do statuses such as race, class, gender, and ability influence reproductive possibilities? How has reproductive justice organizing intersected with other social movements? How can we incorporate a reproductive justice analysis into our scholarship and practice? The goal of the group is to facilitate an environment where participants can develop their understanding of reproductive justice and develop practical ideas for integrating RJ into their research and practice.” In spring 2013, we modified the description slightly adding, “The working group’s primary goal is to co-create an environment where participants can deepen their understanding of reproductive justice and develop practical ideas for integrating it into their research and practice.”

Publicity

We sent emails through UCB campus departments, student groups, and California reproductive health, rights and justice organizations.* Our cosponsor also sent announcements through its lists. With a little over a week’s advertising, CRRJ received about 50 inquiries about the fall group including multiple from out of state. In both academic terms the initial organizational meetings had approximately 25 attendees with a range of experiences and backgrounds (see later sections). To ensure more diversity in your group, be sure your outreach includes individuals and communities representing a variety of backgrounds and perspectives. Think beyond the “usual suspects.” If you are based in an academic institution, make sure to reach out to local organizations and vice versa. If the RJWG will be a project of a coalition or many organizations, use those lists as well.



Timeline

- 2-3 weeks prior — Publicize!!! Provide interest survey to all who reply. Contact any interested participants who list scheduling conflicts.
- 1st meet — Start with introductory activity, go over administrative details, discuss first readings, begin to take signups for feedback sessions.
- 2nd meet — Provide examples of possible group agreements. Remind people that after this meeting, they commit to stay with the group.
- 3rd meet — Develop group agreements.
- 5th meet — Discuss themes from confidential midterm feedback.
- Final meeting — Include a closing (possibly do at off-site location such as participant’s house or have an off-site activity afterward).
- Send final feedback survey using some of same questions as midterm feedback .

Interest survey

When someone inquired about the group, we sent an email reply that included a reiteration of the details and a link to a brief interest survey. The survey asked questions such as affiliation, demographic information, understanding of RJ, availability during scheduled meetings and interest in presenting for feedback. The survey allowed the facilitator to have a better understanding of each

attendee’s level of interest and exposure to RJ. The survey allowed the facilitator to determine whether a person was ineligible to participate due to too many expected absences. The room location and directions were provided to people only after completion of the interest survey. In the second term, people were allowed to attend the first meeting even if they explicitly did not plan to par-

ticipate further—these people still had to submit the survey. Anyone who expressed interest in the group was allowed to participate provided they had submitted the survey, could attend the meetings and appeared genuinely interested in engaging ideas of reproductive justice.

Guidelines

The facilitator developed structure/expectations such as attendance prior to advertising. At the third meeting, we developed group agreements through a brainstorm. Sample:

To facilitate intimacy and trust, members will attend

all sessions in their entirety. Exceptions include one pre-arranged absence and emergency.

To provide ample time and information for meaningful feedback, presenter has responsibility for posting a memo and any relevant

materials on the group e-bulletin board at least five days before the meeting.

To foster full presence, no checking messages, texting, or writing emails during the workshop (good faith about full presence while in the group).

Participants

We did not have a minimum or maximum number of participants. In both sessions, participants were primarily white women who had obtained advanced degrees. In fall semester, participants were primarily from academic backgrounds or currently working in academic settings such as graduate students at both Master's and PhD levels, postdocs, and retired faculty. Only one member, a local minister, was not currently affiliated with an academic institution. There was some racial diversity (White, African-American, and Asian-Pacific Islander participants) and variation in age and sexual orientation among the participants.

The membership of almost half the group changed from fall to spring. In spring semester the previous academic categories were represented, as well as participants who worked in reproductive health and rights organizations and childcare. Yet we had less racial diversity, and participants were clustered in age groups. In both semesters we had participants from other countries. The summer group was composed only of previous members.

- Fall 2012: 18 members (4 formally dropped/stopped coming due to situations such as changed work schedules or personal situations).
- Spring 2013: 14 members (6 continuing from fall, 2 dropped after deadline).
- Summer 2013: 13 participants (combination of 3 fall-only, 5 spring-only and 4 fall/spring combined).
- Campus connections of members: Cal State East Bay, Ecole Normale Supérieure de Lyon, Graduate Theological Union, Hastings College of Law, San Francisco State University, UC Berkeley, UC San Diego, and UC

San Francisco (including undergraduate, Master's student, PhD student, postdoc, emeritus faculty, staff). Majors/educational background: ethics, gender and women's studies, history, law, psychology, public health, and sociology.

- Organizational connections of members: ACCESS Women's Health, Advancing New Standards in Reproductive Health, Bay Area Doula Project, Center for Genetics and Society, Packard Foundation, Physicians for Reproductive Health.

“Time
to do the
readings and
have these rich
conversations
was great, but
the relationships
win.”

(Fall 2012
participant)





Structure of sessions

In an early session, potential presenters were confirmed and a schedule developed. In some sessions two people presented; in others one presented, and we spent the rest of the time discussing a reading or two. In later sessions, a group member, other than the facilitator, led discussion around a paper or reading. Each presenter was given about 30 minutes.

The presenter was given the opportunity to describe the type of feedback desired, any specific information about the writing style of their area of scholarship, the intended audience for their work, and/or the publication where the author intended to submit their manuscript or do their presentation. The discussion leader started by giving an overview of the paper

and, ideally, facilitated the Q+A discussion. If a presenter cancelled with enough notice, another presenter filled in. Alternatively, additional reading was selected or an open group discussion was held. For presentations that were focused on feedback about how to structure a community event, the event sponsor led discussion.

Session structure:

- Start at stated time (snacks available 15 minutes early)
- Check in (using a timer, each participant had 1 minute)
- Administrative updates (e.g. how to access materials, announcements about upcoming events, schedule changes)
- Feedback on presentation (~30 mins)
- Break
- Feedback on presentation or discussion of reading (~30 mins)
- Each meeting had a volunteer note taker and timekeeper
- A few hours after each meeting, the facilitator sent a short follow up email with any key decisions or action items was sent
- The facilitator reviewed the more detailed notes for accuracy and sensitive information before posting them on the group website

“Readings
other members’
work and
presenting my
own... allowed for
a multifaceted
understanding of
how RJ is applicable
to a range of
current issues, and
was such an
inspiration for
future work.”
(Fall 2012
participant)

Topics of discussion

Sessions alternated between discussion of specific readings related to RJ and providing feedback on members’ in-progress projects such as a dissertation proposal or a work plan for an event. Some sessions included guest presenters on topics including:

- Defining reproductive justice
- History of the reproduc-

tive justice movement (including a session with Professor Elena Gutierrez of Women’s Studies at University of Illinois-Chicago, co-author of Undivided Rights)

- Assisted reproductive technology (risks to donors, experiences of lesbians and single women)
- Religion, secularism, sexual ethics

• Criminalization of pregnancy (including attending a presentation by Lynn Paltrow, JD, Executive Director of National Advocates for Pregnant Women)

• Research methods such as interviewing, Institutional Review Board, ethics of international research (including a session with Professor Kristin Luker, CRRJ Faculty Director)

Readings *

We think a combination of texts from social movement organizations and scholars is important. Starting with key texts from the reproductive justice movement is a good way to for people new to RJ to learn about its history and for more “advanced” attendees to view these texts in a different light. The first session of both terms included the same readings. Some readings were selected by the facilitator based on relevant events (e.g. upcoming talk by an author) with agreement from the group or group decision on what reading could fill a gap in the schedule.

First meeting (for both terms):

- *Reproductive Justice Briefing Booklet* selections
- Ross, Loretta. “What is Reproductive Justice”

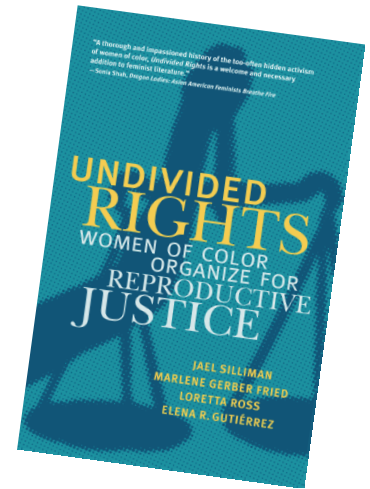
- Silliman et.al, *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice* selections

Sample readings from later sessions

- Arons, Jessica. “More than a Choice”
- Collins, Patricia Hill. “On Intellectual Activism.”
- Fried, Marlene Gerber. “Reproductive Rights Activism in the Post-Roe Era.”
- Joffe, Carole. “Roe v. Wade and Beyond: Forty Years of Legal Abortion in the United States.”
- Paltrow, Lynn M. “Roe v. Wade and the New Jane Crow: Reproductive Rights in the Age of Mass Incarceration.”
- Roberts, Dorothy. “Privatization and Punish-

ment in the New Age of Reprogenetics.”

- Solomon, Akiba. “The Personal Is Political: That’s the Challenge.”
- Sudbury, Julia, and Margo Okazawa-Rey. *Activist Scholarship: Antiracism, Feminism, and Social Change.*
- Additional useful readings are available in the in CRRJ Reproductive Justice Virtual Library, which includes links to and descriptions of over 150 sources from RJ organizations and peer-reviewed academic journals.
- Readings may also need to shift from what you planned based on previous exposure to RJ.



“The readings were excellent. The group does need to have some kind of shared foundation of knowledge of reproductive justice. I especially liked the emphasis on understanding how this emerged from the experience of women of color and from the bottom up, not primarily from academics. This seems to support keeping those grass root connections.”
(Fall 2012 participant)

What topics proved particularly productive?

Topics were selected through current events (e.g. Roe v Wade anniversary), feedback survey, and general flow of the conversation. In both sessions, the topic of teen pregnancy led to some of the discussions

with the most divergent points of view. One way this came up was through reading draft paper by a participant whose research focused on youth who are parents. The group watched a video co-produced by the SFSU Elayo project and

California Latinas for Reproductive Justice, which features a teen mother talking about her engagement with the policy process. A particularly lively session occurred in discussion of gender terminology and transgender people’s health.

Costs

Our group incurred costs for food, copying early readings, and printing fliers. CRG funding covered refreshments and in our second year, some books for participants. Facilitating the RJWG was part of the postdoc activities with the center and therefore did not include additional pay. Our RJWG was free. Others might consider charging a nominal fee or sliding scale to cover costs such as room rental. However, since any costs may be prohibitive for people, consider noting whether there are scholarships available.

Facilitator role



The facilitator was a woman of color who had done research on the reproductive justice movement. Her UCB postdoc was based out of CRRJ. She had teaching experience in social work, sociology and women's studies in addition to conducting pedagogical training, facilitating diversity training, and programming experience. The facilitator took primary responsibility for advertising, structuring the group, selecting readings, facilitating sessions, and managing administrative details such as accounting, updating the internal website, and documenting activities.

Some RJWGs may also decide the facilitator does not need facilitation or administrative experience. We do think it is important the facilitator have awareness

of power asymmetries, and how to create a space in which a community member who is new to RJ feels as comfortable speaking as the director of an organization or faculty member whose status typically makes their opinion more valuable in their respective academic spaces. Further, when deciding on a facilitator, consider their experience, identities, interests, and commitment to your institutions/organization. While your first impulse may be to have an organization leader or faculty member facilitate the group, consider whether their status and power could make some participants uncomfortable and unwilling to challenge them in the group. While individual participants are part of creating that space, due to

these very power asymmetries, in early sessions, participants may not yet have the comfort to moderate each other, which could set an unproductive pattern that continues throughout the RJWG.

Some groups may decide to rotate facilitation, but we suggest the group be very clear on who has responsibility for the above items so one person is not overburdened, or important items such as posting the notes are not forgotten. In our second year, we solicited for a co-facilitator from previous group participants. The aim is for the new facilitator to spend the first term learning from the previous facilitator then take over full responsibilities of facilitating in spring. Selecting a facilitator from the group keeps some continuity in the group.

Ensuring equitable participation



There are many ways people can participate in the RJWG such as facilitating a reading or presentation, presenting, and contributing to general discussion. However, in every group there are people who are more comfortable participating due to their identity (e.g., race, class privilege), organizational position, personality, or knowledge of the topic. You can structure the group to encourage more voices to contribute to the conversation. Developing group agreements that encourage awareness of

participation patterns is a good start (e.g. "three before me," "move up, move back" etc.) We began each meeting with a go-around in which each person had a minute to share whatever they felt was pertinent personally or professionally. Rather than a free form large group discussion of a reading, consider starting with a "think-pair-share" or a go-around the table where everyone shares one thing about the reading. Sometimes the facilitator may have to say explicitly "can we hear from people who

haven't spoken yet" or, "Maria, Jane, and I have spoken quite a bit—can someone else jump in?" Further, if after a few sessions, the facilitator notices some people are consistently not talking, the facilitator could contact people to ask if they will facilitate a particular reading or feedback session. After a few sessions as group members came to know each other more, many, but not all, became more comfortable contributing to the discussions and even challenging each other.

Attendance

The RJWG attendance expectation was stated in the introductory publicity and the standard reply email to inquiries. The required interest survey included a question about potential conflicts with attending the meetings physically. Anyone who identified more than one planned absence was not

allowed to participate on the assumption that, in the course of the term, people would also have one unplanned absence. These absences combined would result in missing at least 25% of the meetings; missing more meetings was likely to make building trust difficult. Both terms every participant

missed at least one session. In feedback from participants, they noted appreciating the requirement. We do not suggest allowing people who anticipate missing the first session to participate unless the facilitator holds a “make-up” session in which to discuss the norms and initial readings



Departures

Starting spring term, if someone left the group after the second meeting, the person sent an email to the whole group, notifying us of the de-

parture. Keep in mind some group members may develop relationships outside the group and have this info but others do not. Previously, people

only notified the facilitator of the circumstance, but this resulted in other participants not having an opportunity to say goodbye.

Location, location, location

The physical space where you meet can influence how comfortable people feel attending the group. While you may feel comfortable meeting in a department's or organization's conference room, consider whether people's previous perceptions of the space might hinder conversations. We met in a conference room in the law school's research building where CRRJ is located, a mile away from UCB's main campus. While we were still meeting in a campus facility, it

was a more neutral location with ample free parking that was more convenient for many members, many of whom lived in other cities. If your RJWG is a program of a coalition, consider meeting at an off-site location so that no one organization is disproportionately burdened. We do not suggest rotating locations. In each term of our RJWG, we shifted location once to attend a relevant event, but that produced confusion for some members even with verbal and email remind-

ers about the change.

We included information about disability access and agreed to subsidize travel expenses from prospective participants for whom it would have been a financial burden. By providing such accommodations, we increased accessibility and improved the experience for all by facilitating the participation of people with different experiences, thereby putting into practice reproductive justice principles.



Scheduling

We chose to meet every other week for two hours. This provided enough time between meetings for people to do readings. Your group may decide to meet more or less frequently.

Either way, we suggest keeping the time consistent, having an attendance policy of some kind and sticking with both!

“I now have a much clearer sense of what RJ means and does. I think the term 'reproductive justice' is used quite frequently at this time without an understanding of how the movement was formed and what the goals are. Academic activism has drastically changed my understanding of RJ and how to participate in the academy.” (Spring 2013 participant)

Incorporating feedback

Midway through each term, the facilitator emailed a survey to assess to what degree participants felt the RJWG was meeting the stated goal, their comfort level speaking in the group, quality of facilitation, and suggestions for improvement. The results were shared and discussed by the group. At the final meeting, informal feedback was solicited and a final survey emailed which included some of the midterm feedback questions as well as new ones. Finally, between each term there was an interim meeting for continuing members to check in with each other and the facilitator to solicit feedback about potential changes in the next term.

Feedback is important for assessing progress and success. With different people weighing

in, there may be conflicting results. Some participants may want more of something while others want less. There are many ways to interpret and respond to inconsistent feedback. Pleasing everyone all the time is not a realistic goal and should not be the expectation of the facilitator or the participants.

For example, in the fall a couple members wanted the group to do a collective activism project, which brought about important discussion related to aims and the relationships between activism and scholarship. We talked about how CRRJ's purpose is not to do activism per se, which would duplicate the work of organizational allies in the area. Further, other group members had joined with the

intention of furthering scholarship and changing disciplinary understanding of RJ. However, through our discussion we were able to uncover many avenues for engagement in activism and identify some participants already doing work outside the group.

Some members wanted more “experts” on RJ to be guest speakers, but other members felt guests changed the dynamic of the group too much since they had not been part of the process of developing the group. Some suggestions may conflict with your institution/organization goals in having the group or the majority of participants' interests, so proceed in a way that makes sense.

Role of activism

Based on feedback from the fall session, more explicit discussion of activism was incorporated in spring 2013.

One easy way was including a listing of reproduction-related events to the reading list. Encouraging attendance at local events, rather than asking those organizations to attend your meeting provides an opportunity for participants to

make connections with grassroots activists and support their efforts on their terms. In spring, we also had a session explicitly dedicated to discussing activism and scholarship for which the group read selections of two texts approaching these issues from different perspectives: *Activist Scholarship: Antiracism, Feminism, and Social Change* co-edited by Julia Oparah (formerly Sud-

bury) and *On Intellectual Activism* by Patricia Hill Collins. Oparah joined the discussion to share about the development of her scholarship and the new reproductive justice collective she co-founded, *Black Women Birthing Justice*. The spring group decided to relax the participation rules to invite fall participants to this special session.

We already have a group that gets together-why can't that just be our RJ group?

Before the RJWG, there was a group of UCB students who periodically met with CRRJ's faculty director to discuss reproductive issues and their individual research. When

CRRJ decided to have a group, the previous group discussed what some of the new expectations would be such as regular attendance, structured reading, emphasis on repro-

ductive justice, and opening to new members. About half of the members chose to continue with the new group. It is important to start off the new group with clear expectations.

Documentation

Create a document that guides people to the general meeting dates and structure. The facilitator was resistant to do this as it was suggestive of a course syllabus. However, participants desired a reading list, so a document was created that included meeting dates, other events of interest such as presentations or programs by RJWG

members and websites of possible interest. The document was *not* distributed prior to the meeting. A hard-copy was distributed in the first meeting and updated electronically throughout the term. We created an internal website that included an email address through which members could communicate.

Presenters posted material in designated presenter folders, notes were archived in another part of the site and announcements about local events or reminders about the meetings were sent through the site. The site was only accessible to current group members.

“My understanding has deepened through the readings and conversation, in particular through the different ways to consider an RJ framework within my own work, i.e., through questioning the power dynamics and racial/gender justice issues inherent in non-repro health issues.”
(Spring 2013 participant)

Academic credit

Some students expressed interest in taking the RJWG for course credit. The reflections students submitted after each meeting provided valuable feedback on group process and possible ways to structure future sessions.

For CRRJ to offer credit through a faculty sponsor

required the student meet with the faculty sponsor regularly, complete an academically-focused project, and contribute to other CRRJ activities. We recommend pre-determining the possible activities available for credit rather than having students develop separate projects. All of this re-

quires staff and student time to meet to discuss mutual expectations, coordinate with students, supervise and evaluate projects, and more that you may decide is not feasible.



Outside events

Over the course of the year some group members decided to attend optional events together such as group members' own organizations' events, fundraisers, or related lectures. While this was not a formal part of the RJWG, if multiple group members had attended, time was set aside on the agenda for those members to share their experience.

Meeting practices

Different aspects of the meetings were designed to integrate thoughtful practices into the group meetings. First, everyone had a time to share at the beginning of each meeting through check in. Second, the presence of food was important both for physical sustenance and its social aspects.

The Center on Reproductive Rights and Justice (CRRJ) is the nation's first multidisciplinary research center dedicated to issues of reproduction and designed to support policy solutions by connecting people and ideas across the academic-advocate divide.

CRRJ seeks to realize reproductive rights and advance reproductive justice by furthering scholarship, bolstering law and policy advocacy efforts, and influencing public opinion through innovative research, teaching, and convenings.

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Challenges

Some challenges occur in most groups: logistics. At the beginning of fall term, the group expressed interest in attending an event in a nearby city. Enough members agreed to attend an extra session to ensure that a previously-scheduled presenter still received feedback. However, the trip required coordinating schedules and by the time the date arrived it was a particularly hectic time in the term for members, many of whom ended up not attending. (We did change location of a regular meeting once during each term to attend a CRRJ talk that conflicted with the meeting date/time. We generally discussed the change at the meeting, and the facilitator sent directions and reminders.) That term we also established that one of the expectations was that absent people would provide feedback to the presenter via email. At the end of the term the facilitator confirmed the feedback had not been provided, so continuing members decided to remove that expectation for the following term.

The biggest challenge of the group remains its strength: different exposure levels and understandings of RJ. In the initial advertisements, we purposely left the stated goal broad: deepening understanding of RJ. Participants are coming into the group with very different experiences and familiarity with the topic and understandings of the reproductive health, rights and justice movement; privilege and oppression; gender theory; critical race theory and the like. Thus, bringing people with this range of experiences and interests together for discussions was a challenge but also provided many opportunities for learning.

Accomplishments

Members received feedback on projects in various stages. Some of the tangible achievements of group members:

- Acceptance of first-ever review on reproductive justice for *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*
- Presentation at National Women's Studies Association 2012 conference November 2012
- Presentation at UCLA Thinking Gender 2013 conference February 2013
- Panel presentations by RJWG members at Pacific Sociological Association 2013 conference March 2013
- Development of "Honoring Legacies of Justice" "a Roe v. Wade 40th anniversary service of storytelling and music that honors the fullness and messiness of justice work" attended by over 100 community members
- Receipt of Best Undergraduate Honors Thesis from UCB Gender and Women's Studies
- Group members attending and (some facilitating) at Reproductive Justice: Activists, Advocates, Academics in Ann Arbor convening in May 2013 (Michigan Meeting on Reproductive Justice)

