

AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN ARE FOR REPRODUCTIVE FREEDOM

WE REMEMBER

1989

One of the signers, Loretta Ross, explains its history:

"This statement ... originated with a conference call organized by Donna Brazile, then executive director of the National Political Congress of Black Women, because we were strategizing on how to respond to the Webster Supreme Court decision [the 1989 ruling that allowed individual states to restrict access to abortion]. On that conference call, we decided that what was most urgently needed was a statement giving African American women permission to talk about abortion (the original suggestion was made by Byllye Avery). We then published the statement, distributed about 1/4 million copies of it, and the rest is history."

Choice is the essence of freedom. It's what we African-Americans have struggled for all these years. The right to choose where we would sit on a bus. The right to vote. The right for each of us to select our own paths, to dream and reach for our dreams. The right to choose how we would or would not live our lives.

This freedom – to choose and to exercise our choices – is what we've fought and died for. Brought here in chains, worked like mules, bred like beasts, whipped one day, sold the next – for 244 years we were held in bondage. Somebody said that we were less than human and not fit for freedom. Somebody said we were like children and could not be trusted to think for ourselves.

Somebody owned our flesh, and decided if and when and with whom and how our bodies were to be used. Somebody said that Black women could be raped, held in concubinage, forced to bear children year in and year out, but often not raise them. Oh yes, we have known how painful

it is to be without choice in this land.

Those of us who remember the bad old days when Jim Crow ruled and segregation was the way of things, know the hardships and indignities we faced. We were free, but few or none were our choices. Somebody said where we could live and couldn't, where we could work, what schools we could go to, where we could eat, how we could travel. Somebody prevented us from voting. Somebody said we could be paid less than other workers. Somebody burned crosses, harassed and terrorized us in order to keep us down.

Now once again somebody is trying to say that we can't handle the freedom of choice. Only this time they're saying African-American women can't think for themselves, and therefore, can't be allowed to make serious decisions. Somebody's saying that we should not have the freedom to take charge of our personal lives and protect our health, that we only have limited rights over our bodies. Somebody's saying that if women have unintended pregnancies, it's too bad, but they must pay the price.

Somebody's saying that we must have babies whether we choose to or not. Doesn't matter what we say, doesn't matter how we feel. Some say that abortion under any circumstance is wrong, others that rape and incest and danger to the life of the woman are the only exceptions. Doesn't matter that nobody's saying who decides if it was rape or incest; if a woman's word is good enough; if she must go into court and prove it. Doesn't matter that she may not be able to take care of a baby; that the problem also affects girls barely out of adolescence; that our children are having children. Doesn't matter if you're poor and pregnant – go on welfare, or walk away.

What does matter is that we know abortions will still be done, legal or not. We know the consequences 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 kitchen 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.

We understand why African-American women risked their lives then, and why they seek safe legal abortions now. It's been a matter of survival. Hunger and homelessness. Inadequate housing and income to properly provide for themselves and their children. Family instability. Rape. Incest. Abuse. Too young, too old, too sick, too tired. Emotional, physical, mental, economic, social – the reasons for not carrying a pregnancy to term are endless and varied, personal, urgent, and private. And for all these pressing reasons, African-American women once again will be among the first forced to risk their lives if abortion is made illegal.

There have always been those who have stood in the way of our exercising our rights, who tried to restrict our choices. There probably always will be. But we who have been oppressed should not be swayed in our opposition to tyranny, of any kind, especially attempts to take away our reproductive freedom. You may believe abortion is wrong. We respect your belief and we will do all in our power to protect that choice for you. You may decide that abortion is not an option you would choose. Reproductive freedom guarantees your right not to. All that we ask is that no one deny another human being the right to make her own choice. That no one condemn her to exercise her choices in ways that endanger her health, her life. And that no one prevent others from creating safe, affordable, legal conditions to accommodate women, whatever the choices they make. Reproductive freedom gives each of us the right to make our own choices, and guarantees us a safe, legal, affordable support system. It's the right to choose.

We are still an embattled people beset with life-and-death issues. Black America is under siege. Drugs, the scourge of our community, are wiping out one, two three generations. We are killing ourselves and each other. Rape and other unspeakable acts of violence are becoming sickeningly commonplace. Babies linger on death's door, at risk at birth: born addicted to crack and cocaine; born underweight and undernourished; born AIDS-infected. An ever-growing number of our children are being abandoned, being mentally, physically, spiritually abused. Homelessness, hunger, unemployment run rife. Poverty grows. Our people cry out in desperation, anger, and need.

Meanwhile, those somebodies who claim they're "pro-life" aren't moved to help the living. 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 maternal nutrition and health programs. Eradicating our 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.

So when somebody denouncing abortion claims that they're "pro-life," remind them of an old saying that our grandmothers often used to say: "It's not important what people say, it's what

they do.” And remember who we are, remember our history, our continuing struggle for freedom. Remember to tell them that We Remember!

Written by Marcia Gillespie

Original Signers:

Byllye Avery (National Black Women's Health Project)
Rev. Willie Barrow (Operation Push)
Donna Brazile (Housing Now)
Shirley Chisholm (National Political Congress of Black Women)
Representative Cardiss Collins (U.S. Congress)
Romona Edelin (National Urban Coalition)
Jacqui Gates (National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women's Clubs, Inc.)
Marcia Ann Gillespie (Ms. Magazine)
Dorothy Height (National Council of Negro Women)
Jewel Jackson McCabe (National Coalition of 100 Black Women)
Julianne Malveaux (San Francisco Black Leadership Forum)
Eleanor Holmes Norton (Georgetown University Law School)
C. Delores Tucker (DNC Black Caucus)

Patricia Tyson (Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights)
Maxine Waters (Black Women's Forum)
Faye Wattleton (Planned Parenthood Federation of America)

Additional Signers in 1994:

Tony M. Bond
Sen. Carol Moseley-Braun (D-IL)
Rep. Corrine Brown (D-FL)
Rep. Eva Clayton (D-NC)
Rep. Barbara-Rose Collins (D-MI)
Rev. Alma Crawford
Evelyn S. Field
Rev. Catherine Godbolte
Rev. Dr. Claudia Highbaugh
Beverly Hunter
Rev. Elenora Giddings Ivory
Bernice Powell Jackson
Terri James
Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)
Bisola Marignay
The Rev. Dr. Joan Martin
Cassandra McConnell
Rep. Cynthia McKinney (D-GA)
Rep. Carrie P. Meek (D-FL)
Mary F. Morten
Cynthia Newbille
Mary Jane Patterson
Loretta Ross
Jerald Lillian Scott
Beverly W. Stripling
Elizabeth Terry
Mable Thomas

Winnette P. Willis
Kim Youngblood