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Forging NEW ALLIANCES: Mobilizing Hip Hop Activists for Reproductive Justice

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Abstract (summary)

Over the last six years, activists, artists, scholars, community leaders and ordinary folk alike have found ways to harness the power of hip hop in order to spark meaningfully active political and civic participation among the younger generations who grew up in the post-civil rights era. In that workshop, several young activists, many of whom were in their late teens and early twenties, expressed concern about the lack of comprehensive sex education, the repression of positive, healthy expressions of sexuality, the obstacles to obtaining reproductive health care services and governmental intrusion on the reproductive lives of marginalized communities.

Full Text

We are in the midst of a revolution. Women of color and our allies across the country are joining together to build a movement that addresses the reproductive needs of communities of color. Tired of the mainstream pro-choice movement's ever-narrowing focus on abortion rights, women of color activists are redefining the reproductive rights paradigm. By moving away from the individualistic "right to choose" and privacy rhetoric, this movement is moving toward a framework that embraces social justice and human rights, and is mindful of historical and contemporary governmental efforts to control marginalized communities through the control of their fertility.

For someone who has been actively involved in the reproductive rights movement for more than 13 years, this is an exciting moment. Given the nature of this new framework, there are many prospects for building alliances across movements that have previously not been easy to forge with the abortion rights-only focus. For example, I was heartened by the recent actions of the NAACP. At its convention two years ago, members of the group voted to pass a resolution that officially supports reproductive rights. Additionally, the group endorsed the 2004 March for Women's Lives held in Washington, D.C. These were the first instances in its almost one-hundred-year existence that the NAACP very publicly supported reproductive freedom.

We have also seen effective cross-movement collaborations in California where civil rights and other social justice groups joined with reproductive justice groups during the 2005 special election to defeat Proposition 73. If passed, the so-called "The Parents' Right to Know Act" would have created a constitutional amendment that would have restricted abortion rights for girls under the age of eighteen. It would have required providers to notify parents or legal guardians of a minor's abortion 48 hours before the procedure as well as made providers liable for civil damages if they did not comply with the law. With social justice as their common rallying point, many groups stood firmly in opposition to the proposition and were able to effectively mobilize their constituencies.

That victory gives me hope about other possible collaborations, such as partnerships with environmental justice groups (many of which are led by women of color) and economic justice activists. However, there are connections to other groups of activists that may not be as obvious. One is the emerging hip hop political movement.

Within the hip hop political movement, there are increasing numbers of young women who identify as "hip hop feminists." This may seem like an oxymoron to some given the blatant misogyny of much mainstream rap music and videos; however, younger women are using hip hop, which is a culture that many of us grew up and identify with on some level, as a starting point to examine and speak out against racial, ethnic, gender, class and sexual oppression within U.S. society. For instance, approximately 1,000 people from the United States and abroad participated in the 2005 "Feminism and Hip Hop" conference in Chicago to discuss these issues. The overwhelming response to this conference was a surprise even to its organizers.

Hip hop has become a significant organizing force. Over the last six years, activists, artists, scholars, community leaders and ordinary folk alike have found ways to harness the power of hip hop in order to spark meaningfully active political and civic participation among the younger generations who grew up in the post-civil rights era. Several organizations, such as Russell Simmons' Hip Hop Summit Action Network and the National Hip Hop Political Convention (NHHPC), mobilized young people during the 2004 Presidential election and were very successful in increasing the participation levels of younger people in that election. NHHPC in particular continues to build on the momentum that it started in 2004 by becoming a permanent national organization.

During the last two years, I have been involved in the hip hop political movement in order to increase the involvement of younger women of color, particularly those under the age of 25, in reproductive justice issues. Although many of them support the concept of reproductive rights, many young women of color have said that they do not personally identify with, or even understand, the mainstream "pro-choice" movement. While many of the mainstream national groups have spent a lot of time and money conducting focus groups to determine which "messages" work in mobilizing women of color, they really have not made significant progress in reaching out to our communities.

I have been part of a core group of about ten young women who founded the Progressive Women's Caucus (PWC) of the National Hip Hop Political Convention. PWC grew out of our concern about the inattention to gender and sexuality issues during the initial planning of the convention. In the summer of 2004 in Newark, New Jersey, we launched a major organizing strategy that included developing a gender and sexuality platform. We lobbied state caucuses to include

our platform in the convention's five-point national agenda on education, economic justice, criminal justice, health care and human rights. We also conducted workshops and organized mass meetings at the convention.

Our organizing efforts were no easy feat. We encountered resistance from some factions of the convention who questioned the need for a women's/gender caucus at all and argued that our presence would only splinter the convention. Although several key points of our gender and sexuality platform, such as specific LGBT rights issues, did not make it into the final document, we were successful in getting a reproductive rights clause onto the agenda.

As part of our organizing efforts, we distributed survey cards to get a sense of the concerns of the convention participants, especially women. In more than half of the surveys returned, participants indicated that they thought that abortion, HIV/ AIDS and other reproductive health issues were among the most important political and social issues. They also expressed concern about economic issues, the war in Iraq, sexism within hip hop, violence against women, racial profiling and drug abuse and trafficking. Instinctively, they saw the connections among these seemingly divergent issues.

Many convention participants attended the reproductive justice workshop that I and two other fellow activists conducted. In that workshop, several young activists, many of whom were in their late teens and early twenties, expressed concern about the lack of comprehensive sex education, the repression of positive, healthy expressions of sexuality, the obstacles to obtaining reproductive health care services and governmental intrusion on the reproductive lives of marginalized communities. They were unconditionally passionate in their articulation of these concerns.

The interest is there. We just have to meet and respect where younger women stand and build from there. Even though some older activists may not understand, identify with or even like hip hop, the fact is that it is a major social and cultural force in the United States and abroad. It has the potential to become a significant political force as well.

PWC is continuing the work that we started at the convention. One of our goals is to create a progressive network of women of color (and our male and white female allies) who are unabashedly feminist, race- and class-conscious and political. We have been approached by grassroots organizers for assistance in addressing gender and sexuality issues in their local communities. We continue to conduct workshops, lecture, write and hold public forums on these issues. We invite others to join us in our efforts.

The reproductive rights movement needs the voices of the hip hop generation. We cannot allow others to make important decisions about OUR bodies, OUR lives, OUR communities! It's time to step up.

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