

# INTERSECTIONS

## AT THE GRASSROOTS

Insights from Organizing for  
Reproductive Justice, Youth Leadership,  
and Immigrant & Refugee Rights



### THE MOMENTUM SERIES

A project of EMERJ: Expanding the Movement  
for Empowerment and Reproductive Justice



### Volume 2

EMERJ is a national movement-building initiative  
of Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice



**ACRJ**  
ASIAN COMMUNITIES FOR  
REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE



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## ***THE MOMENTUM SERIES***

### **Volume I. Winning Reproductive Justice:**

Contributions to Policy Change from the Reproductive Justice Movement



### **Volume II. Intersections at the Grassroots:**

Insights from Organizing for Reproductive Justice, Youth Leadership, and Immigrant & Refugee Rights

**The Momentum Series is a project of EMERJ** (Expanding the Movement for Empowerment and Reproductive Justice), that supports movement building by engaging reproductive justice allies in dialogues that lead to deep and shared understandings of the current movement and opportunities for movement growth. Through these efforts, EMERJ is releasing reports that document our dialogues as well as tools, models, and resources that highlight and amplify the groundbreaking work of reproductive justice groups and our allies.

The work of EMERJ is grounded in a long history of women of color leaders and organizations that have taken courageous and innovative action to demand an end to reproductive oppression in our communities and achieve a more just future. As a result of our collective work, the Reproductive Justice Movement is growing. Through this series of conversations and reports, EMERJ will gather and document successes and insights from the vast and diverse body of experience of reproductive justice allies. The Momentum Series is one of many ways in which EMERJ and other groups are making a contribution to reproductive justice movement building. Together we will continue to strengthen our collective capacity to build the social, political, and economic power required to make lasting change.

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PHOTO: MATAHARI: EYE OF THE DAY



# INTRODUCTION: SEEKING INSIGHTS FROM THE MOVEMENT FOR THE MOVEMENT

People experience reproductive justice when they have the social, political, and economic power and resources to make healthy decisions about their gender, bodies, and sexuality for themselves, their families, and their communities. Looking at the world through a reproductive justice lens reveals how gender, bodies, and sexuality are regulated and controlled in communities and institutions and in broader social and economic structures.

The goal of reproductive justice is ambitious. In the face of rampant violence against women and girls, systemic racial discrimination, and an increasing economic divide between the very rich and the very poor, creating a future without such oppression seems almost unimaginable.

This kind of transformation requires a large and powerful social movement with an explicit reproductive justice commitment. Reproductive oppression is a result of multiple systems of oppression based on race, class, gender, sexuality, immigration status, age, ability, geography, and faith/spirituality. So, fighting reproductive oppression requires taking action to combat all these systems of oppression. Organizing at the intersection of these systems allows us to build alliances across communities, issue areas, and movements, which strengthens all of our efforts and allows us to bring our whole selves – all of our many identities and strengths – to these struggles.

Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice's (ACRJ) movement-building initiative, EMERJ, strengthens the Reproductive Justice Movement through strategic coordination and collaboration with reproductive justice groups across the country. *Intersections at the Grassroots* is the culmination of EMERJ's learning from group discussions and interviews with 13 organizations and over 40 leaders working at the intersection of the reproductive justice, youth organizing, and immigrant and refugee rights sectors.

All the groups who participated in the project have a focus on youth organizing and/or immigrant and refugee rights. Some organizations define themselves as reproductive

organizations, some organizations are familiar with reproductive justice and its connection to their primary work, and others came to the conversation without much knowledge about reproductive justice. The organizations that were not familiar with reproductive justice are working with constituencies directly affected by reproductive oppression and on issues that are critical to achieving reproductive justice.

What we learned from these conversations resonates with what we know about successful social movements. By identifying common features that strong movements share, we can take practical steps to nurture those features in reproductive justice movement building. In this report we focus on four indicators of a strong social movement and the questions they raise for individuals and groups engaged in reproductive justice work: shared analysis and language, leadership from affected communities, cross-sector alliances, and organizational capacity and resources.

## FOUR INDICATORS OF STRONG MOVEMENTS

Movement Indicator	Questions for the Reproductive Justice Field
<b>Shared Analysis and Language</b>	How can we think and talk clearly and collectively about reproductive oppression and the control and regulation of our genders, bodies, sexualities, and families?
<b>Leadership from Affected Communities</b>	What lessons are we learning from communities most severely impacted by the control and regulation of gender, body, and sexuality, and how can our efforts to overcome that impact be supported?
<b>Cross-Sector Alliances</b>	Where are movement intersections emerging and how can they be strengthened?
<b>Capacity and Resources</b>	What strengths and capacities are present in our movement and what resources do we need to grow our work?

These four indicators rose organically from the stories we heard and resonated with our common sense understanding of effective movements for social change. They do not provide a complete understanding of movement building. However, they do provide a framework in which we can learn from the wisdom and experience of participating groups. We are deeply grateful to all of the organizations and leaders that participated in the project and look forward to continuing this dialogue with additional youth and immigrant and refugee groups as well as other justice movements as our network and capacity grows.

# CREATING SHARED ANALYSIS AND LANGUAGE

## Creating Safe Spaces to Tell Our Stories

In all of EMERJ's conversations, we found that when we create a safe and comfortable space for people to bring their whole bodies, minds, and spirits into the room, a wide range of experiences of control and regulation of gender, bodies, and sexuality are revealed. We also found that using the Reproductive Justice Lens – a political education tool developed by EMERJ for identifying reproductive justice issues – allowed people to integrate their personal experiences into the bigger picture of reproductive oppression. Especially for groups newer to connecting youth organizing or immigrant and refugee rights to reproductive justice, the Reproductive Justice Lens facilitated the process of making these connections in concrete ways.

While reproductive justice may be an unfamiliar term to some people, the control and regulation of gender, bodies, and sexuality is a common experience that people feel in real and tangible ways. And although all groups may not necessarily use the reproductive justice framework to describe their work or the issues facing their communities, many have found their own unique ways for engaging these issues. The most important aspect is to start where people are – from the experiences, ideas, and concepts that are familiar to them – and build from there. For example, Hamid Khan, Executive Director of South Asian Network (SAN), stated that SAN does not start with the term reproductive justice because they do not want to describe their efforts with what they view as a narrow label:

*We start from the ground up in building our analysis and language, rather than starting from reproductive justice. It's more or less for us to look at varied experiences and then build them together into something that looks like reproductive justice. We let people's experiences of economic justice, women and agency, access to health care, access to reproductive health, and equal voice and leadership evolve and build toward what we call reproductive justice.*

Carol Gomez, Founding Director of MataHari: Eye of the Day, described a similar process, emphasizing the importance of having these conversations in an environment that is open, friendly, and familiar:

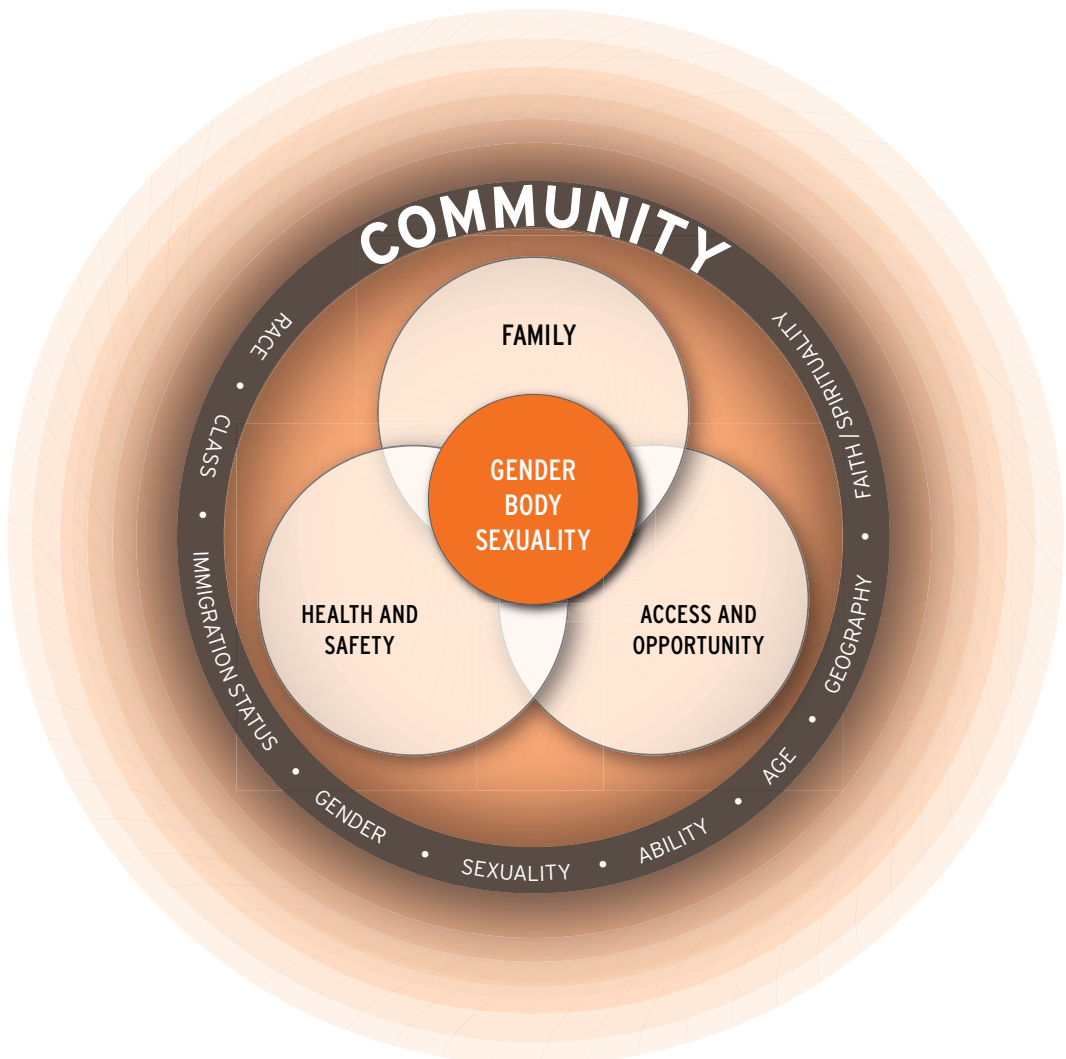
*Starting with experience is effective, rather than directly using the words "reproductive justice" (RJ). RJ terminology feels sort of academic. Breaking it down in these terms with community may not work as well; it's more of a "framework" for organizers to utilize in creating spaces*



*for dialogue...We talk about community-specific issues using film, or someone's story. Then themes organically come out. For example, at our kitchen tables with women of African descent, the discussion is completely free flowing. It's really important to have food at every meeting, to be inclusive of children, and to be at a home. It's about embracing communities as they are, and making it as comfortable and as homelike as possible...and don't forget humor - to love and laugh with each other.*

From Hamid and Carol's examples, we see the strength of the reproductive justice framework prioritizes building relationships and making connections with people so that they will be willing to take the courageous step of telling their story.

## THE REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE LENS



*Each of the stories shared in our discussions is a useful contribution to building and broadening the movement's analysis of reproductive justice. These stories provide specific examples of reproductive oppression that we can connect to a wide range of people's lived experiences and use to identify strategies for organizing.*

"How do you solve poverty? All the problems come together. Poverty targets women of color with children."

"Young men get more positive reinforcement about intellect, bodies, what they're doing. Young women don't get the reinforcement. It affects who they date, hang out with, and when they start sexual relationships."

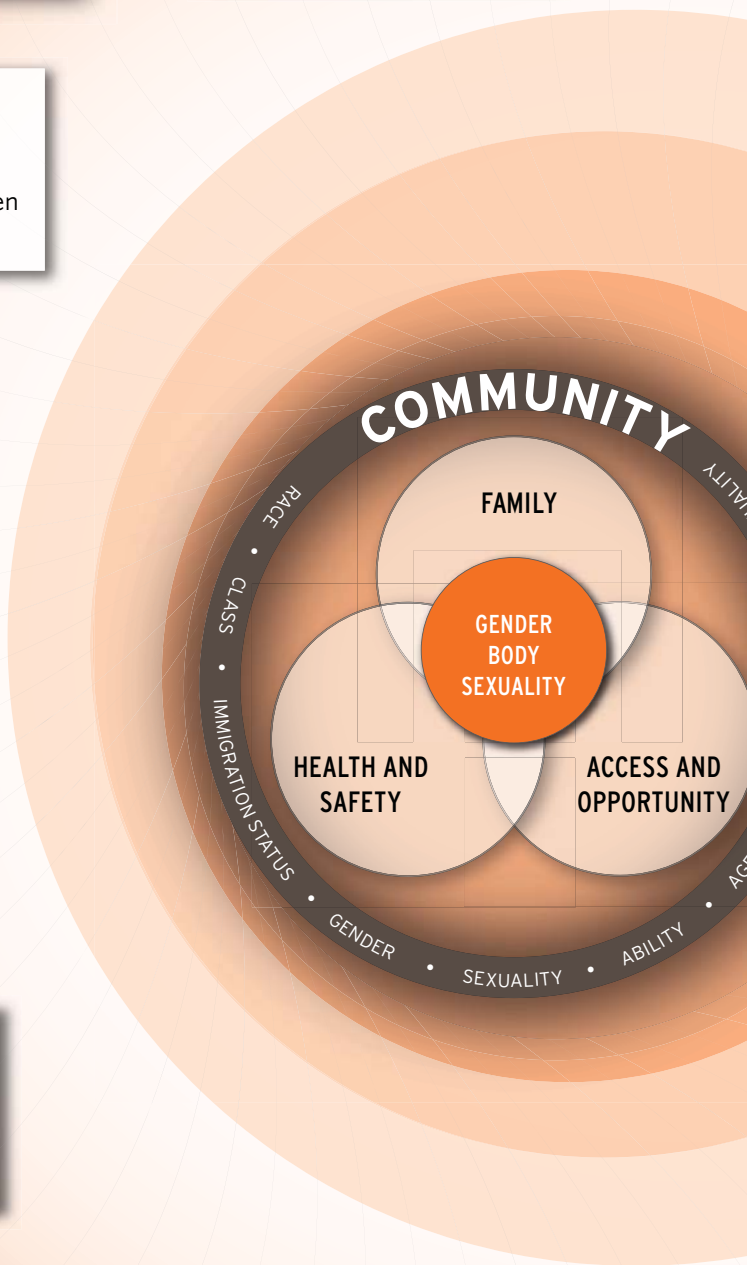
"A transgender woman was kept in a detention center cell 24/7 'for her own protection.' Transgender people in prison frequently experience isolation and abuse by guards and other inmates."

"Workplace violence, especially for undocumented women, often results in rape, sexual harassment, blackmail, forced prostitution on the job."

"There's a lack of resources that support health and safety in the sex industry such as health care, harm reduction supplies (e.g. clean syringes), self-defense resources, and ways to report police-based violence."

"Housekeepers work long hours and use cleaning materials that are hazardous to their health. On top of that they have no access to health care, a lack of basic labor protection, no overtime, and no respect as a workforce."

"They (young men of color) are having to prove they're tough, showing a certain image. It's one person, then more people, then it's the whole grade making fun of you."



"Because she takes care of someone else's family, if a nanny gets pregnant, she is asked to terminate the pregnancy or lose her job."

"Families are detained by ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement). Mothers and children are separated in state custody, and pregnant and nursing women have been left in detention."

"Migrant women often arrive in the country as dependent spouses of people who've lived in the country for much longer. The natural fabric of social structure and extended family that helps in the childbirth and child rearing process is absent. People are culture-shocked, isolated, and vulnerable to exploitation and violence."

"A lot of pregnant girls have a harder time receiving education and it causes them stress. Their parents are mad because they don't want that for their children. Parents cause stress, school causes stress. . . it's bad for baby, bad for them. They don't get a good education and can't provide for the kid."

"For people who are on H4 visas as dependents on people with H1B (temporary visas for highly-skilled workers) visas for their status, they can't get a work permit, which limits their ability to be independent and sustain themselves."

"Negative messages create a view that women are slutty. We need to advocate that women are more than eye candy."

"In our communities, migrating women aren't even acknowledged. Men are recognized as breadwinners and women are just there."

"Even after acquiring legal status, many transgender immigrants cannot find jobs due to gender discrimination, and are forced back onto the streets."

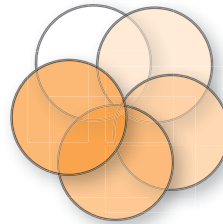
"Because of cultural and gender values, a lot of women are not able to access pap smears or breast exams. Their spouse might not be comfortable with them seeing a doctor, particularly a male doctor."

## Building our Analysis at the Intersections

Each of the stories of reproductive oppression embodies the core aspect of reproductive justice, that all our analysis and organizing comes from an understanding of intersectionality.

### INTERSECTIONALITY

is the linking of different systems of power and oppression. These intersections can occur at different levels - individual, interpersonal, family, community, and institutional.



Experiences of reproductive oppression and reproductive justice occur to our whole selves, not one aspect of ourselves that can be split off into a single-issue analysis or approach. Several of the organizations in our discussions talked about broadening their intersectional analysis to include sexual orientation and gender identity.

South Asian Network spent several years developing their lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) analysis and programming. They started by forming a queer advisory committee within the organization to challenge their own homophobia and internalized homophobia, and to see how it intersects with racism and xenophobia. Then they moved on to focus on how to build the organizational infrastructure for long-term engagement and leadership development as an integrated, rather than separate, program. Joyti Chand, Lead Community Advocate of the Civil Rights Unit, explained, "We don't want to ghettoize the community or our programming. We don't want one person on a staff of 15 that is working on LGBTQI issues."

They began incorporating LGBTQI issues into their day-to-day programming, and conducted a community assessment that was used to create programs and as an organizing tool. They focused on curriculum development and conducted trainings with a wide range of immigrant communities, as well as train the trainer sessions and roundtable discussions with organizers from numerous people of color, immigrant, and legal aid groups. This intensive and successful process had tangible results both internally and externally.

*Our relationships are deeper due to the trainings. People are approaching South Asian Network for curriculum, materials, and resources - information that they can take back to their own staff. For example, a couple of organizations have formed an LGBTQI advisory committee as a result.*

In other organizations, the process of looking at these intersections has not yet occurred, but ideas have begun to formulate in people's minds. While Chinese Progressive Association in San Francisco hasn't previously talked about how to incorporate gender/body/sexuality

oppression into their justice work, Youth Organizer Emily Lee has seen a lot of issues of sexuality and homophobia that have come up and need to be addressed. She sees a lot of opportunities where their youth organizing could intersect with reproductive justice.

*There's a lot we can do to develop a stronger analysis of reproductive justice. We're not up on what the issues are. We need to do internal education of staff and understanding more of it, then we can see that the lens is actually bigger than we know it is. A concrete thing would be doing more workshops and training with youth. We frame things in an environmental justice or immigrant rights focus, and I think we could build a stronger foundation of doing work through a RJ lens.*

She sees the benefit of integrating reproductive justice because of the direct impact it would have on building consciousness and empowering young women of color.

*Doing reproductive justice with young women is important since young women are heavily identified by their bodies, sexuality, and, especially in immigrant communities, gender roles. We need to address these issues for young women to step up into leadership roles.*

## LESSONS LEARNED

- 1. Stories of reproductive oppression are present in all of our communities.** While some groups approach their work using a reproductive justice framework and others do not, all the individuals who participated in the dialogues were able to share an example or story of how people in their communities are experiencing the control and regulation of their gender, bodies, and sexuality.
- 2. The Reproductive Justice Lens is an effective tool.** For some people, reproductive justice can seem very broad, overwhelming, and all encompassing; using the RJ Lens was helpful for concentrating on gender/body/sexuality. For those who do not place issues of gender/body/sexuality oppression at the center of their work, the RJ Lens provided a fresh perspective and allowed them to lift up issues that have often been overlooked.
- 3. An intersectional analysis is critical.** Organizations that participated in our conversations are adamant that building an intersectional analysis is not an academic exercise; rather it is the result of listening and responding to the lived experiences and needs of the communities in which they live and organize. We found that a reproductive justice analysis is one way that some groups express their intersectional analysis. For other groups, reproductive justice may provide an opportunity to explore areas of their intersectional analysis that they haven't addressed before or to bring new language to their constituents' experiences.

# BUILDING THE LEADERSHIP OF AFFECTED COMMUNITIES

Gender/body/sexuality oppression affects everyone, and certain communities experience its most profound impacts. Leadership of these communities – from identifying issues to creating solutions and organizing for change – is a strategic necessity required by our reproductive values of inclusion. Leadership of the most affected communities ensures that the practice of movement building reflects lived experiences and builds capacity where it is most necessary. It also inspires our communities to take a stand against reproductive oppression and builds a broad and strong base of support for the movement. When we try to address reproductive oppression without the leadership of communities that are most affected, we find that solutions often fail to reach the most marginalized communities or ignore the realities of people’s lived experiences.

To learn about building leadership by communities most affected by gender/body/sexuality oppression, EMERJ asked participants of *Intersections* to describe their own experiences of leadership and the ways they are developing new leaders to support their communities’ capacity to analyze and take action around reproductive oppression in their lives.

## **Leadership in the Context of Systemic Oppression**

Organizations often face challenges to building and supporting new leaders who must overcome overwhelming day-to-day needs. Two organizations that work with young mothers raised this challenge as a priority for the Reproductive Justice Movement to consider. Leslie Grant of Sistas on the Rise described how they have shifted their organizing approach in order to address challenges in organizing young mothers with immediate needs, “They [young mothers] would say, ‘I need a job. I need to eat. I don’t have anyone to watch my kid.’ Now when they come in the door we ask, ‘What do you need?’”

In respecting the complexities of the daily lives of their members, the Brooklyn Young Mothers’ Collective faces a similar dynamic. Community Organizer Colleen Thompson talked about the time it takes to navigate what young mothers are up against. “It’s not going to happen right away. It’s like, ‘RJ is great but right now I need a job!’ We can’t tell someone, ‘Well, if you sit here and listen to the history of women of color we will help you get a job and services.’”



### Connecting “I” to “We”: Models for Building Oppression Consciousness

While people’s day-to-day struggles may pose challenges to leadership development, they also present opportunities for building consciousness by providing a place to start reflecting on personal experiences and then placing them within the larger context of oppression. In a group discussion of young women of color in New York City, Leslie shared her organization’s process of helping other young women develop their analysis by starting where they are:

*How do we talk about sexuality? We say, ‘Here is you.’ Then we talk about the other people ‘you’ are dealing with. Our priority is sister first; be comfortable to voice your needs and desires, what you do with your body. You first! Know the risk behind the choices.*

The next step is to bring one’s own experience and connect it to that of others.

*We’re trying to move people from I to We. I’m not the only person going through this. A lot of women feel really isolated. It’s I-we-my sister.*

Another young woman in the discussion echoed how useful it is to take one’s realization of being impacted by oppression to help others to see their experiences in a similar way.

*It’s how do you go from you to your analysis? Part of it is showing other young women who don’t have what you have: This is you.*

People have different routes of translating their personal experiences into an understanding of oppression, and then getting to a place of taking action around bringing change to their

lives and their communities. Each person goes through their own unique process, and organizers may play a role in facilitating that shift in consciousness.

By virtue of the trust that they have built within the community, South Asian Network has become first responders for battered women, and this is the point where consciousness raising begins. Executive Director Hamid Khan describes how they use a public health approach to change: first assessing a person's understanding of the situation, next addressing issues of mental and emotional health with the lens of migration and displacement, and then, over a period of time, bringing the issues back to the community:

*So the whole process includes trying to make an assessment about what the needs are and then trying to shift people to becoming spokespeople. For instance, our last community forum on violence was facilitated by a survivor. This is a big deal because it's a very touchy subject. Her family could be threatened back home - we've seen this happen. It took this person about 18 months to make this journey. It was shorter than for most people because she had the privilege of speaking English and having some other resources. For others it takes a much longer time.*

In some instances, oppression consciousness happens much more organically. Aside from helping to provide logistical and infrastructure support, Carol Gomez of MataHari finds that her most effective role in organizing the community is a peripheral one, instead helping to develop leadership among community members. She observes that when women come together, share their personal stories, and have honest and open dialogue, they are naturally motivated to take action and come up with ideas about how to address community issues. "The key is to bring people in a safe space together and empower people to be thinkers in the room and not just passive recipients."

### **Critical Role of Youth Leadership**

The young people fighting gender/body/sexuality oppression in their communities are taking leadership at the intersection of youth organizing and reproductive justice, and are using cutting-edge strategies not always recognized by the larger Reproductive Justice Movement. Young organizers often voiced frustration with the lack of respect for their leadership shown by veteran activists who have been leading the movement for decades, and the lack of support they receive to be nurtured as leaders.

As a young person taking leadership in the Reproductive Justice Movement, Leslie often finds herself in adult-dominated spaces where her input and opinions are dismissed. Her description of her experience received enthusiastic nods from other young women participating in the conversation. "I'm growing up and adults in the group feel like they're being disrespected when I talk to them directly about my experience - but it's valid!" She referred to the general sentiment she has observed by groups dismissing young women's leadership as, "Look at the cute girls, now back to the agenda." She was also aware that youth marginalization goes beyond individual leaders but also to the value placed on specific issues and movement work.



*Within organizations we work with we are valued, but on a large scale, local small grassroots groups aren't valued. Within the movement, people talk about the right to parent, but they still don't look at young people as having the right to be parents, to choose.*

A key aspect of movement building, which relies on the intentional inclusion of all communities, is developing youth leadership by harnessing their talents and building their skills, analysis, and confidence to be powerful. Leadership development is a deliberate and long-term process based on the idea that leaders are cultivated rather than born. One pervasive obstacle to nurturing young leaders is the way in which youth organizing has become institutionalized – as age-specific programming that is separate from other community organizing work. Chhaya Chhoum, Director of the Youth Leadership Project at CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities, reflects on the gap in leadership continuity that occurs when young people “age out”:

*One of the biggest challenges we face is retainment of members. After youth finish our programs, there is nothing for them to go to. Where do they go once they're no longer youth? We're not good at sustaining leadership development.*

It is evident that the obstacles young people confront in their transition to becoming adult leaders are exacerbated when there is a lack of adequate support from adult allies, organizations, or the movement as a whole. A member of LUZ Reproductive Justice Think Tank noted, “Burnout happens and young leadership isn’t cultivated because it happens. When organizations do work to cultivate young leadership, they get punished.”

Developing the leadership of young activists is a critical part of sustaining our movement. And as a matter of necessity, long-time leaders must recognize the vital contributions that young people make and support their growth by creating spaces for young people to step into their power and lead the movement.

### **Choosing to Provide Leadership**

Some organizations are carving out space for their constituencies to provide leadership by joining and building networks that push people to think more deeply about the countless issues affecting our communities. Participants in our conversations talked about the challenges and opportunities of proactively building movement by entering new organizing spaces.

FIERCE, a New York City organization building the leadership and power of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) youth of color, is doing this by creating youth leadership spaces within the Right to the City Alliance. FIERCE chose to join Right to the City because they recognized that the national effort to address a converging set of issues around privatization, gentrification, and policing was a strategic opportunity to link their own work around issues impacting LGBTQ youth of color to a larger movement building strategy.

FIERCE is bringing a LGBTQ youth voice to the alliance by playing a lead role on the national and regional steering committees of Right to the City. Their leadership was demonstrated at

a recent convening at the US conference of Mayors in Miami, where Right to the City held a march against gentrification and displacement, bringing hundreds of people from across the country. FIERCE organized a specific youth track, helping to mobilize 30 youth from across the country in addition to their own youth. As they continue to engage in Right to the City's movement building efforts, FIERCE is committed to making sure that their involvement is not staff driven by bolstering their youth members to take active leadership.

Rickke Mananzala, Executive Director of FIERCE, describes two impacts of their strategic decision to partner with Right to the City,

*By bringing our constituency, LGBTQ youth of color, to Right to the City we encourage a broader range of leadership in that alliance. At the same time, it also encourages the kinds of conversations that we would like to have within the LGBTQ movement that will shift the focus toward racial and economic justice issues.*

As the Director of the Immigration Project at the National Center for Lesbian Rights, Noemi Calonje has also been working to broaden the LGBTQ movement and to build a bridge between immigrant rights and LGBTQ groups by fostering dialogue, engaging in cross-movement opportunities, and helping people see the connection. Recently, she spoke at a national summit on immigration reform on the intersection of the marriage movement and immigrant rights.

At this particular event, Noemi was the only person in the room representing a LGBTQ organization. She recalled, "I was a little concerned about what their response would be. I have lots of positive feedback where people talked about their niece or someone they know... but also just some strange looks." Because of her experience in working directly with LGBTQ immigrants, she is able to share real life stories and bring visibility to LGBTQ struggles within the immigrant rights sector. She has also been successful at shifting perceptions by highlighting immigrant rights work as part of National Center for Lesbian Rights and helping LGBTQ people see how immigration impacts their community.

FIERCE and National Center for Lesbian Rights' Immigration Project work to highlight the needs of their constituencies because many movement sectors' current definitions do not encompass these communities. CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities is doing similar work through their Women Workers Project.

The Women Workers Project is part of Domestic Workers United, a coalition of labor rights, student, and faith-based groups that is heavily involved in a campaign to pass state legislation that would establish respect, recognition, and fair labor standards for the domestic work industry. The bill would secure basic labor protections for domestic workers in the Metropolitan New York City area such as a living wage, health care, and basic benefits. The emphasis of the campaign is placed on labor violations, addressing the fact that as a result of gender oppression, domestic workers have been excluded from the most basic labor protections, such as minimum wage and overtime.

Because domestic workers are not recognized or respected as a legitimate workforce, CAAAV is creating a place for their constituents to take leadership in advancing a workers

agenda and establishing their basic rights. In the process, workers are educated on the systems of race, class, and patriarchy that oppress poor working class immigrants and are at the core of their struggle. Carolyn H. de Leon, Director of the Women Workers Project and Co-Founder of Domestic Workers United, describes the importance of tying all these issues to their organizing campaign, "For us, the ultimate goal is for women to engage in organizing, to understand that we need change in the industry and help the movement to challenge racism, class oppression, and patriarchy."

### Nurturing Leadership Networks

A number of the groups involved in *Intersections* are finding creative ways to support leadership by creating both formal and informal leadership networks. These networks fortify leaders through the adversities of gender/body/sexuality oppression as well as the challenges of providing leadership within their communities. Carol, of MataHari: Eye of the Day, told the story of their approach to building leadership networks.

Creating community solutions is part of MataHari's mission, and it has been effective in amplifying the impact of their local organizing. Based in Boston, the organization has been working for years with migrant Filipina women experiencing an acute set of interrelated issues including domestic violence, immigration, child custody, and housing. One of the women they once provided support to later began helping other Filipina migrant women

PHOTO: NATIONAL CENTER FOR LESBIAN RIGHTS



going through similar domestic violence situations. With the leadership of this woman and the support of MataHari staff, a local network of Filipina migrant women grew out of the relationships she nurtured and the women she sustained. Eventually, the network built partnerships with groups in New York also working with Filipina migrant women, and have since come together to examine their connections and opportunities at a regional as well as a transnational scale. “Starting with one woman’s problems,” Carol recounts, “we’ve helped create a visible structure for the Filipina migrant women’s community.”

## LESSONS LEARNED

- 1. Leaders already exist.** Young people, immigrants, and refugees across the country are taking leadership in fighting gender/body/sexuality oppression in their communities. These new and emerging leaders are doing vital cross-sector organizing that strengthens key intersections and expands the reproductive justice analysis.
- 2. Leadership development and support is needed.** The groups involved in these discussions echoed beliefs that leadership development is essential not only for cultivating individual leaders but also for effective organizing and sustaining the movement. Grassroots organizations’ commitment to and practices of leadership development reflect a central tenet of reproductive justice work: building the leadership of communities that are most impacted by reproductive oppression.
- 3. Our movement can do better.** Many young organizers spoke of the challenges of trying to cultivate their own leadership and that of their peers in an unsupportive environment. The need for the Reproductive Justice Movement to nurture new leaders such as young people and immigrants cannot be overstated. To build on the remarkable gains that have been made toward our vision of reproductive justice, our movement needs to embrace successive generations of leaders with innovative ideas and fresh perspectives to take a stand against the gender/body/sexuality oppression in their communities and society at large. The movement as a whole must recognize the legitimacy of their struggles and the essential contributions they are making, and veteran leaders must share their power and make space for new leaders to shine.

# CROSS-SECTOR ALLIANCE BUILDING

In our dialogues, participants believed that it is important to make connections between reproductive justice and various other social justice issues. This was unsurprising as reproductive justice is inherently intersectional, and this project was designed to explore intersections as a way to deepen our understanding of movement building. Our initial premise was that leaders and organizations straddling various social justice sectors have insight into opportunities to leverage multiple movements for greater social change. Our conversations revealed these opportunities while clarifying the important nuances that many of the organizations don't define themselves as straddling movements but as demonstrating intersectional movement building.

All the organizations involved in these conversations expressed that building alliances across issues, constituencies, and movements is both critical and challenging and that we are in the early stages of making inroads to building broad and diverse movements that have greater critical mass and political power. Participants shared a range of approaches by which their organizations are advancing reproductive justice at the intersections and building alliances across movements.

## **Benefits to Cross-Sector Alliances and Intersectional Movement Building**

FIERCE is creating strong alliances not only through Right to the City, where they are connecting their work with LGBTQ youth of color around privatization with national efforts to resist gentrification, but also through active involvement in Grassroots Global Justice. Grassroots Global Justice is a national movement building effort that links domestic justice movements with the global justice movement that has grown out of the World Social Forums and 2006 U.S. Social Forum.

FIERCE is creating the opportunity to integrate LGBTQ issues affecting youth of color into the overall framing of these national and international efforts. By participating in these spaces they are also building their organizational capacity through leveraging the resources of these collective efforts. For instance, Right to the City has developed critical opposition research about a handful of private developers across the country. With access to this research, FIERCE is free from "recreating the wheel" in their campaign for a LGBTQ



youth center amidst a newly privatized (previously public) space in New York City. More importantly, they are better equipped to frame the problem as part of a larger trend of gentrification driven by privatization across the country. FIERCE describes similar benefits to their participation in Grassroots Global Justice that have given them access to a range of political education tools and analyses

they use to develop their global justice perspective.

In Colorado, LUZ Reproductive Justice Think Tank has paved the way for multiple sectors of the progressive movement to benefit from cross-sector alliances built through the Think Tank. The idea behind the creation of LUZ was for individual activists from a wide range of social justice movements to meet, share ideas, and support each other to incorporate reproductive justice into their own activism. They recognized that “All of the different movements that people came from could be stronger using a RJ lens... We became a group with a distinct personality.” LUZ is a place where individuals come together to expand their skills and analyses, test ideas with each other, and bring them to fruition out in the world in order to “insert a RJ voice” into their work with other organizations.

### Integrating a Reproductive Justice Lens into Collaborations

MataHari: Eye of the Day works with individuals and communities impacted by family violence, sexual violence, migrant labor exploitation and human trafficking. With their expertise working with migrant women, women of color and their families, they are able to bring much needed support to allied organizations facing issues related to gender-based oppression. They frequently collaborate with immigrant workers’ centers in the area that usually deal with traditional labor issues. A male organizer from one of the centers often reaches out to MataHari when female workers approach him about being sexually harassed by employers or landlords, or being stalked. Carol Gomez reflected on how these experiences have led them to develop a fruitful and mutually beneficial partnership with the workers’ center:

*When I don’t know particular issues around labor laws I call him, and when he has situations involving workers that particularly fall around the gender line, we help him out – we go into the community with him to work with the workers and their families to try to strategize.*

MataHari: Eye of the Day also partners with the American Friends Service Committee, bringing a gender lens to their joint trainings around immigration, anti-war, and anti-prison industrial complex work.

*We insert the gender piece, in part because most of these organizations don’t traditionally talk about gender, gender violence, or reproductive or women’s health issues. With us at the table, we can make sure we insert that, and help those folks in getting versed on gender issues.*

Some organizations bring a reproductive justice lens to their collaborations on specific cam-

paigns. As a youth-led organization, Sistas on the Rise allies with local youth organizations in New York City like Critical Resistance, which organizes around issues of police brutality and harassment, and Youth on the Move, which works on educational justice. Sistas on the Rise regularly brings their young women to actions, events, and activities organized by their allies. For example, they were invited by Youth on the Move to write a paragraph for their student's bill of rights. Leslie said of their involvement, "We bring a perspective that wouldn't be there. Young mother's voices are often overlooked, and individual circumstances aren't addressed, but the groups [they collaborate with] are open to us bringing this perspective."

Sometimes the reproductive justice analysis is a critical factor in building cross-sector alliances. This reality played out in LUZ Reproductive Justice Think Tank's work to build bridges with immigrant rights groups in Colorado. One LUZ member described how they supported an ally from one of the most active immigrant rights groups to take a stand for reproductive justice issues in her community:

*She was reproductive justice oriented. We asked her to speak at something like a press conference or rally; she declined because it was putting her name and organization behind an issue that many immigrant rights groups couldn't get behind. Since then, she has shifted. Enough people in the community are talking about reproductive justice so [she] won't be singled out as the only one. They came closer by focusing on how reproductive justice isn't just about choice.*

### Learning Together, Working Together

The stories of the groups who have been successful at building cross-sector alliances illustrate that this process requires effort, patience, and an open mind. Bridges are not built overnight, especially with individuals or groups who may be coming from different places or are resistant to integrating new issues into their work. As one LUZ member reflected:

*It's about relationship building. In a lot of organizing it feels like people have hard and fast lines, people get written off easily and stop acting like a community. The more I understand that people are human and capable of change, the easier it is to do this work. It's humbling. It doesn't help to run people off, it does help to meet people where they're at, and to challenge them.*

FIERCE describes this process as a two-way street. Rickke emphasizes, "We don't go into alliances thinking we have it all figured out." Instead, they work from a conviction that the very act of doing the work together can result in building deep understanding and relationships. FIERCE believes it is important to conduct political education and share information about the issues that are specific to their communities. At the same time, they are committed to the process of developing and implementing joint organizing efforts, such as developing shared demands, as a fundamental component of movement building. In other words, building alliances is about putting theory into practice.

## Barriers to Cross-Sector Alliance Building

While cross-sector work has been successful for many groups, it has come with distinct challenges. Some obstacles are overcome while others persist, pushing groups to tackle these tensions in an ongoing process of learning and making progress. One of the most common challenges that groups face is encouraging people to think and see outside their specific issue area. Shiu-Ming Cheer of South Asian Network has noted how discussion around gender/body/sexuality issues isn't common in most immigrant rights work because people have narrow perceptions of who immigrants typically are, "In people's minds, 'immigrant' is male, straight, Latino workers. Immigration is so focused on working or paid labor, it misses so much."

Set beliefs about which communities are – and aren't – impacted by particular issues can be problematic in garnering support for cross-movement efforts. Noemi Calonje at National Center for Lesbian Rights, who has observed a similar kind of limited perception of immigrants, recalls:

*We closed our doors on May 1st for the Immigrant Rights marches – we had a National Center for Lesbian Rights contingent. As a result we got a lot of email with not so positive feedback regarding our participation because people said we are a LGBT organization, not an immigrant rights organization...For people in the LGBT community, they feel like immigration is not something that impacts our community. They have this perception that immigration is about labor and workers. But for some sex couples there is no means to legalize our status like heterosexuals. There is a lack of acknowledging the expansive impacts of this within LGBT communities.*

Similarly, the challenges for FIERCE around cross-sector alliances arise from the reality that they have had little success in getting the LGBTQ movement to recognize the critical issues of privatization and police brutality affecting queer and transgender youth of color in New York City. On the other hand, as they engage in their movement-building work, they are also challenging straight ally organizations to develop their analysis of how LGBTQ communities are present throughout the social justice movement. Rickke shared the influence they hope to have, "We want to reach a point where justice movements are placing equal emphasis on the barriers our communities are facing in terms of racial, economic, and gender justice issues."

## LESSONS LEARNED

**Reproductive justice is an inherently intersectional framework with tremendous potential for building alliances across constituencies, issues, and movements.** As we've seen from the wealth of examples of cross-sector work that came up in our discussions, groups that are fighting gender/body/sexuality oppression at the intersections are able to make connections and break out of the silos that so often constrict social justice organizing efforts. Understanding the challenges and successes of these groups can help us determine the most effective ways to continue building and strengthening important alliances.



# BUILDING CAPACITY FOR REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE MOVEMENT BUILDING

Through hearing the stories of grassroots organizing at the intersection of youth organizing, immigrant and refugee rights, and reproductive justice, EMERJ is identifying strategic opportunities for reproductive justice movement building. These stories describe myriad strengths and capacities that are effectively building momentum for reproductive justice. At the same time, these stories reveal further opportunities for EMERJ and the Reproductive Justice Movement to address critical gaps and challenges to advancing the movement.

## **Building and Deepening Shared Language and Analysis**

As a fairly young movement on a leading edge of intersectional work, the Reproductive Justice Movement needs to develop broad and accessible shared language and analysis of reproductive justice and its strategies for change. Researching and developing *Intersections at the Grassroots* has confirmed our belief that communities and organizations must describe and define their own experiences. We know that our analysis is strengthened when the movement internalizes how communities name and identify their efforts to end the control and regulation of gender, bodies, and sexuality.

Concurrently, movement building requires enough synergy between language and concepts for all sectors of the movement to communicate with each other and build collective vision, goals, and strategies. Many groups are looking for effective tools and resources, especially political education curriculum to support their leadership development. Groups new to thinking about their work in relationship to reproductive justice need resources to make connections to reproductive justice in their work and address potential wedge issues like queer and transgender oppression or sex work. In addition, some groups identified the

need for staff training to implement political education around reproductive justice into their leadership development work and to integrate reproductive justice into their campaign development and planning.

EMERJ will continue to learn from and document the work of communities and organizations as they develop their language and descriptions of their experiences. We will also persist in seeking, developing and sharing political education tools useful in starting from a community specific experience and building toward shared language and analysis.

### **Build and Support the Leadership of Marginalized Communities**

Questions of leadership are present in all efforts to build movements for social change. In relatively small movement sectors, leadership can become a crisis when we fail to develop and support new and emerging leaders who can both learn from and teach the founders and visionaries that have laid the groundwork in the early stages of the movement. Fortunately, the Reproductive Justice Movement is far from lacking in strong and courageous leaders and activists who are ready and willing to both provide leadership and support others in doing so.

Through our interviews and discussions we heard stories of incredible individuals: a migrant woman who experienced domestic violence and moved through her own healing to lead a community forum on the impact of family violence in migrant communities, an immigrant community leader who was supported in bringing a reproductive justice agenda to organizing spaces where gender issues had not been brought up, and a young mother who was empowered through the reproductive justice analysis to claim her leadership in organizing to support other young mothers. We also heard stories about creating much needed spaces for communities marginalized within our own social justice movements to take leadership: FIERCE's organizing for queer and transgender youth of color to provide leadership around gentrification and privatization, and the development of LUZ Reproductive Justice Think Tank as home ground for organizers to hone their leadership within the progressive movement.

The stories in *Intersections at the Grassroots* prove that it is both possible and crucial to build and support leaders from historically marginalized communities to lead the Reproductive Justice Movement. The movement will reach critical mass as we create opportunities to recognize and support leaders and organizations in youth organizing and immigrant and refugee rights that operate from an understanding of reproductive oppression. This also holds true for supporting immigrant and youth leadership within explicitly reproductive justice organizations and reproductive justice movement-building projects.

### **Bridging Movements**

Though reproductive justice is inherently intersectional, cross-sector alliances are not always pursued nor is the pathway always clear. Nevertheless, the stories heard in our dialogues outline a number of successful strategies. For example, FIERCE and South Asian Network have led the way in building relationships with organizations and movements that have not yet grappled with issues of queer and transgender liberation and inclusion of LGBTQ community members. LUZ Reproductive Justice Think Tank and its members are

inserting a reproductive justice lens into the work of a broad array of progressive sectors in Colorado. MataHari: Eye of the Day and The Women Workers Project at CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities are bringing the specific needs of women and LGBTQ people in their constituencies to sectors that don't traditionally highlight the gendered aspects of work. Youth United for Community Action, Chinese Progressive Association, and Asian Immigrant Women Advocates are all exploring ways to bring a reproductive justice analysis to their long-standing work around environmental justice and youth organizing.

EMERJ believes these efforts are fundamental to broadening the base of the Reproductive Justice Movement. We will continue to document these and other cross-sector alliance building efforts in order to promote their replication and success.

### **Increasing Funding**

A common theme that arose from our dialogues was that money is a barrier for organizations to achieve stability and grow their work. Throughout their stories, groups named a number of frustrations about working with foundations as their main source of funding. Some groups feel pressured to quantify their work in ways that don't make sense for sharing their success. In other words, "10 new leaders in 12 months" is not always meaningful or realistic. Other groups think that their constituency falls through the gaps of foundation priorities or that

PHOTO: MATAHARI: EYE OF THE DAY



their constituency or issues are marginalized both in the larger progressive movement as well as foundation priorities. Groups emphasizing cross-sector movement building disclosed challenges in getting foundations to understand the importance of breaking down silos and building new and different coalitions and networks.

Many of these groups are seeking to address some of their frustrations through diversifying their funding to include a greater proportion of individual donors. At EMERJ, we are working with foundation officers, who also understand the challenges around working within philanthropy, to develop assessment tools and frameworks that will better reflect the needs of groups doing indispensable reproductive justice work.

### **Synergy and Alignment of Social Change Strategies**

Successful movements for change are invariably a convergence of multiple strategies and tactics that build power, change hearts and minds, and build the leadership of communities that are historically and systemically marginalized and oppressed. At the same time, movements are susceptible to fractures and fault lines that arise from disagreements around movement strategy. These disagreements might revolve around short-term vs. long-term strategies, reform vs. revolutionary strategies, the role of direct service, centralized or non-centralized decision making, and the list goes on. EMERJ is interested in investigating the potential for creating synergy and alignment between social change strategies in a way that embraces these differences. We are challenging ourselves to understand when and how diversity of strategy can be a strength rather than a fault line within the movement for reproductive justice.

EMERJ purposefully identified organizations to participate in *Intersections at the Grassroots* that represent a wide range of social change strategies including community organizing, legal advocacy, think tanks and service provision. In our discussions, some groups spoke explicitly about the need for a range of social change strategies while noting that we sometimes work against each other and at cross purposes. While we have not delved deeply enough to understand this aspect of reproductive justice movement building, our initial foray has led us to identify critical questions facing the movement that we will explore in upcoming volumes of **The Momentum Series**:

- How can direct services to our communities build movement for reproductive justice?
- What kinds of groups and leadership do we need to build alignment and synergy between the various strategies playing out in the Reproductive Justice Movement?
- How do we identify, address, and seek accountability when the use of a strategy undermines collective action for reproductive justice?

# MOVING FORWARD

*Intersections at the Grassroots* confirms that organizations and leaders across the country are leveraging their strengths and the strengths of their allies to increase their effectiveness and build cross-sector alliances. The groups that participated in our conversations are driving efforts to build a broad base, link issues and build relationships that increase the momentum for progressive social change.

Even as organizations are reaching out and building networks, many groups still identified a need to break out of their isolation through collaboration with other groups to share analyses, lessons, and strengths. This isolation showed up in the stories people shared about being the only youth, the only queers, the only immigrants, and the only young mothers in the room. The appreciation for sharing and building relationships was expressed every time more than one organization was present in the room. One participant explicitly stated, "We really need spaces like this where we can talk things out." This call for collaboration and learning is especially significant for EMERJ as we realize that most groups who took part in this process are based in urban areas with relatively large numbers of progressive groups. Our assumption is that this feeling of isolation and the desire for organization-to-organization relationships will become even more prevalent as our movement building efforts include organizations from more regions of the country.

Through **The Momentum Series** we will continue to build opportunities for groups to come together and highlight their work in order to increase the capacity and infrastructure of the reproductive justice and progressive movements. Our first report in the series focused on the work of groups that are winning reproductive justice through engagement in public policy battles. In 2009 EMERJ will put some of the lessons we are learning in **The Momentum Series** into practice by launching a series of Strategic Cohorts that will galvanize the efforts of multiple organizations to make collective contributions to building the Reproductive Justice Movement.

# ORGANIZATIONAL CONTACT INFORMATION

**Asian Immigrant Women Advocates**

Oakland, CA  
510.268.0192  
[www.aiwa.org](http://www.aiwa.org)

**Brooklyn Young Mothers' Collective**

Brooklyn, NY  
718.596.7074  
[www.brooklynyoungmotherscollective.org](http://www.brooklynyoungmotherscollective.org)

**Chinese Progressive Association**

San Francisco, CA  
415.391.6986  
[www.cpasf.org](http://www.cpasf.org)

**CAAAY: Organizing Asian Communities**

New York, NY  
718.220.7391  
[www.caaav.org](http://www.caaav.org)

**FIERCE**

New York, NY  
646.336.6789  
[www.fiercenyc.org](http://www.fiercenyc.org)

**Khmer Girls in Action**

Long Beach, CA  
562.986.9415  
[www.kqalb.org](http://www.kqalb.org)

**LUZ Reproductive Justice Think Tank**

Denver, CO  
[www.luzthinktank.org](http://www.luzthinktank.org)

**MataHari: Eye of the Day**

Boston, MA  
617.448.0993  
[www.eyeoftheday.org](http://www.eyeoftheday.org)

**National Center for Lesbian Rights**

San Francisco, CA  
415.392.6257  
[www.nclrights.org](http://www.nclrights.org)

**Paso del Norte Civil Rights Project**

El Paso, TX  
915.532.3799  
[www.texascivilrightsproject.org](http://www.texascivilrightsproject.org)

**Sistas on the Rise**

Bronx, NY  
718.991.6003  
[www.sistasontherise.org](http://www.sistasontherise.org)

**South Asian Network**

Artesia, CA  
562.403.0488  
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**Youth United for Community Action**

East Palo Alto, CA  
650.322.9165  
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Paso del Norte Civil Rights Project  
Sistas on the Rise  
South Asian Network  
Youth United for Community Action

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