



# Respectus.

i n s i g h t s • i n c l u s i o n

Black Women for Wellness

## Manifesto

for Reproductive Justice



A Black Women for Wellness  
Publication/Policy Brief

*featuring recommendations and findings  
from 10 years of research and outreach!*



# What the Body Remembers

by pam ward

what the body remembers  
what it sees with teeth  
what it knows  
from bone  
from birth  
from that first blackest breath  
inside womb  
What the body remembers  
what it hears  
is not always  
measured in drums  
not heard only through ears  
it is stirred  
in the belly  
that big mixing pot  
between soft flesh and rib  
not through ears  
but with gut  
through the pit  
of each stomach  
it can see  
with that third eye  
that tiny antennae  
that hides under each  
of our belts  
the body can feel  
the cold slam of a door  
the ambulance scream  
the glass that you dropped  
when the hospital called  
the slow hum  
a wheelchair makes  
what remains in the brain  
can bring blood pressure up  
can turn dad diabetic  
lock half your mama's  
whole body in stroke  
can leave you alone  
by yourself late at night  
with the phone cut off  
all of your lightbulbs burnt out  
on that hard kitchen

floor of despair  
what we store  
what we horde  
between muscle and teeth  
what we pepper  
our tears with  
what season's our flesh  
should be good  
like your lover's thighs  
wedged inside yours while  
you sleep  
or your children's soft  
breathing in bed  
it recalls things by smell  
things by touch  
things like home  
and mom's fingers  
massaging your hair  
the scent of her  
warm baking hands  
and whole families huddled  
near stoves  
it remembers your first kiss  
your first eager lick  
of young love  
running up like  
a whole gang of puppies  
what the body remembers  
what we can not forget  
what we sweat out at night  
between sheets  
between jobs  
between good men  
and no man at all  
it recalls every kindness  
every pie someone brought  
every rainbow bouquet  
every time someone  
saved you some cake  
your body remembers  
how to cure

how to mend  
how to heal itself up  
like your mother does  
cocoa buttering scars  
every keloid  
becoming new skin  
it erodes the most lonely  
most bleakest of nights  
with one call  
out the blue from a friend  
the body knows  
how to horde  
how to put pain in storage  
how to stuff those bad days  
into thick freezer bags  
how to chew  
how to spit out life's bad  
ugly meat  
how to laugh  
how to slap  
the wet face of self-pity  
how to weep  
when it needs to  
and wake the next day  
feeling fresh  
it can heal  
it can swallow  
those rough pills  
that life dishes out  
walk twenty five miles  
of bad road in the rain  
work forty hour weeks  
at some low paying job  
and show up everyday  
with a grin  
see the body's a woman  
who tucks in her kids  
fixes piping hot plates  
like a fuckin' magician  
and she hums to herself  
cuz she healing y'all

hums while she ironin'  
or yankin' up weeds  
every song  
is an ointment  
each note a stiff tonic  
see, the body is strong  
it can stand in the mud  
and still paint  
a whole house  
it can live on a diet  
of thick blood and gristle  
it can bend  
arch its back  
tilt its throat up to God  
say a prayer to each hip  
in those difficult moments  
taste the moon  
with its tongue  
when the sun  
has left town  
bite the sweet flesh of life  
with one tooth in its head  
close both eyes  
and still see  
become hummingbird  
dreaming in eight  
different tongues  
see, your lungs  
can read things  
written only in womb  
they can still feel  
their wings  
and remember rich skies  
recall everything,  
ALL that is pitch-black  
and good  
see the body remembers  
every pore tells a story  
every follicle speaks  
and it never forgets  
how to breath.

# Manifesto

## for Reproductive Justice



Black and African American women have a unique experience and history in the United States as well worldwide. Histories of slavery, oppression, and institutional racism are whispered, shared and less often hollered about, amongst us. This knowledge and struggle have shaped our perspectives on health, the institutions offering health services and our government that regulates both the health care professionals and institutions providing services. Our experience of exploitation, exclusion and humiliation influences not only our physical but mental, emotional, financial and spiritual health but also our willing to seek health care.

**This manifesto gives witness to the resiliency, spirit and light of our lives and work.**

Words written about our bodies, our sexuality, our community and our lives aim to control, degrade, and silence the strength and beauty of our being, this manifesto gives witness to the resiliency, spirit and light of our lives and work.

BLACK WOMEN FOR WELLNESS • MANIFESTO 1

# What is Reproductive Justice?

Reproductive Justice sheds light on how race, gender, class, sexuality and institutions work together to either uplift or oppress a woman's ability with reproductive life decision making. By using a justice framework we acknowledge and make known that racial, gender and class oppression cannot be viewed as single or separate entities or incidents but must be considered together as multi-layered contributors to our personal and community health.

Reproductive Justice creates space to build a movement that is inclusive of social justice, environmental justice, critical public policy, and addresses social determinants to health as well the intersections for decision making by women and girls. It brings into conversation the empowerment process, influences of history, media bias and controlled resource distribution that impede our access to health care services and treatment. A key factor in achieving positive non-coerced reproductive decision-making is the respect that comes with quality culturally competent gender and age appropriate affordable care.

Reproductive Justice brings focus to a complete woman and girl, not as silos isolated by funding streams or special interest. Reproductive Justice insists that justice will only be achieved when women and girls have the power and resources to make healthy, informed, non-coerced decisions about our bodies, sexuality and families.



**Reproductive Justice:** Women's reproductive health is connected to and affected by conditions in their lives that are shaped by their socioeconomic status, human rights violations, race, sexuality, and nationality. Women cannot have full control over their reproductive lives, unless issues such as socioeconomic disadvantage, racial discrimination, inequalities in wealth and power, and differential access to resources and services are addressed.

BLACK WOMEN FOR WELLNESS **MANIFESTO 2**

# Race, Gender, Class

## Critical Ingredients to Reproductive Justice

As the reproductive rights movement gained popularity in the mid 60's and 70's Black women and other women of color began to critique mainstream feminists and activists who failed to account the ways race and racism affected not only their abortion rights but also their rights to have healthy pregnancies and children due to racist legislation and social norms that produced dual health systems. Not more than two generations away from segregation, race continues to be a crucial variable in determining access to health services. Diverse neighborhoods with dense Black and African American populations continue to be underfunded, under staffed and equipped with fewer hospitals and clinics. As a result race became a place to offer critique and build a social justice movement within the reproductive rights movement.

Gender in U.S., as it relates to femininity and womanhood, is an area where women continue to be discriminated against. Women are charged more for insurance, excluded from purchasing policies if already pregnant, paid less wages, and offered fewer opportunities for professional advances when compared to men. For Black women gender is an integral component to Reproductive Justice agendas. Moreover, gender stereotypes of Black women increases the stigma of seeking effective birth control and family planning; reinforces bias and personal burdens with decision making for reproduction and sexuality and influences the options available or shared with women in health care settings.

Class analysis, when combined with race and gender reveals the numerous ways discrimination can affect a community's ability to determine their health and well-being. Government programs, which penalize low-income women, as well as those battling addictions or formerly incarcerated, limit services available to those most dependent upon aid for survival. From shackling pregnant women, enacting abortions restrictions, dismantling the state safety net to forced sterilizations and the rising cost of care, our government needs a Reproductive Justice framework to address the egregious wrongs instituted against Black and African American women.

**Women are still charged more, paid less, & offered fewer opportunities compared to men.**



**BLACK WOMEN FOR WELLNESS MANIFESTO 3**

# Historical Analysis

## Critical to Black Women's Reproductive Justice Framework

Africans were brought to the Americas as objects to build the wealth of White land holding Americans and English colonizers. As enslaved women, the use of Black bodies not only included manual labor in the fields or around the house, but also mental and physical abuse by rape, sexual assault, and medical experimentation became everyday occurrences that ensured Black women's continued degradation and humiliation. This type of treatment dehumanized Black women and subjugated our autonomy as always ready and available for the use and pleasure of others. 'Normalization' of reproductive and sexual exploitation of Black women continues to affect the spiritual, mental and physical health of African women. Forcing Black women to ponder and assert the question, at what point does a women's body become her own?



Memory of trauma unaddressed lives in the bodies and memories of a people's culture and community. In the case of Black and African American women, slavery was not the first, nor the last state sponsored and institutionalized oppression. Slavery, followed by the abandonment of reconstruction, share cropping, Black Codes, Segregation, Welfare Reform and the rolling back of Civil Rights gains has perpetuated inequalities in access to health care as well created dual and unequal health systems.

Health insurance companies have a history of discrimination against African Americans negatively impacting health status by decreasing access to culturally appropriate health services. Across medical data and health indicators, Black and African American women experience growing reproductive disparities despite advances in medical technology. In fact if not for advances in medical technology, the disparity experienced by African American women & girls would be deeper. Data demonstrating this situation demands a deeper analysis into the social conditions that affect Black women and girls. However, factors including social determinants, stress from racism and gender bias and overall community health should be examined.

**BLACK WOMEN FOR WELLNESS MANIFESTO 4**

**Medical schools have consistently used low income Black women and girls as research subjects with and without consent.**

Historically the very same medical institutions that deny access, coverage, and care to Black and African American women often use our bodies, families, and communities to further medical technologies. Universities and medical schools have consistently used low income Black women and girls as research subjects with and without consent. In addition, the practices dehumanize African American women and girls among medical professionals who learn skills at the expense of Black women and girls.. This



practice creates victims, who then share the stories with families often resulting in a community who learns to mistrust medical professionals and health institutions. These justifiable suspicions can unfortunately lead to a delay in seeking care, increasing mistrust as more aggressive and untreated disease lead to shorter life expectancy, increase disease burden and morbidity. Combined research and medical students have exasperated and influenced the health status of women and girls that without analysis would be a negative mitigating factor impacting reproductive justice for Black women and girls

A social justice framework addresses the unique history of Black women through an acknowledgment of the multiple atrocities that have been levied at Black communities from several directions. Only through a race, class, gender, and sexual lens can the distinctive conditions Black women have endured be acknowledged, honored and addressed. Reproductive Justice brings a lens that includes race, ethnicity, gender, socio economic status , history and education to the conversation. It creates space for a movement that is inclusive of the social determinants, policy and environment both build and physical that influence or impede our access to health care services, education and treatment.

**Dr. Marion Sims**--(photo above) considered the father of gynecological surgery--perfected the techniques for gynecological surgery on slaves. (33) He addicted the women to narcotics in order to sedate and immobilize them post-operatively. (34) Furthermore, he performed the surgery repeatedly on the same women.



Reproductive Justice recognizes that women's reproductive health is connected to and affected by conditions in our lives where we are either offered respect and dignity that promotes our health or suffer humiliation and stigma that hinders our health. A social justice framework supports analysis and insight into how the ability of any women or girl to determine her own reproductive destiny is linked directly to the conditions in her community and the historical experience of the community that she is a part of —and these conditions are not simply a matter of individual choice and access.

## Media

### Contemporary Challenges Exasperate Historical Problems

Black women face particular challenges at the crux of racial and gendered inequities that build from histories of slavery and oppression, continuing to contemporary media exploitation, objectification, and stereotyping of Black women and girls. Images of always ready sexually available Black women and girls plague media outlets.

In addition media images often portray the economic challenges of living on state assistance as a Black woman's epidemic. When policy, legislation, and services aim to target racially gendered outcomes that are created out of disproportionate inequalities, these stereotypes have a profound affect on the quality of reproductive care provided, policy developed and resources allocated to Black women in general and lo income women in specific.



A content analysis of rap music video states, "the fact that rap music is largely consumed by white individuals suggest that these images can be especially

**Hattie McDaniel**, (photo above) played a maid on stage and became the first black woman to win an Academy Award but her real accomplishment was in real life where her fight against "restrictive covenants" legalized the right for black people to buy property anywhere in the United States.





detrimental to attributions made about African American women. The images of misogyny that surrounds women in the videos may assist in the cultivation of women as sexual objects... "the bombardment of negative images of black women provided in music videos, coupled with the lack of positive images to compensate produce psychological responses that can lead to low self-esteem and low self worth among African American women." (Harris-Lacewell, Ward, Hansbrough & Walker 2005)

When the images of Black women are broaden out to look at all television and video media an overlaying theme occurs. Black women are portrayed in three major components, the emasculating sapphire, the desexualized mammy and the over sexualized jezebel (Jones & Gooden 2004). With only a few positive images in general to compensate for the negative ones, these three stereotypes of Black women are reinforced by the mainstream media continuously. With regard to sexual health and HIV/AIDS there is direct connection between body image and the willingness to engage in risky behaviors (Wingood et al 2002). A study looking at HIV/AIDS prevention for African American girls suggest that exposure to repeated negative media images at a young age might influence their sexual decision and identity (Shambley-Ebron, 2009).

## Movement Building

### with a Reproductive Justice Framework

A Reproductive Justice framework produces critical analysis about the ability of any Black woman or girl to determine her own reproductive destiny by making clear that the historical, environmental, and social conditions of her community are deeply linked to her personal health, yet understands that an individuals health status is not representative of the entire community's health. To do this WE must build a collective understanding of the ways history, race, class and gender can determine our access to health and then push the boundaries of those limits by insisting, creating and calling for the following:

**Leadership Development** – Empowering women and girls - We need to be informed and engaged to begin to understand and participate in addressing the reproductive injustices facing our communities. Every Black girl, woman and man should know their history, be aware of the role community and government play in access to affordable appropriate health services and education and that this is a collective struggle with collective impacts on health and well being.

BLACK WOMEN FOR WELLNESS MANIFESTO 7

**Policy Advocacy** – Black Women need to be at the table advocating, writing, and implementing policy and legislation that speaks to a racial, social, and reproductive justice agenda that brings resources to our communities and prohibits racist, sexist, and classist laws that limit our life chances and produce high premature mortality rate. We need to revise public health education curriculum and books to reflect our struggle, histories and contributions. This must lead to societal shifts where every student in a public health program receives a list of mandatory readings, insights into the barriers and challenges race, gender and class present to public health.

**Research** – We must produce research that is conducted from a Reproductive Justice lens with intentional concern, ethical procedures, and a moral obligation with the full knowledge of our community to help mitigate the growing health disparities. Research should NOT be conducted under economical coercion, misinformation, without the full understanding of the participant. Research should not be conducted ON us but WITH Black communities. Building trust in the African American community one female at a time will allow researcher to begin, “fair and just” research to help better develop treatments that meets the needs of our bodies.

**Alliance Building** – The time for separate movements is over. A Reproductive Justice framework is at its most successful when organizations, activists, policy makers, community members and elected official are working across differences towards a common goal of social justice and human rights. Building upon each others strengths, histories, and recognizing oppressions that may be common yet singularly experienced by each community provides a critical base for understanding how to work with, for, and next to each other.

“ I want to live in a world where every woman/girl can have access to reproductive health care; can decide, when and how many children that she wants to birth; be treated respectfully as a patient in every health care setting; and to be informed through culturally and linguistically accurate health education material.

**A Black Women for Wellness member**

In spite of these histories of inequality that continue today Black women are still standing and demanding changes be made.





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A MANIFESTO on  
REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE  
& HUMAN RIGHTS  
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Publisher: John Wiley Sons. (August 1997)  
-Reveals the myths, misconceptions, and  
misinformation about African American  
women's sexuality.

### 2. Killing the Black Body – Dorothy Roberts,

Publisher: Vintage (December 29, 1998)  
-A powerful, thought-provoking indictment  
of America's continuing assault on the  
reproductive rights of black women ranges  
from the era of slavery to the welfare reform  
acts of the 1990s that penalize women on  
welfare for having babies.

### 3. Mad at Miles – Pearl Cleage,

Publisher: Cleage Group (November 1990)  
This is a funny, whimsical, lyrical, short and  
concise piece of basic insights into survival as a  
black woman.

### 4. The Immortal Life of Harriet Lacks

–Rebecca Skoort Publisher: Crown;  
(February 2, 2010) -She was a poor Southern  
tobacco farmer who worked the same land as  
her slave ancestors, yet her cells--taken without  
her knowledge--became one of the most  
important tools in medicine

BLACK WOMEN FOR WELLNESS • MANIFESTO 9

### **5. Medical Apartheid – Harriet Washington**

Publisher: Doubleday (January 9, 2007)  
-American blacks have long suffered from health adversities not shared by whites, and the problem persists even today, decades after the end of state-sanctioned racism.

### **6. When and Where I Enter- The History of Black Women in American – Paula Giddings**

Publisher: Harper Paperbacks (August 16, 1996) -When and Where I Enter is an eloquent testimonial to the profound influence of African-American women on race and women's movements throughout American history.

### **7. Body & Soul – Linda Villarosa**

Publisher: Perennial (October 1994)  
-Sponsored by the National Black Women's Health Project, this honest, straight-from-the-heart guide addresses the physical, emotional, and spiritual health issues and concerns of Black women today.

### **8. Undivided Rights Women of Color United for Reproductive Justice – Loretta Ross**

Publisher: South End Press (November 1, 2004)-Undivided Rights presents a fresh and textured understanding of the reproductive rights movement by placing the experiences, priorities, and activism of women of color in the foreground.

### **9. Conquest: Sexual Violence in American Indian Genocide – Andrea Smith**

Publisher: South End Press (May 1, 2005) - In Conquest, Smith places Native American women at the center of her analysis of sexual violence, challenging both conventional definitions of the term and conventional responses to the problem.

### **10. Tapping the Power Within – Iyala Vanzant**

Publisher: Writers & Readers Publishing (August 1992) -A guide to the empowerment of African-American women offers techniques for achieving spiritual growth and renewal by tapping the power within, teaching African American women to rid themselves of self-destructive thoughts.

### **11. An American Health Dilemma –**

**Michael Byrd & Linda Clayton** Publisher: Routledge; (August 15, 2000) In the first of a projected two-volume work, the authors, both physicians and senior research scientists at the Harvard School of Public Health, document how, from their first arrival on these shores, blacks received inferior health care.

### **12. Yurugu: An African American Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior**

**– Marimba Ani** Publisher: Africa World Press (March 1994) - Yurugu removes the mask from the European facade and thereby reveals the inner workings of global white supremacy: A system which functions to guarantee the control of Europe and her descendants over the majority of the world's peoples.

# Black Women for Wellness – Framework Comparison Chart

## Framework

### MODEL

## Reproductive Health

Focus is on meeting individual woman/girl reproductive health needs through increasing access to reproductive health services

## Reproductive Rights

Focus continues on meeting the needs of women/girls through advocacy & legal avenues

Seeks to increase access, education and resources to community through primarily driving resources to health providers

## Reproductive Justice

Creates a framework that is inclusive of social justice, race, gender and class determinants with reproductive decision making for women and girls

Builds movements to promote change in structural inequities that affect women reproductive health and ability to control their reproductive lives

### CENTRAL THEME(S)

Increasing service provision & education surrounding of birth control, family planning and abortion for women and girls

Increasing policy that promotes access to health services

Increases governmental obligation to provide health services and resources to women and girls

Links positive choices with personal responsibility and accountability in making reproductive decisions

Shifts responsibility burden from the individual to community and governmental

Highlights intersectionality of social and racial justice movements with reproductive health/ rights

Includes race, class & gender analysis with access to reproductive health design

# Black Women for Wellness – Framework Comparison Chart

## Framework

## Reproductive Health

## Reproductive Rights

## Reproductive Justice

### STRATEGIES

Improving and expanding free and low cost specific reproductive health services, education  
Emphasis on increasing access

Provides legal recourses to women and girls who are discriminated through bad policy  
Social legal and policy advocacy,

- Challenging mainstream thinking on reproductive health and rights for women and girls of color
- Challenges mainstream thought on access to reproductive health for lo-income women, culture, age and gender appropriateness of services and education
- Combines policy, advocacy and alliance building across social and reproductive justice organizations and leadership
- Includes developing leadership, youth voices and other marginalized voices at the decision making table
- Shifts center of responsibility from the individual to society increasing options and choices for women that are obtainable

### GENERAL ASSUMPTIONS

Increased services will increase utilization

Assumes that health disparity will decrease with expanding health services and education

- Relationship building between social & racial justice, reproductive justice movements
- Shared opposition to racism and sexism as well shared definitions of racism and sexism
- Willingness to recognize and give up privilege offered by race, class and education

# Black Women for Wellness – Framework Comparison Chart

## Framework

## Reproductive Health

## Reproductive Rights

## Reproductive Justice

### KEY PLAYERS

Health providers,  
community clinics

Advocates,  
legal experts,  
mainstream  
family planning  
organizations and  
reproductive health  
agencies

Women of Color  
Reproductive Justice/  
Health organizations  
Community  
Organizers, Social  
Justice Allies, policy  
makers stakeholders  
and elected officials

### LIMITING FACTORS

Burden is the  
individual  
Government &  
community not held  
responsible

Minimum  
consideration of race,  
racism, history and  
class with increasing  
health services

Assumes that women  
are on an equal  
field with making  
reproductive health  
decisions, presumes  
access to education  
and influence

Requires access to  
and influence of policy  
makers and health  
providers

Emphasis on controlling  
generic material and  
preventing unintended  
and/or unwanted  
pregnancies

Asks organizations  
and individuals  
to take personal  
financial social  
and legal risks to  
challenge current  
environment, racist  
and sexist culture  
and laws,

Assumes value  
clarification and unity  
across movements

Long term, labor and  
resource intensive



# BLACK WOMEN FOR WELLNESS

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## sponsors

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## Lavender Mint Tea

1 teaspoon fresh lavender flowers  
or 1/2 teaspoon dried lavender flowers  
1 1/2 to 2 tablespoons fresh mint leaves  
or 2 teaspoons dried mint  
1 cup boiling water

Combine lavender flowers & mint in pot. Pour hot water over mixture; steep 5 minutes.

**Breath Deep . Stay Well!**

