If/Then

If You Care About Achieving Reproductive Justice for All, Then You Should Care About Sex Education

WHAT IS THE REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE MOVEMENT?

SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective is the first and oldest organization to use the Reproductive Justice framework as their guiding organizing principles. SisterSong defines Reproductive Justice as the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities. This framework is expansive and rooted in centering the most marginalized and combating white supremacy. Black and Indigenous communities have always been fighting for Reproductive Justice, but the term itself was officially coined in 1994. Before attending the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, where the world agreed that the right to plan your own family must be central to global development, a group of Black women gathered in Chicago. They recognized that the women's rights movement, led by and primarily representing middle-class and wealthy white women, could not defend the needs of Black and Indigenous women and other marginalized women and queer people, and that there needed to be a national movement to uplift the needs of the most marginalized birthing people, families, and communities.



These women named themselves Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice, and on that day, a movement was born. Rooted in the internationally accepted human rights framework created by the United Nations, Reproductive Justice combines reproductive rights and social justice and examines how power, privilege, and oppression affect a person's ability to access care. The progenitors of Reproductive Justice launched the movement by publishing a historic full-page statement with 800+ signatures in The Washington Post and Roll Call. Just three years later, in 1997, SisterSong was formed to create a national, multi-ethnic Reproductive Justice movement.

Reproductive Justice rests on the belief that a movement grounded in human rights and led by Black and Brown women is best equipped to protect not only the rights of Black and Brown women, but everyone. The mainstream reproductive rights movement was heavily focused on the legal right to an abortion, an issue which has remained vitally important. Still, that alone cannot adequately address the full experience of accessing reproductive care, especially for marginalized people. Without access, "choice" means nothing. Reproductive Justice seeks to bring the politics of power, privilege, and oppression into the conversation of how people access reproductive healthcare, addressing barriers such as transportation and childcare that impact a person's ability to get an abortion, and making conversations about culture central to our healthcare.

This framework moves beyond just abortion and treats reproductive decisions as one of the many ways that we exercise bodily autonomy. In a country where much of our medical system was built on the erasure of women and the exploitation of Black women and people of color, we cannot shy away from the ways that our history impacts our present. The Black maternal mortality rate being three times higher than for white birthing people is not a coincidence; it's a series of policy choices, cultural norms, and historic consequences. Viewing our bodily autonomy as something sacred that must be protected allows the Reproductive Justice movement to protect abortion care as the healthcare it is, support healthy families and children, as well as protect access to clean drinking water, trans inclusive healthcare, voting rights, and everything in between.

HOW SEX EDUCATION ADVANCES REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

Comprehensive sex education is an evidence-based, medically accurate, and culturally responsive approach to teaching about human sexuality that equips people with the information and skills they need to make informed decisions about their bodies, relationships, and futures.

People cannot meaningfully exercise reproductive autonomy without accurate, affirming information about their bodies, consent, relationships, contraception, pregnancy, abortion, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and reproductive health.

For many young people, access to sex education can be one of their earliest opportunities to develop the knowledge and agency necessary to make decisions about their sexual and reproductive lives.

The Reproductive Justice movement and comprehensive sex education share a fundamental principle: all people deserve the information, resources, and power necessary to make informed, unbiased decisions about their own bodies and futures. Sex education helps build that foundation for young people by providing access to information that supports bodily autonomy in reproductive health decision-making and beyond.

- **Bodily autonomy:** Sex education helps people understand their bodies, boundaries, consent, relationships, and ability to make decisions about their sexual and reproductive lives. Bodily autonomy recognizes that feeling good isn't something to be ashamed of - it's a fundamental human right.
- **The right to have children:** All people deserve accurate, non-stigmatizing information about fertility, pregnancy, reproductive health, and parenting, not messaging that treats pregnancy or parenthood as shameful or inherently negative outcomes.
- **The right not to have children:** People need accurate information about contraception, pregnancy prevention, abortion, and their reproductive health-care options.
- **The right to parent in safe and sustainable communities:** Sex education can connect people with health information, resources, healthy relationship skills, and support while affirming, rather than stigmatizing, young parents and families.

WHAT DOES A REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE APPROACH TO SEX ED LOOK LIKE?

While information is essential to reproductive autonomy, sex education has not always provided young people with the full range of information they need to exercise that autonomy. Sex education and adolescent sexual health interventions have historically emphasized preventing pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, and sexual activity, sometimes framing young people's sexuality primarily as a risk to be managed rather than an area in which they deserve information, agency, and support.[1] Some approaches, such as Abstinence-Only-Until Marriage/Sexual Risk Avoidance programs have and continue to also reflect messages associated with **purity culture**, which emphasizes abstinence before heterosexual marriage and can tie sexual restraint, particularly for girls and young women, to morality and personal worth.[2] These messages do not affect all young people equally. Black girls and femmes, for example, navigate expectations of sexual restraint alongside racialized stereotypes that hypersexualize and adultify them.[3] Research has documented both adultification bias toward Black girls and sexuality education that frames their sexual restraint in terms of morality and respectability.[4] LGBTQIA+ youth, young people with disabilities, pregnant and parenting youth, and others whose identities or experiences fall outside narrow expectations about sexuality, gender, and family can likewise be excluded, stigmatized, or left without information that reflects their lives.[5]

A Reproductive Justice framework approach to inclusive sex education requires more than ensuring that different identities are represented in a curriculum. It also asks **what young people are taught about sexuality, power, relationships, and their own agency.** Research conducted by Ibis Reproductive Health in collaboration with SisterSong found that Black women in the U.S. South described having to "unlearn" inaccurate and negative messages about sexuality and called for culturally responsive education that meaningfully addresses "autonomy, pleasure, and consent."

CONSENT, AUTONOMY, AND COLLECTIVE CARE

Consent puts bodily autonomy into practice. *The National Sex Education Standards* define consent as an "informed, voluntary, and mutual agreement between people to engage in an activity."[6] Consent education gives young people the tools to identify and communicate their own desires and boundaries, recognize and respect the boundaries of others, navigate power and pressure in relationships, and understand that consent must be freely given and ongoing. From a Reproductive Justice perspective, consent is seen as an essential component of pleasure. As deeply social beings, we are always navigating our own, and others', boundaries. When a vulnerable and potentially consequential action like sex is approached with a consent framework, mutual pleasure enters the conversation. A Reproductive Justice framework also deepens the understanding of the way sex is shaped by power by recognizing that the ability to exercise autonomy does not exist in a vacuum. Race, gender, sexuality, disability, economic circumstances, and other systems of power can shape whether a person's boundaries are recognized and respected, whether they feel safe saying yes or no, and whether they have meaningful choices available to them. Sex education through a Reproductive Justice lens, therefore, means more than teaching young people to say "no"; it means helping them develop the knowledge, communication skills, and agency needed to make affirmative decisions about their bodies and relationships.

A Reproductive Justice approach also recognizes that bodily autonomy is not limited to avoiding unwanted experiences. All people should be equipped to understand their own desires, communicate what they want, and recognize pleasure as part of healthy sexuality rather than something inherently shameful. This approach can extend beyond individual relationships to collective care by teaching skills such as bystander intervention that help young people recognize and respond to coercion, harassment, and violence in their communities. In this way, Reproductive Justice-centered sex education moves beyond both risk prevention and representation toward sex education grounded in agency, safety, pleasure, consent, and collective responsibility.

SEX EDUCATION AS A TOOL FOR REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

Applying a Reproductive Justice framework to comprehensive sex education means looking beyond whether young people simply receive sex education to consider what information they can access, whose experiences are reflected and affirmed, and whether they have the tools to apply what they learn in their own lives. Sex education should provide young people with the information, representation, and skills they need to exercise meaningful agency over their bodies, relationships, and futures.

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QUALITY SEX EDUCATION WORKS

- Sex education advances Reproductive Justice by ensuring young people have the information, resources, and support they need to exercise bodily autonomy and make their own informed decisions about their reproductive lives.
- Quality sex education recognizes sexuality as a part of young people's lives and development, rather than framing it solely through pregnancy, STIs, and other risks.
- A Reproductive Justice approach to sex education requires more than ensuring that different identities are represented in a curriculum, sex education must challenge stigma and oppression by including honest reflection on sexuality, power, relationships, and agency.

IF YOU'RE AN ADVOCATE

- Connect sex education advocacy to the broader fight for Reproductive Justice and access to sexual and reproductive health care.
- Advocate to protect and expand funding for sex education that is culturally responsive, inclusive, and grounded in bodily autonomy. Reject curricula rooted in shame, stigma, stereotypes, or misinformation.
- Center young people, particularly those from communities most impacted by reproductive oppression, in sex education policy and program development.

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| Sources

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