

our choices—is what we've fought an
for. Brought here in chains, worked
mules, bred like beasts, whipped one day,
sold the next—for 244 years we were held in
bondage. Somebody said that we were less
than human and not fit for freedom. Some-
body said we were like children and could
not be trusted to think for ourselves. Some-
body owned our flesh, and decid
when and with whom and how
were to be used. Somebody



choice is the es
It's what we
have struggled
The right to

would sit on a bus. The
right for each of us
to dream and
to choose
our lives

Whose Fight?

A Look Into the Origin and Legacy of Black Reproductive Justice



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Our *Purpose*

In the spring of 2022, one headline continued to resurface in online media: “**Black Mothers Keep Dying After Giving Birth.**” Black women in local communities were losing their lives after childbirth, and their stories about medical racism and lack of access to healthcare were finally coming to light. This issue is wholly connected to our country’s current conversation surrounding reproductive justice as a whole.

Nearly a year after the United States Supreme Court released its decision in **Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization**, overturning the constitutional right to abortion granted in **Roe v. Wade**, this zine aims to take a look into history and uncover what abortion access means for reproductive freedom. Examining the Black women-led movement that started it all, this zine explores the implications of restricted abortion access, both in history and this post-Roe world, and how Black women have been at the forefront of this fight for freedom since the beginning.

What is *Reproductive Justice?*

Coined by a group of Black women activists in 1994, the term “**reproductive justice**” is most plainly defined as **the right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, the right to have a child, the right to not have a child, and the right to parent a child or children in safe and healthy environments.** It revolves around a critical feminist framework to include social, economic, and health factors that may impact reproductive experiences. The starting goal of the reproductive justice movement was to expand the women’s movement to include women of color, socially marginalized women, and LGBTQ+ people.



Background

During the summer of **1989**, activists and lawmakers alike stood on the steps of the Supreme Court to condemn its decision on **Webster v. Reproductive Health Services**, a landmark case which upheld a Missouri law restricting the use of public services for abortions, counseling in support of abortion, and enforced a viability framework for pregnancy.

This ruling was a direct contradiction to the 1973 decision in **Roe v. Wade**, which secured **abortion as a constitutional right**. It opened the door for states to restrict abortion in ways thought to be illegal under **Roe**.

In the wake of the Webster ruling, **Black women took action**.

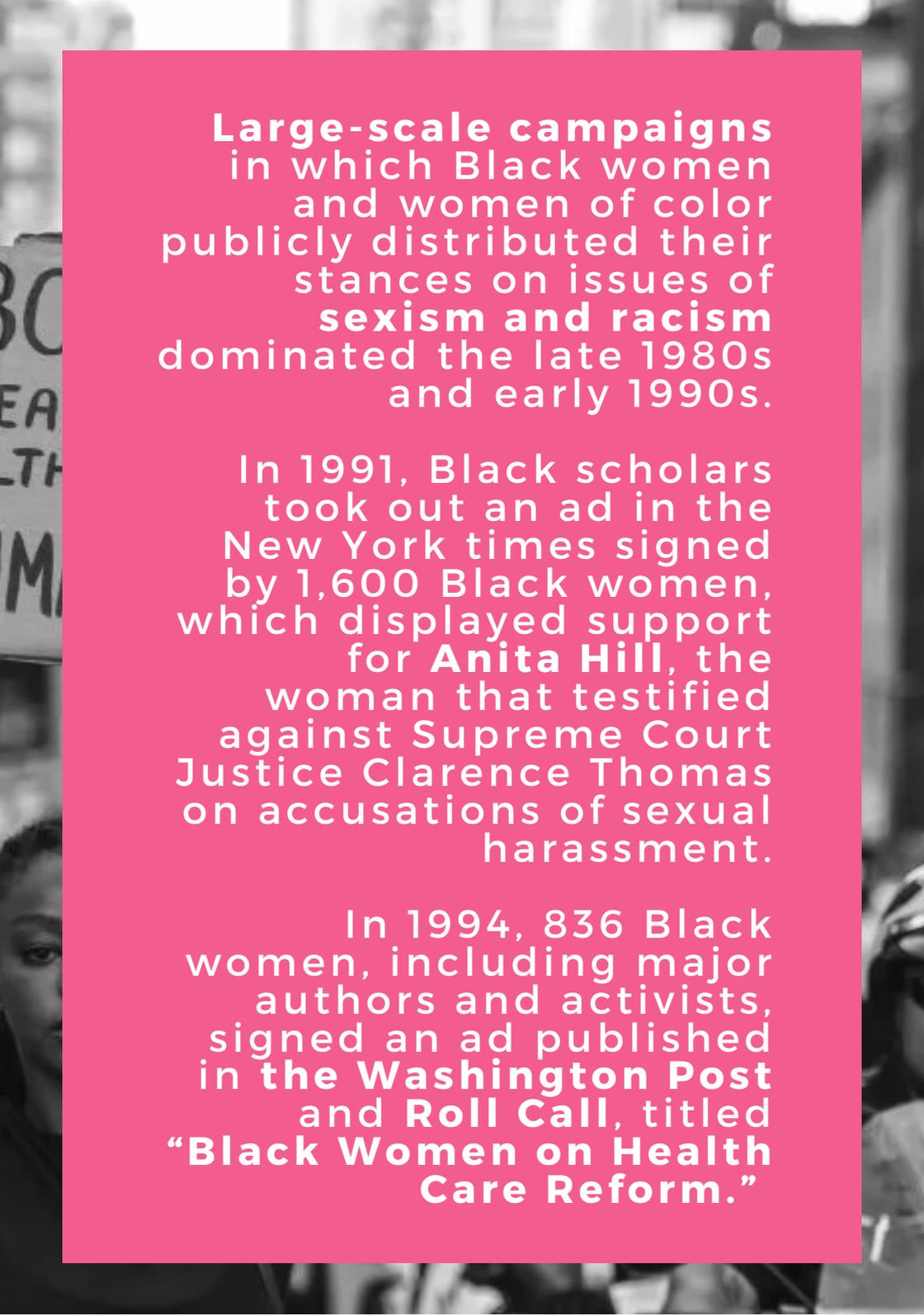
The *Brochure*

In 1989, 16 Black women published the first collective state advocating for equal access to abortion, titled **“We Remember: African American Women are for Reproductive Freedom.”**

The document aimed to define reproductive justice beyond Roe and provide a more **holistic analysis of Black women’s historical fight for freedom**. It ensured the inclusion of low-income women and women of color in the fight for bodily autonomy and access to reproductive services. **250,000** “We Remember” pamphlets were produced.

It served as a catalyst for the **reproductive justice movement** and inspired several acts of courage by Black women around the country.

Black women’s organizations, such as **the National Political Congress of Black Women and the National Coalition of 100 Black Women**, were among groups actively speaking out in support of abortion rights.



Large-scale campaigns
in which Black women
and women of color
publicly distributed their
stances on issues of
sexism and racism
dominated the late 1980s
and early 1990s.

In 1991, Black scholars
took out an ad in the
New York times signed
by 1,600 Black women,
which displayed support
for **Anita Hill**, the
woman that testified
against Supreme Court
Justice Clarence Thomas
on accusations of sexual
harassment.

In 1994, 836 Black
women, including major
authors and activists,
signed an ad published
in **the Washington Post**
and **Roll Call**, titled
**“Black Women on Health
Care Reform.”**



That same year, 12 Black women coined the phrase **“reproductive justice”** and established themselves as **the Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice** to launch a nationwide campaign surrounding Black women’s reproductive health issues.

In 1994, the Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice and the Women of Color Partnership Program of the Religious Coalition of Reproductive Choice republished “We Remember” with an **additional 29 signatures.**



**"We Remember: African
American Women are for
Reproductive Freedom"
(1989)**

Illustration by Clyde Gilliam

- In "We Remember," the women laid out an 11-point definition of *reproductive freedom*:

REPRODUCTIVE FREEDOM MEANS:

1. The right to comprehensive, age-appropriate information about sexuality and reproduction.

2. The right to choose to have a child.

3. The right to good, affordable health care to assure a safe pregnancy and delivery.

4. The right to health services to help the infertile achieve pregnancy.

5. The right to choose not to have a child.

6. The right to the full range of contraceptive services and appropriate information about reproduction.

7. The right to choose to end an unwanted pregnancy.

8. The right to safe, legal, affordable abortion services.

9. The right to make informed choices.

10. The right to easily accessible health care that is proven to be safe and effective.

11. The right to reproductive health and to make our own reproductive choices.

12. The right to reproductive health and to make our own reproductive choices.

13. The right to make informed choices.

14. The right to easily accessible health care that is proven to be safe and effective.

15. The right to reproductive health and to make our own reproductive choices.

16. The right to reproductive health and to make our own reproductive choices.

17. The right to reproductive health and to make our own reproductive choices.

The 16 Black women that signed “We Remember,” continue to fight for *reproductive justice, racial and gender equality, and other social justice issues* through education, politics, and community organizing:

Byllye Avery is an activist that focuses on Black women's access to reproductive healthcare. After the Roe decision, Avery co-opened an abortion clinic in Gainesville, Florida, called the Gainesville Women's Health Center. In 1984, she founded the National Black Women's Health Project (now called the Black Women's Health Imperative).



Reverend Willie T. Barrow was a civil rights activist and minister. From 1953 to 1965, she was a field organizer for Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. She helped found Operation Breadbasket (now known as the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition). In 1984, Barrow became the first woman executive director of a civil rights organization, serving as Push's CEO. Barrow held membership in the National Urban League and the National Council of Negro Women.



Donna Brazile is a political strategist, campaign manager, and political analyst. Coretta Scott King even hired her to help with designating Martin Luther King Jr. Day as a federal holiday. Brazile was the first African American woman to direct a major presidential campaign, and worked on the campaigns of numerous politicians. She is currently an ABC News Contributor and has previous experience with Fox News, Ms. Magazine, and Roll Call.



Shirley Chisholm was an American politician who became the first Black woman to be elected to the United States Congress in 1968. Chisholm also became the first African American to seek nomination for president of the United States from a major political party. She introduced more than 50 pieces of legislation and overcame resistance in politics because of her gender, but continued to fight. She also co-founded the National Political Congress of Black women.



Representative Cardiss Collins was a politician who served in the United States House of Representatives for 24 years. She was first elected to Congress under a special election following the death of her husband. Collins soon became the first African-American and first woman to chair the Manpower and Housing subcommittee of the House Government Operations Committee. She rose to serve as president and chair of the Congressional Black Caucus. By 1997, she was the longest-serving Black woman in Congress.



Ramona Edelin is an academic and activist. She has taught at various institutions, and in 1972, Edelin is known to have introduced the term “African American” into general circulation. In 1997, she joined the National Urban Coalition and eventually rose to the positions of both president and CEO. In 1991, she joined the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation and then-president Bill Clinton appointed her to the Presidential Board on HBCUs that same year. Edelin is currently executive director of the DC Association of Charter Schools.



Jacquelyn Gates Shipe is a consultant and non-profit leader. Shipe has led as the Associate Vice President and Vice President at the University of Alabama in Huntsville and Oakwood University. She has also held several leadership positions in organizations like Verizon and JCPenney. Formerly the president of the National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women's Clubs, Inc., Shipe is now its Planned Giving Director. She is currently the CEO of Global Ties Alabama, as well as the president and CEO of SOARing LLC.



Marica Ann Gillespie is a magazine editor, writer, professor, and racial and gender justice activist. In 1970, Gillespie was hired as a managing editor at Essence Magazine and became editor-in-chief the following year. In 1980, she joined Ms. Magazine, the first national American feminist magazine, and served as a contributing writer, contributing editor, executive editor, and finally editor-in-chief in 1992. Gillespie currently serves on the board of directors of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America and the Global Fund for Women, and she is a member of the National Council of Negro Women and the American Association of Magazine Editors. She continues her activism through lectures and the regular writing of articles and essays.



Dorothy Height was a women's rights and civil rights advocate known as "the godmother of the civil rights movement." In 1958, Height became the fourth president of the National Council of Negro Women, remaining in the position for 40 years. Heights was one of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s key advisors and was one of the chief organizers for the 1963 March on Washington, but was and is largely left out of discussion regarding the Civil Rights Movement. In 1971, she co-founded the National Women's Political Caucus.



Jewell Jackson McCabe is a business executive and social and political activist. In 1970, McCabe was a part of the first chapter of the NY Coalition of 100 Black Women, and she was elected president in 1976. She expanded the organization to become the National Coalition of 100 Black Women in 1981 and served as Chairman of the Board. In 1984, she was appointed by then-president Bill Clinton to the United States Holocaust Memorial Council's Committee on Conscience, and she was the first African American member. McCabe is currently president of Jewell Jackson McCabe Associates.

Julianne Malveaux is an economist, author, social and political commentator, and businesswoman. Malveaux's writing has regularly appeared in USA Today, Black Issues in Higher Education, Ms. magazine, Essence magazine, and the San Francisco Sun Reporter. Malveaux is currently on the boards of the Economic Policy Institute, The Recreation Wish List Committee of Washington, DC, and the Liberian Education Trust. She is also President of PUSH Excel.

Eleanor Holmes Norton is a lawyer and politician. Norton began much of her activism during her time in law school as an organizer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Norton was on the founding advisory board of the Women's Rights Law Reporter, the first legal periodical in the United States to focus exclusively on the field of women's rights law. She was also a signer of the Black Woman's Manifesto, a classic document of the Black feminist movement. That same year, Norton represented 60 female employees of Newsweek who had filed a claim that Newsweek had a policy of allowing only men to be reporters—the women won. In 1977, she was appointed as the chair of the EEOC and introduced its first regulation on sexual harassment. In 1990, she was elected as a Democratic delegate to the House of Representatives. She still holds office as and continues to advocate for social justice issues.





C. Delores Tucker was a politician and civil rights activist. Tucker had extensive involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. She participated in the 1965 Selma to Montgomery marches and raised funds for the NAACP. Tucker also succeeded Shirley Chisholm and was the convening founder and national chair of the National Congress of Black Women. In 1971, she became the first Black female Secretary of State as the Secretary of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. In 1991, she established and was president of the Bethune-DuBois Institute, Inc., which promoted the development of young African Americans through scholarships and educational programs.

Patricia Tyson was the director of the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights (now known as the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice), which currently works to expand inclusive reproductive healthcare and fight for reproductive rights in a lens that recognizes intersectionality framework.

Maxine Waters is a politician. Before her election to Congress, Waters was a leader in the anti-apartheid movement. In 1990, Waters was elected to the United States House of Representatives for California's 29th congressional district. The district was renumbered multiple times, but Waters continued to get reelected. From 1997 to 1998, she was chair of the Congressional Black Caucus. Waters was also a superdelegate to the 2008 Democratic National Convention. Throughout her political career, she has remained a fearless and outspoken advocate for women, children, and minorities. She is currently one of the most senior Black women in Congress.

Faye Wattleton is a reproductive rights activist. Wattleton took on leadership on maternal and child health programs in the facilities of the Dayton Ohio Health Department. Paired with her role as a midwife, Wattleton's experiences in healthcare led to her work on reproductive rights. In 1978, Wattleton was appointed as the of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, becoming the first African American woman, the first woman since founder Margaret Sanger, and the youngest to hold that position. Wattleton ultimately helped place Planned Parenthood at the forefront of reproductive choice. After her time at Planned Parenthood, Wattleton created the Center for Gender Equality (renamed the Center for the Advancement of Women), and co-founded EeroQ Quantum Hardware in 2017.



The “**We Remember**” brochure served as a stepping stone for several non-profit organizations to continue and strengthen their involvement in the reproductive justice movement.

One of the most notable is the **National Black Women’s Help Project**, now known as the **Black Women’s Health Imperative**. Founded by Byllye Avery, The Black Women’s Health Imperative was the first non-profit organization created by Black women to **protect and advocate for the health and wellness of Black women and girls**. The organization possesses several initiatives promoting mental health, reproductive justice, healthcare, education, research, policy, and leadership.



BLACK WOMEN'S
HEALTH IMPERATIVE

Reproductive Justice as a *Human Right*

In the original document, the 16 Black women presented the concept of reproductive freedom in a way that begged readers to

acknowledge
**reproductive justice as
a human right.**

Reproductive rights are grounded in humanity—the rights of life, privacy, bodily autonomy, and most importantly, **freedom.**

This includes the freedom for a woman to choose whether or not to seek an abortion, but **reproductive justice is also connected to other standards of living.**

Aspects of family planning, access to health insurance, or even environmental justice are all related to how a woman is able, or unable, to adequately take care of her reproductive system or any children she may already have. **The circumstances in which people give birth point to a larger issue in human rights. People everywhere lack stable housing, food, or wealth—these factors contribute to how they can exercise choice in every part of their lives. Abortion is important, but it is not the only focus.** Recent bans on abortion are connected to all of these other aspects of reproductive freedom that are related to human rights and social justice as a whole.

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happy
Black
Maternal
Health
week!

