

## *Marching Toward Reproductive Justice: Coalitional (Re) Framing of the March for Women's Lives\**

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This article examines how coalition frames develop and what happens to that frame after the formal coalition ends. To that end, I analyze the frame shift around the 2004 March for Women's Lives (March). The March initially focused on established ideas of reproductive rights around which the four national mainstream co-sponsors previously organized. However, after a newer reproductive justice organization joined the coalition, material and organizing reflected a shift in framing to reproductive justice. How did this change happen? What are the impacts of this event for the women's movement? Through document analysis and interviews, I trace the negotiations that facilitated this framing shift. I argue that this new coalition frame translated into positive lasting changes in organizing for women's reproductive health even as the coalition dissolved and some of the tensions within the larger women's movement remain.

Over 1 million people made the April 2004 March for Women's Lives (March) one of the largest marches in U.S. history. The summer before the March, a coalition of four well-established national women's organizations had announced the March, then named the Save Women's Lives March for Freedom of Choice. Months later, the coalition changed the name to the March for Women's Lives. While similar to the original name, the new name actually indicated a framing shift representing a new organizing strategy that emphasized increasing the diversity of the March participants. The 2004 March differed from other national women's marches because of its emphasis on diversity, social justice, and social issues beyond traditional "women's issues." One black woman, who had initially felt reluctant to organize a delegation from Pittsburgh as part of a coalition with white women from local organizations, recalled a disagreement about the publicity materials those local groups wanted to distribute after the name had already changed nationally:

They had...the old name of the March on them. And I was like "Un-uh, we need the new card that says March for Women's Lives." And that was significant but they didn't even know! They didn't know 'cause "freedom of choice" sounded perfect [to them]. Obviously, that doesn't resonate with women of color, and it hasn't and they ask the question "Why don't women of color participate?" I'm like "Well, obviously, it doesn't resonate with them

or their experiences.” (La’Tasha Mayes, 26, New Voices Pittsburgh and SisterSong Management Circle, personal interview)

This quote highlights the importance to social movement participants of choosing the appropriate language to talk about issues, particularly as it relates to participants’ historical experiences in movements. This specific March’s shift in framing, or how social movements develop discourse and mobilize supporters around social problems, came after years of tense coalition efforts around this type of March and was illustrative of the continuing issue in the women’s movement of representing diverse groups of women. The 2004 March framing dispute was part of a larger discussion that continues among feminists: Who are the women represented by the women’s movement?

This article aims to understand how coalition framing can have a continued impact on a social movement after the coalition that produces the frame dissolves. The process through which movements develop their framing is a contested process and the cooperation of competing organizations into a coalition could be fraught with tension. Yet, positive consequences can become a part of the social movement field even after a formal coalition ends. To better understand this process, I analyze the frame shift around the March, a useful site through which to understand the dynamics of coalition framing. In this article I ask, How were different frames brought together to create a consonant frame pyramid? Who “won” this frame contest? What are the visible impacts of this coalition frame on the women’s movement?

The Feminist Majority Foundation, NARAL Pro-Choice America (NARAL), the National Organization for Women (NOW), and Planned Parenthood Federation of America (Planned Parenthood) conceived of the March, but midway through planning, a less established national organization, Sister-Song Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective (SisterSong) joined the coalition, changing the tenor of the March and subsequent organizing. The March’s success through broadening of a frame exemplifies short-term resolution of debate about how to emphasize gender analysis of oppression without eliding the multiple ways women experience manifestations of oppression due to other socially constructed status categories they embody, such as race. Even now, half a decade after the March, mainstream groups continue to use some of the language of reproductive justice, suggesting a continued impact on the women’s movement.

In this article, I use a definition of reproductive justice that closely matches that of the case. SisterSong emphasizes the necessity of achieving reproductive justice rather than reproductive rights, the focus of groups such as NARAL, NOW, and Planned Parenthood. SisterSong traces the term “reproductive justice” to a 1994 pro-choice conference at which a caucus of

black women defined it as reproductive health linked to social justice (SisterSong 2006). While “reproductive rights” and “reproductive justice” often appear to be the same to outside observers, activists within the movement disagree with this substitution. SisterSong leaders often explain the differences as the focus on social justice within the context of achieving a spectrum of human rights rather than only privacy to make a decision to legally access to abortion. The limits of the liberal legal approach toward reproductive rights that emphasizes protection of *Roe v. Wade* has encouraged this broader approach: “Thus, the liberal approach’s narrow focus on the formal right to reproductive choice doesn’t *just* miss the fact that governmental nonintervention in reproductive decision making can actually harm some women and perpetuate inequalities. It also obscures the role of biased legal and governmental policies in *creating the contexts* in which women’s choices are made in the first place (Ehrenreich 2008:4; emphasis in original). A human rights framework links multiple structural obstacles and, SisterSong argues, better reflects the lived realities of women (and allied men) who simultaneously experience multiple oppressions due to their race, class, and immigrant status, which affects their needs and access to reproductive care. SisterSong’s diagnosis and prognosis of the problem of women not having control over their bodies suggests an “alternate reality” in which their members live (Benford 1993:679), which while not in all ways different from that of white, middle-class women, emerges from a different set of historical circumstances that shapes their reproduction as discussed later in the article.

After I review studies on coalitions, I provide the context for the emergence of the two March cosponsors I analyze and outline my data and methods. The findings sections discuss the multiple stages in framing the March: previous framing by NOW of similar marches, initial framing and negotiations to shift the framing of the March, and the potential impacts of this reframing. The article concludes with future directions for research.

### **Developing Coalition Frames**

Social movements are comprised of social movement organization (SMOs) and individuals that are interested in the same problems but have different ideas and tactics for advancing their concerns (Benford 1993; Meyer and Corrigall-Brown 2005). Coalitions are often responsible for social movement wins yet remain remarkably understudied in comparison with other social movement topics. Thus, researchers have called for more research on coalitions (Jones et al. 2001; Meyer and Corrigall-Brown 2005). Coalitions are difficult to sustain and are more likely to emerge when organizations face with a threat (McCammon and Campbell 2002; Staggenborg 1986; Van Dyke 2003). Within coalitions, tension arises as organizations need the benefits of

coalition but remain wary of losing organizational identity (Croteau and Hicks 2003; Meyer and Corrigall-Brown 2005). Some research (McCammon and Campbell 2002; Meyer and Corrigall-Brown 2005; Van Dyke 2003) focuses on political contexts, arguing that external political threats such as impending policy changes facilitate coalition even when groups have individual concerns about the proposed coalition. Joining a coalition is often a complex decision with high risks. Movement actors often move to other organizations or movements (Meyer and Whittier 1994), but an SMO leaving a coalition could damage its reputation among other SMOs or endanger future possibilities of working together. Additionally, coalitions are often short-term since concerns around “resources and ideological disputes among organizations make it difficult to maintain a coalition once the exceptional environmental conditions which make coalition work attractive return to normal” (Staggenborg 1986:375). The risks of diverting financial and human resources to what could be a failed effort only heighten the pressure and potential for disappointment.

Frames convey meaning and thus attempts to align them often lead to conflicts (Benford 1993). Framing theory provides a useful tool to analyze the relationship between an organization’s membership and that membership’s interpretations of a problem, both of which are influenced by its own history. Due to this relationship, “not only do frames clash but frame sponsors argue, debate, and negotiate via interactive discursive processes” (Croteau and Hicks 2003:254). Further, depending on the actions of other organizations in the social movement, organizations may use different types of frames at different points in their existence. Alternatively, an organization may continue to use the same frame despite changing social conditions that shift the public understanding of the social problem at hand. Using the example of the March coalition, I explore how these ideas lead to intramovement conflicts and compromises around strategies and framing.

Organization frames diagnose a social problem (diagnostic framing) and provide a solution to the problem (prognostic framing) in a way that intends to elicit support from constituencies that can be called into action to support the SMO and the broader social movement in which the organization is embedded (Snow et al. 1986). In this case, the organizations approached their concerns around women’s reproduction in varying ways. This article focuses on the mechanisms of frame alignment, the “linkage of individual and SMO interpretive orientations, such that some set of individual interests, values and beliefs and SMO activities, goals, and ideology are congruent and complementary” (Snow et al. 1986:464). Frame alignment is achieved through four processes: frame amplification, frame bridging, frame extension, and frame transformation. Of particular interest, here is how frame amplification draws in participants through clarifying the connection between a frame and

(potential) participants' lives. Frame amplification occurs through value amplification and belief amplification. While the former describes focusing on what people think is important, the latter focuses on the perceived relationships between ideas or events, such as the belief about the cause or solution to a particular social problem. In this piece, I provide insight into the temporal impact of frames by emphasizing the multiple ways this new coalition frame was amplified and the impact on the larger movement of the deployment of this new frame.

The consonant frame pyramid proposed by Croteau and Hicks (2003) can be successful if individuals' frames align with organization frames, which are aligned for the purposes of the coalition. Frame resonance is especially important for a coalition because if the framing appeals then organizations overcoming their differences to work together to create the frame will have been worth the effort. As Snow and Benford (1992) have explained, the more a frame resonates, the greater its ability to mobilize people. Thus, for a frame to resonate, it has to appear to be based on evidence (empirical credibility), speak to a problem that is part of potential constituent's lives (experiential commensurability), and draw on the common culture (e.g., values) (centrality/narrative fidelity) of a constituency. Focusing on the values of a group and using the language to which they are accustomed increases the potential for successful alignment. Alignment does not always guarantee action because coalition groups can have different ideas of how to solve the problem (Noy 2009). Resonance may not be every organization's goal, as they may seek a radical shift in how the problem is understood (Ferree 2003). In the case presented here, part of the desire for a shift in framing was not just about how the public understood reproductive issues but how movement insiders defined the problem. In the case of the March, for which millions of dollars and multiple reputations were on the line, the action was guaranteed. That the final frame would be well-received, however, was hoped for but not guaranteed.

How members understand themselves affects how they talk about the organization and devise strategies, and conversely how they talk about themselves and devise strategies affects how potential members see the organization and whether they decide to join. Construction of collective identity as an organization or movement requires engagement with your individual members' identities (Taylor and Whittier 1992). Everything from appearance to language to organizational structures can reflect this identity. While collective identity is one way to analyze the issues raised by this March, for this piece I focus on framing as it improves our understanding linkage of individual worldviews and organizational worldviews. As I will outline below, however, the inability to provide space for multiple identities has presented challenges to the cohesion of the women's movement.

While framing is a necessary step for movements gaining supporters and increasing political power, a framing shift is not enough to guarantee lasting changes. While organizations with a social movement have an interest in how other organization frame the issues (Benford 1993), not all will participate in coalitions. Organizations cooperating to develop a frame can be a powerful experience, but it can give individual organizations a false idea that their combined efforts will result in lasting change for all their partners. However, since a coalition frame change does not require a change in how organizations operate this can ultimately be more damaging than if the groups had not worked together in the first instance. Yet, as I show, the discontent that arises after a coalition ends can actually act as a catalyst for further organizing.

### **Historical Divisions in Women's Activism**

The women's movement, like other social movements, is not a unified whole. Rather, its current incarnation emerges from a history of "a group of feminisms" (Roth 2004:3). A vast body of feminist literature documents the long-standing inability (or unwillingness) of the women's movement to be a movement for women of all races (Combahee 1983; Crenshaw 1994; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Roth 2004). Some women of color identified isolation within mainstream organizations as having limited their ability to organize around issues more important to their communities. One influential activist theorist noted that, "Drained of our energy, we few tokens had little left to deploy into the development of our own literary and political movements" (Anzaldúa 1995:xvi–vii). Diversity within organizations presents a continued challenge that impacts women's activism (Poster 1995).

In writing about feminist organizing after the suffrage movement (the First Wave of feminist activism), Ferree, Hess, and Sanders (1985) argued, "the ferocity of the opposition to abortion rights has served to solidify commitment to reproductive freedom within the New Feminist Movement" (p. 107). They noted, however, that the liberal approach to protection of abortion that focused on an individual woman's right to privacy was critiqued even during the Second Wave of feminism. Even though abortion was a primary issue that invigorated many feminists of these decades, criticisms of their emphasis emerged from minority women whose reproduction was historically viewed as negative (Nelson 2003).

Women of color have argued that the historical exploitation and denigration of their bodies stems from both gendered *and* racialized (and often classed) stereotypes (Collins 1990). Reproduction of black women has been controlled since slavery when slave women were forced to produce children who would later be sold as property (Roberts 1997). Latina women have faced state control of their reproduction, as policy makers and pundits construct their

reproduction as “breeding” immigrants who drain social services (Gutiérrez 2008). These anxieties continue to inform debates and public images of social policy (Luther, Kennedy, and Combs-Orme 2005; Mink 2001; Quadagno 1994). For example, images of black “welfare queens” manipulating the government permeated discussions around the 1996 welfare reform (Hancock 2004). Public representation of social problems are often complex and rely on multiple denigrating stereotypes. Thus, some organizations insist on using a more nuanced analysis for challenging these representations, leading to continued division within “the” women’s movement.

### **How the 2004 March Frame Shifted**

The focus on intersecting identities and the emphasis on the relationship between women’s reproduction and human rights is critical to understanding increased resonance of the new coalition frame that led to the successful consonant frame pyramid. Starting in the late 1960s, some Asian/Pacific Islander, black, and Latina women developed autonomous women’s organizations rather than engage with white feminists who privileged gender over other forms of oppression (or men of their racial communities who refused to address sexism). These divergent experiences result in a different collective identity and subsequent framing looks different. White (1999) identifies how in protesting the responses to Mike Tyson’s highly publicized rape trial, a group of black women invoked a black feminist frame that placed social problems in the context of complex experiences of oppression (rather than singular identities of gender *or* race). The March coalition framing demonstrated an attempt to answer this question on a national scale and was significant because the innovative aspects of the frame have maintained some presence in continued activism.

The March showed that “the American women’s movement remains capable of highly visible, large-scale, newsworthy collective actions” (Staggenborg and Taylor 2005:45–46). The March initially focused on established ideas around which NOW and the three other major cosponsors traditionally organized, including access to abortion and contraception. However, after SisterSong, joined the coalition planning, official March material reflected a shift in framing. While multiple organizations supported the March, I focus on a U.S. national coalition of women of color, SisterSong, and one mainstream organization, NOW. Even though abortion and reproductive choice remained focal points, NOW’s later material produced for the March also highlighted social justice and the variety of issues around which different groups involved with the March supported. SisterSong’s involvement in the March was pivotal and foregrounded an organizing strategy and new language that continues to change the tenor of contemporary organizing from reproductive rights

emphasizing abortion rights to reproductive justice emphasizing a range of reproductive health needs. As such, the resulting March provided visible proof that the contemporary movement could represent women of many backgrounds, not just with the white, middle-class women it has traditionally been associated in popular media and academic press. With the inclusion of SisterSong in the March planning, the language used to promote the March took a noticeable turn, increasing the March's ability to gain enough support to be noteworthy.

Initially, the framing of the March relied on a feminist analysis of reproduction. Historically, this has included a focus on women's oppression in relation to men, the unfair treatment of women, and the need for women to control their own bodies. While these foci were elements of the frame both before and after SisterSong joined the coalition, the frame eventually emphasized broader concepts related to human rights, which has increased its usage among organizations. Since the focus of organizations that invoke human rights is often to demand the creation of structural conditions in which the rights can be exercised, the language of human rights also appeals to organizations challenging structural inequality. Their integration of human rights emerges from the recognition that irrespective of their presence in the law, rights do little to ensure that people with said rights (such as the right to abortion) can practically exercise them (Luna 2009).

## Data Collection and Methods

### *The Organizations*

Initially, four organizations cosponsored the March—Feminist Majority Foundation, National Organization for Women, NARAL Pro-Choice America, and Planned Parenthood Federation of America. Reproductive justice advocates focus on how structural inequalities intersect with and produce different reproductive health-care issues. Planned Parenthood has education and public advocacy programs, but is primarily a direct reproductive health-care provider, which made it too narrow a comparison point. NARAL, had up until the past decade explicitly defined itself as focused on abortion rights, thus we would expect it to focus on abortion in its continued framing. Ostensibly, NOW, with its broader platform would have been the most open to adjusting its rhetoric and practice to that of reproductive justice. Additionally, NOW's history of acknowledging its need to reach out to women of color suggested it understood its historically limited appeal to women of color. For example, during the 1980s, SisterSong National Coordinator Loretta Ross served as NOW's Director of Women of Color Programs under then president Ellie Smeal. NOW had also been the primary sponsor of similar national marches.

**National Organization for Women.** Founded in 1966, the National Organization for Women claims to be the largest feminist organization in the country with a half million members, and chapters in all states. Structurally, NOW is composed of local chapters, state organizations, a national board of directors, a Political Action Committee, and an affiliated legal defense fund. NOW is frequently cited as a textbook example of a liberal, reformist feminist organization that seeks to make social change through bureaucratic structures (e.g., Taylor and Whittier 1997).

NOW lists “Promoting Diversity/Ending Racism” as one of its six main issues but tensions between fighting for women’s rights and acknowledging diversity within the category of “women” continues. In 1995, Los Angeles NOW president Tammy Bruce was quoted in national media sources, such as *Time* and the *Los Angeles Times* saying that the discussion around the O. J. Simpson trial should focus on domestic violence and not racism. NOW board members called on Bruce to retract her statements because they violated NOW’s commitment to ending racism (National Organization for Women “Statement”). Bruce’s response that “[P]eople don’t join NOW to work on a host of social injustice issues. They join to work on women’s issues” pointed to what many women saw as a limitation of NOW (Gleick 1996). In the 2008 presidential election, Shelly Mandell, the president of Los Angeles NOW supported Republican Vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin, declaring her “what a feminist looks like” (ABC News 2008). National NOW leaders did not support Bruce or Mandell. Still, public statements like these confirm some critics’ suspicions that mainstream organizations can never serve the needs of women of diverse backgrounds because underneath their veneer of diversity, they are only concerned with women whose experiences most closely match that of elite white women.

NOW has historically framed its activism around women gaining gender-based equality with men through legal means, such as the creation of non-discriminatory employment laws and the protection of abortion laws. This approach has been successful as evidenced by NOW’s membership numbers and continued national presence. Still, while NOW’s activities have been critical for dramatic change for women as a group, critics contend that until other inequalities such as racism and homophobia are more actively addressed by the group, only some women will ever reap the full benefits of NOW’s activities.

**SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective.** Founded in 1997, SisterSong began as a coalition of 16 organizations, growing to over 80 women of color and allied organizations that work to achieve reproductive justice. Reproductive justice differs from reproductive rights in its emphasis on

embedding reproductive rights in a human rights framework. SisterSong has six paid staff based out of the national office in Atlanta, a Management Circle that guides the organization, and committees that strategize on the organization's operations such as policy and mobilizing. The mini-communities represented in SisterSong are Asian/Pacific Islander, black/African American, Latina, Middle Eastern/Arab American, and Native American/Indigenous women. SisterSong is part of the women's movement but it works with other movements through partnerships with groups in the environmental justice movement and other movement with which few reproductive rights organizations have worked.

A condition of membership for an organization or an individual member is agreement to SisterSong's principles of unity. Two of the principles mention human rights in stating that SisterSong "values and affirms...protecting the human, reproductive and sexual rights of all peoples, creating space for those typically excluded" and "working collectively and with allies from other progressive movements for human rights." In addition to holding trainings on how to integrate the reproductive justice model into an organization's work, SisterSong hosts national conferences, and works in coalition with mainstream women's organizations as necessary. Since the March analyzed in this article, the organization has grown, replaced "Health" with "Justice" in its name, and its spokespersons have become a part of national health care conversations. For example, its National Coordinator Loretta Ross joined First Lady Michelle Obama in September 2008 at an event on women and health-care reform. In early 2010, SisterSong staff were interviewed by national and international media in response to a Georgia Right to Life's anti-abortion campaign that equated black women's abortion to genocide.

Founded decades apart, these organizations differ in history, capacity, and goals. However, their interest in women's health led to working together on what some estimate was the largest March in U.S. history.

**Collection and Methods.** The author first interacted with SisterSong when she interviewed Loretta Ross while a research assistant on the U.S. site of the Global Feminism Project, an international public pedagogy project (see <http://www.umich.edu/~glbfem/index.html>). This article emerged from the 2007 pilot study of a larger research project on SisterSong and the reproductive justice movement, which includes documents, interviews, and participant observation. This article primarily relies on documents but also draws on interview data. Broad themes were produced from documents that informed later analysis of interviews. While numbers are mentioned in the findings sections, these are not meant to imply quantitative content analysis. Documents from NOW and SisterSong include publicly available newsletters, Web sites, video,

and audio recordings. The documents for NOW (31) included all material linked to the archived March Web site and documents that appeared in the results of an internal Web site search related to the 2004 March or NOW's previous marches were also used. Since 1971, NOW has published the *National NOW Times*, with issues as early 1995 available online. The documents for SisterSong (24) included the first seven issues of its newspaper, *Collective Voices* (*CV*), video, archival documents, and Web site.

Interviews were solicited via fliers at SisterSong conferences, listserv, and interviewee referral. Public figures were asked directly. While sharing an identity with interviewees and movement participants (e.g., gender, race, student status), likely helped improved response in some cases, my legitimacy as an informed researcher or desire to have one's story heard was mentioned most often. The 50 semi-structured interviews for the larger project were with members of SisterSong as well as founders, staff, and current Management Circle members (12 interviews were from the 2007 pilot and the remaining from 2009 to 2010). One-third of the interviews were conducted in person. Sixty percent of the phone interviews were conducted with people I had met at a SisterSong event prior to the interview. The interviews did not focus on the March, but if interviewees mentioned it, I probed and included that data in the analysis for this article where their reflections added to the understanding of the negotiation of framing of the March. Interviewees reviewed their transcript and were provided the opportunity to clarify previous statements as well as make anonymous or remove any portion with which they feel discomfort having publicly linked to their name. A few interviewees in the larger study took advantage of these options, none of which affected the conclusions of this article. Organizational affiliations are included to show range of participants' activities, not an official organizational position. This article is also informed by insights from approximately 170 hours of participant observation I conducted at later SisterSong events: national conferences in 2007, 2008, and 2009; workshops at the U.S. Social Forum in June 2007; a "Reproductive Justice 101" training in October 2007; and volunteering at the national office in Atlanta in 2010. Whenever possible, I identified myself as a researcher. While my data have breadth and depth regarding SisterSong, it is limited as it does not include all such data for NOW since I did not conduct similar interviews or later participant observation with NOW. This is an area for future research.

Throughout this piece, I refer to "mainstream" and "women of color" organizing and organizations. I am distinguishing between organizing that focuses on gender as the only or primary site of women's oppression (mainstream) and organizing that considers multiple sites of oppression simultaneously (women of color). Women of color can and do belong to mainstream organizations or could analyze social problems through a gender-only lens,

and white women can and do belong to women of color organizations or analyze social problems through an analysis based on simultaneous sites of oppression. Nevertheless, this is the language used by many of my interviewees as well as literature produced by them to describe what they understand as differences in social location, analysis of social problems, commitment to diverse groups of women, and organizing strategies.

### Findings

#### *Protecting Choice: Initial Mainstream Framing of the March*

NOW has organized many national marches, including the April 1989 March for Women's Lives, which occurred during the George H. W. Bush administration to "let the Court know what would happen if *Roe* were overturned" (NOW "Celebrating Our Presidents"). NOW described the April 1992 March for Women's Lives as having "leadership and delegations from every *pro-choice* organization" (NOW "March for Women's Lives 1992," emphasis added). While these are not the only national marches NOW has organized, NOW referred to both as "record-breaking" in the amount of support garnered, as demonstrated by the estimated numbers of participants: 600,000 in 1989 and 750,000 in 1992 (NOW "History of Marches"). NOW notes that both "these mass marches forced the issue of *abortion rights* into the forefront of political debate" (NOW "History of Marches," emphasis added). The framing of these marches relied on a reproductive rights frame that emphasizes protection of abortion and choice as the central goal of these demonstrations.

Previous accounts of NOW marches show that participation by women of color was documented as startlingly low. In the 1986 March, approximately 2,000 of women of color marched (Ross/Smeal NOW memo 1987). In reflecting on the 1992 March, a newsletter from the National Black Women's Health Project (an organization SisterSong material identifies as a "foremother") noted that only approximately 1,000 people of color participated, despite their increased activism in the movement. The article described repeated attempts to meet with NOW's leadership to include women of color in the planning. On a special conference call in which they were to discuss these problems, Smeal left the conversation before the women could confront her with their complaints. While more women of color were eventually included in the speaker's lineup for that March, the initial exclusion of these women increased frustration to the point that some women refused to attend that March. Many who did attend wore green armbands in visual protest against their initial exclusion.

A decade later, the 2004 March was initially framed as a response to an "attack" on reproductive choice, specifically abortion, by Republicans

including President George W. Bush. In this case, the external threat derived from the possible reelection of President George W. Bush. Organizers perceived the March as an opportunity to energize people through grassroots organizing around abortion rights that would defeat Bush come November 2004. The simultaneous threat *and* opportunity led to an unprecedented coalition by mainstream groups that sometimes competed on the national stage.

This diagnostic framing relied heavily on language of reproductive choice and emphasized threats to abortion access. In June 2003, the four organizations announced the upcoming 2004 March, which was at the time named “Save Women’s Lives March for Freedom of Choice” (Enda 2003). While more than abortion was on the agenda, rights and privacy were still central in the public diagnostic and prognostic framing.

NOW’s earliest article about the March in the Fall 2003 *National NOW Times* begins by discussing how “abortion opponents dominating two branches of government, infiltrating the nation’s courts, influencing state policy and threatening to topple the landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision, the right to safe, legal and accessible abortion and birth control is in grave danger” marked the need for the March (Cherrin 2003). Here, the March represented collaboration by four major women’s organizations to move forward the “abortion rights” movement (Cherrin 2003). With continual references to “abortion” (eight times), *Roe v. Wade* (four times), and “choice” (two times), NOW primarily framed the March as defending the right to abortion as guaranteed through the courts. Yet, for years, some women of color had been criticizing the “choice” analysis that made abortion and *Roe v. Wade* the most central reproductive rights issue. At the time NOW had support of some unlikely partners such as the United Farm Workers (Enda 2003), which indicates some diverse groups supported the March even when the cosponsors were using the reproductive choice framing. This March eventually differed due to the presence of women of color at pivotal planning stages.

### ***Women of Color Moving the Frame Beyond Choice to Justice***

Marches pose a lower risk to participants because they are less likely to incur government repression in a democratic society. Coalitions, however, can pose a high risk to organizations because they require investing financial and human resources. Additionally, successful coalitions require trust, which is a risk after people in an organization already harbor feelings of betrayal, which some women of color had voiced with the previous national marches.

***Gaining Support of Women of Color.*** One interviewee who worked for one of the mainstream cosponsors recalled that those organization’s leaders had discussions that included how they felt that they were doing smaller

organizations a favor by doing the majority of the work up front then asking for endorsements. SisterSong was partially created to provide a space for women of color to repair the negative impacts mainstream groups have had on the organizing power of women of color. Thus, some members considered the mainstream groups initially cosponsoring the March as “tainted allies” (Meyer and Corrigall-Brown 2005:331). Some of the younger members who knew this history explained initial feelings about the 2004 March in a film produced by women of color about the March. Malika Redmond, a National March Coordinator explained, “We marched with you in ‘92, we marched with you in ‘89 and it’s the same thing we’ve been hearing over and over again. And we’re tired of it because we’ve been saying that the struggle for marginalized voices are more than just ‘choice’” (Redmond quoted in Danavall 2005). The previous problems set the stage for women of color to demand more control when the March came around again.

In November 2003, hundreds of women of color convened for SisterSong’s first major conference. At the time, SisterSong focused on four ethnic/racial groups: African American, Asian Pacific Islander, Chicanas/Latinas, and Native American/Indigenous. NOW had already announced the April 2004 March, so at this fall conference representatives from each of the cosponsoring organization—Feminist Majority Foundation, NARAL, NOW, and Planned Parenthood—asked SisterSong to endorse the March.

SisterSong National Coordinator, Loretta Ross, who had previously worked for NOW reflected on the endorsement request: “I thought it was particularly telling that of the four organizations...they didn’t even all have women of color to send to represent them at our conference. This should be normal spacing with ellipsis and extra period to indicate an additional missing sentence:...You don’t even have women of color in senior management?” (Loretta Ross, Global Feminisms Project interview by author). NOW appeared to have the same problems since earlier critiques of its limited demographic diversity. Why would the initial cosponsoring organizations approach SisterSong? In the same interview, Ross acknowledged that SisterSong’s hundreds of members in attendance was one factor. I would also argue that SisterSong held appeal as it was a growing organization, had received a seed grant from a major foundation (Ford Foundation), and its endorsement could show that mainstream organizations had learned from previous coalition breakdowns and diversity critiques, increasing appeal to potential members.

Eboni Barley, who became a March Coordinator with NARAL remembered, “So in the beginning when we were not included in the planning process I was not only annoyed but I felt betrayed ...The SisterSong network really pushed for that envelope to be opened and we sort of opened Pandora’s box with this March for Women’s Lives” (Barley quoted in Danavall 2005).

After a plenary session at which attendees discussed the proposal, SisterSong agreed to endorse the March. Ross notes that younger women, who were more optimistic, were instrumental in making this decision.

**Making the Frame Shift Visible.** SisterSong's endorsement came with certain stipulations. The first stipulation was to change the name of the March to broaden the emphasis beyond "freedom of choice," which reproductive justice advocates argue is often synonymous with choice to have an abortion. A major part of SisterSong supporters' experiences was that their choices as mothers were represented as irresponsible and pathological, as seen in debates around welfare reform and other controversial issues. This dispute is about the scope the reality of women's reproductive oppression (as many SisterSong member organizations understand the barriers faced by marginalized women), what should be done, and how it should be presented. Of the names proposed by Ross—The March for Women's Human Rights and the March for Women's Lives—the latter was chosen.

A month after SisterSong's endorsement, NOW announced the change via the first e-mail to the March update listserv. The e-mail, which NOW duplicated verbatim in the Winter 2003/2004 issue of *National NOW Times*, noted that the original name was too cumbersome, suggesting that the change was primarily for practical reason. However, the notice did incorporate some of SisterSong's language. More importantly, this e-mail is the first public document from NOW that used the phrase "reproductive justice."<sup>1</sup> Already, the language was changing. The e-mail then describes the broader aim of achieving reproductive justice:

This March is about demanding political and social justice for women and girls regardless of their race, economic, religious, ethnic or cultural circumstances. This March is for young and older women, straight women and lesbians, sons and fathers, able and disabled, rich and poor to stand side by side in a show of unity and determination to "never go back" and in fact, move forward with full equality and reproductive justice for all. The excitement is building! (March News December 16, 2003)

The announcement explicitly mentioned race, class, ability status, and sexuality, acknowledging the diversity in the category of "women"—while also including men in the effort. Further, the solution to the "attack" was not only protecting the Supreme Court to protect *Roe v. Wade* but also working toward "full equality and reproductive justice for all." The new name represented an underlying move from a traditional choice frame to a broader justice frame.

**Increasing Diversity—and Tensions—Within the March Coalition.** An article in the *National NOW Times* (Ward, Winter 2003/2004) explicitly

focused on women of color's role in the March and emphasizing diversity. The author noted that "fighters of all ethnicities, classes, ages, and sexualities" would be needed to stop President Bush, who is further identified as "violating human rights indiscriminately." This language indicates NOW was trying to link the problems protecting reproductive choice to protecting human rights. Previous marches had not done this but SisterSong explicitly incorporates these ideas into its materials.

Even after SMOs have agreed to work on an issue together, they continually renegotiate the terms of their collaboration. Other conditions besides the name change included space on the planning committee (Ross agreed to become a March codirector), so that women of color were guaranteed to be included in the decision making. Ross brought on Malika Redmond, who was with the National Center for Human Rights Education, as a national March organizer charged with organizing women of color involved (Malika Redmond, personal interview). SisterSong leaders were wary of investing a high amount of resources when they felt historically the smaller organizations gave up more to be involved with coalitions due to their limited staffing and resources. They also demanded that spots be provided to some of the collective's organizations on the steering committee without the requisite \$250,000 each of the other four organizations had provided as major cosponsors. Thus, Black Women's Health Imperative, National Asian Pacific Women's Forum (NAPAWF), and National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, and SisterSong were eventually all on the steering committee. After the organizers had changed the March name and more women of color were involved in the coalition, problems continued to emerge. A SisterSong member who was interning with NAPAWF when the March occurred remembers her experience:

I got to sit in on those meetings that were...extremely tense. You know, sitting there essentially with the old guard...you know 60, 70, 80 years old, white women who had been in the movement and felt that they had...defined the movement and that the movement was all about choice and all about abortion. And um this woman of color contingent being represented by various you know Latinas, African Americans, multi-racial, Asians, API, and then just down the list of people that were like "This is not our issue." (Jamie Brooks, 30, formerly with Center for Genetics and Society, personal interview)

A field organizer for NOW found that "many of the feminist [s], especially the older feminist[s] seem to take offense...that it was insulting to tell them that 'choice' was not inclusive of many women of color, low-income, and gay and lesbian communities" (Ward/Ross e-mail 2004). Earlier feminists had defined abortion and its legal protection as the appropriate focus for the feminist movement's energy, hence the resistance to change the frame as represented in a name change.

Even though some of NOW's promotion of the March still used language consistent with a reproductive rights frame, NOW emphasized the diversity of the March. E-mails from the listserv highlighted partners and the breadth of partners, emphasizing the support of "nearly 1,000 cosponsors, including the NAACP" (March News March 4, 2004). Endorsements by major organization such as the NAACP, which had avoided taking a stance on controversial issues such as reproduction, did not come by accident. In an interview 2 days before the March, Ellie Smeal, now with the Feminist Majority Foundation, credited Ross and other women of color with increasing the support of the March: "The civil rights movement will be there, students from colleges and high schools will be there, women of color will be there. The environmental movement is coming—the Sierra Club has endorsed the March for the first time. We have more celebrities than I've seen before. We just have much more depth in so many communities" (Smeal quoted in Otis 2004). The increased "depth" that Smeal describes demonstrates the increased success of the frame pyramid, which led to higher resonance with the March's adjusted framing, improving organizing efforts with women of color.

Beyond the name change, the extension of the feminist framing of reproductive rights was visible in other ways. SisterSong produced 5,000 large signs it distributed at the March. The front side of the sign read "Reproductive Social Justice for All Women." Since then "reproductive social justice" has been shortened to "reproductive justice" but SisterSong still describes it as the merging of reproductive rights and social justice through human rights (SisterSong Reproductive Justice 101 training). The flip side said "Women of Color Taking Steps," which can be interpreted as both the literal marching and also the process of moving toward a new framework through which to consider women's reproduction.<sup>2</sup> Through the invoking of an intersectional analysis that linked reproduction to social justice and human rights, SisterSong also attempted to engage in frame transformation seeking to get constituents to interpret reproduction not just as a matter of an individual's access to make a private decision, but also as connected to the conditions of whole communities, which are protected by universally recognized human rights.

### **After the March: Mainstream Moves Back to Choice?**

The first issue of *CV* published after the March featured member testimonials about experiences at the March and SisterSong's role in the March. Another piece gave a short history of the organization and highlighted how SisterSong's analysis differed from other organizations: "The human rights framework shows that most people are denied many human rights entitlements. It addresses the right to healthcare, adequate housing, childcare, education, and social services. SisterSong's mission is to connect reproductive rights

to human rights” (CV 1:2). After the March, SisterSong continued to emphasize human rights in its work.

The initial e-mail from December 2003 announcing the change in the March name is NOW’s first use of the phrase “reproductive justice” to describe its own work. The social justice and human rights that are central to the concept are not consistently mentioned. An attempt to engage with the framework shows positive steps but was not enough progress for many of those who were involved with advocating for reproductive justice:

The sad part is though, despite the success of the March, the four mainstream organizations that started all of this mess, I think they saw diversifying the organizing as a great way to mobilize for the March, but I don’t think they saw it as a great way to transform the movement into the future. Because immediately after the March, they went back to business as usual. Which is, you know, something SisterSong could have predicted that they’d do. They figured [it] out but they didn’t. And...they somewhat lost the potential for using the women’s human rights framework as a way of building the new movement. But that’s what SisterSong is doing. (Global Feminisms Project interview of Loretta Ross by author)

Ross made this comment 2 years after the March. The mainstream organizations’ failure to effectively capitalize on the success of the March continues to help SisterSong.

Did NOW not “figure out” the possibilities of this adjusted frame? On the contrary, NOW, like other SMOs, did figure out that change in language can benefit the organization. For example, the Abortion Rights/Reproductive Issues page introduction states:

NOW affirms that reproductive rights are issues of life and death for women, not mere matters of choice. NOW fully supports access to safe and legal abortion, to effective birth control and emergency contraception, to reproductive health services and education for all women. We oppose attempts to restrict these rights through legislation, regulation or Constitutional amendment.

This paragraph is also duplicated on NOW’s “Young Feminism” Webpage under the section *Advancing Reproductive Justice—Because My Body Is My Own* (“Young Feminism”). While NOW argues that reproductive rights are not just about choices, the first two components that the list focuses on are two issues that are traditionally associated with organizing around reproductive choice: abortion and birth control. NOW’s affirmation relies on a rights-based approach: women have the right to abortion and other clinical services and therefore that right should not be taken away. Readers are encouraged to donate to “support NOW’s work on abortion rights,” which emphasizes the need to protect abortion over the range of issues it purports to support. The site links to “related issues” NOW works on are Contraception and the Supreme Court, focusing on birth control and how laws explicitly afford or deny women access

to abortion. Thus, NOW literally links reproductive freedom to abortion rights. If NOW was attempting to make a deeper integration of reproductive justice into the debate on abortion, one way to make this obvious would be by linking this issue page to its other issues page, such as Economic Justice.

The Abortion Rights/Reproductive Issues page links to another page “We Want Reproductive Justice NOW!” The language on this page subtly reinforces the idea that abortion is the central concern regarding women’s reproduction. Visually, the site attempts to show that NOW does address the concerns of women of color, or at least that the organization appeals to a larger audience than white middle-class women. The page’s introduction about the need for women’s decision making to be “free from government interference” does not address how, as Ehrenreich (2008) and others point out, “interference” has different meanings for different groups of women and therefore some proposed solutions benefit some women more than others. Of the five main photos on the page, the first photo is of three women of color holding signs with “Keep Abortion Legal.” The next is of a smiling African American woman holding a sign proclaiming “Women of Color Taking Steps,” an image from the March for Women’s Lives. The next photo is of an African American woman with a short testimonial next to it. The page includes a photo of farm worker advocate Dolores Huerta. Her testimonial says, “I have 11 children. People criticized me, and doctors recommended sterilization. NOW understands that reproductive freedom includes having all choices available to us—including having children and being able to raise them.” Huerta’s quote contributes to NOW’s newer framing of its activities as broader than abortion rights. Huerta’s reference to sterilization invokes the history of coerced sterilization of poor women and women of color by doctors, many of whom had the support of state agencies (Schoen 2005). Her quote also echoes SisterSong’s emphasis in its literature “the right to not have children, to have children and parent the ones we have,” which suggests NOW is adjusting its framing. However, abortion is still made the central focus on this Webpage both by the number of times abortion is mentioned (fifteen) along with other common phrases associated with mainstream feminist framing of reproductive rights such as choice (four), controlling own body/life (four). Concepts such as justice (three) are only briefly mentioned on this page. The page does not reference human rights, which is part of the reproductive justice analysis.

In fall 2006, the *National NOW Times* featured an article on the difference between reproductive health, reproductive rights, and reproductive justice analysis of women’s health and the reproductive justice movement Mendez (2006). Even though the organization is aware of the difference in analysis these frameworks provide, NOW has not implemented it systematically. These Web pages provide an example of how a mainstream organization uses the

rhetoric of human rights-based women of color organization but does not incorporate it into its deeper analysis, which is indicative of limited frame extension. This illuminates a problem voiced at SisterSong events and by my interviewees: “reproductive justice” is not interchangeable with “reproductive rights,” “reproductive choice” or “abortion rights.” Rather, reproductive justice demands a comprehensive reformulation of an organization’s analysis and organizing around reproductive issues.

While Ross is skeptical of the changes the March had on the mainstream organizations as a whole, others identify the process as a turning point in the movement. One member of the SisterSong Management Circle observed:

One of the reasons that there was so many people in attendance and participating in that March was because there was organizing where people were...conscious efforts being made to link the various issues that organizations had with reproductive rights. (NKenge Toure, 56, Pacifica Radio and SisterSong Management Circle, personal interview)

Others see a lasting impact on shifting the framing strategies within the movement:

I don’t think reproductive justice was new back when the March happened but I think people started to understand that there—there’s a difference [between reproductive rights and reproductive justice], they’re not synonymous and that you know this is gonna be a movement about women’s health...At the end of the day that there are many issues that have to be brought to the table and considered and...just because something is legal or, you know accessible, doesn’t mean it’s necessarily affordable for people. I think all of that really started to resonate with...women of *any* color.... (Jamie Brooks, 30, formerly of Center for Genetics and Society, personal interview, emphasis in original)

Another interviewee identified the new language as indicative of “a shift in consciousness” that “put the knowledge production that was coming from women of color on the front stage” (Malika Redmond, 31, formerly of Center for Human Rights Education, personal interview). With this analysis “on the front stage,” SisterSong led women of color (and their supportive allies) to have a major impact on the framing of a national protest initiated by mainstream women’s organizations. This solidified the importance of SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective to current and future members and potential allies. Mainstream organizations benefitted from increased visibility due to increased supporters, increased legitimacy for the attempt to become more diverse, and a new language to appeal to a wider audience when desired.

### Conclusion

Before the 2004 March for Women’s Lives, NOW had consistently talked about abortion rights and a woman’s choice to have an abortion. NOW intended to frame the 2004 March in the same way and, as this analysis demonstrates,

would have continued to do so if SisterSong organizations had not joined the planning and required changes in exchange for endorsements. Leaders from NOW acknowledged that SisterSong's broader framework of reproductive justice helped the March develop into the largest and most diverse March in its history. SisterSong's success at shifting the framing of the March is the proof of its tagline "doing collectively what we cannot do individually." The story of SisterSong's role in the 2004 March was repeated at multiple SisterSong events reaching hundred of women of color. The story both demonstrates why an organization like SisterSong exists and provides evidence that its reproductive justice analysis can be deployed successfully on a national scale.

In this case, the consonant frame pyramid aligned successfully because the organizations contained some similar elements. The initial cosponsors first used some of the same master feminist frame that highlights gender oppression. Individual ideas of what the movement should be were incorporated into the pyramid. The women of color-identified organization analyzed reproductive issues considering multiple histories of racial oppression, even attempting to link their concerns to that of a human community. As interviewees and authors in the reproductive justice movement (Silliman et al. 2004) identified, the implications for using the language and analysis of reproductive justice is not just a matter of being able to bring more people together in the short-term for specific mobilizations. Rather, the analysis has the potential to bring multiple movements together to find new ways to address social problems beyond the common legal resolutions that in some cases hang in continual threat of being overturned and thus show that they are not a resolution to structural inequalities but short-term solutions to symptoms of those inequalities. The degree to which other movements are successfully using concepts based on human rights in analysis and organizing will be an area of further analysis.

This research has several implications. First, the language of reproductive justice grows in popularity due to the perception of it as innovative and more relevant by many women of color and younger women. As demonstrated in the opening quote, many members of these groups have felt the language of reproductive rights does not resonate. Since the approach of reproductive justice resonates more with their experiences, many move toward reproductive justice organizations rather than ones using exclusive reproductive rights framing. Thus, it makes sense for mainstream organizations to take it on as their own language in at least minimal ways. This partially supports the conclusion for some organizations that coalitions can result in the loss of individual organizational identity (Croteau and Hicks 2003; Meyer and Corrigall-Brown 2005) because they benefit the more powerful groups who use the innovation offered by marginalized groups to their advantage without the less powerful groups reaping equal benefits. Future research would look at how similar the dynamics are between

mainstream and challenging groups in other movements and systematically compare how any benefits from coalitions are dispersed among participating groups.

Second, this case confirms how points of contention can benefit participating coalition organizations in future activities no matter the outcome. Scholars should not assume that dissolution of a coalition necessarily signals failure for a movement or the organizations involved. The dissolution can actually help propel movements forward. Previous research (Benford 1993) has suggested this progress happens due to failed organizations transferring their resources to the remaining organizations, but there are other ways. NOW and other mainstream groups *could* embrace reproductive justice without using the terminology. However, the critique of mainstream groups like NOW posed is twofold: (1) they do not embrace reproductive justice analysis and (2) some now use the terminology of reproductive justice to describe what is essentially the same reproductive rights analysis as before. Whether mainstream organizations will more fully integrate this framing remains to be seen. However, even if they do not, mainstream organizations' use of the term "reproductive justice" without integration of the analysis central to the frame furthers the reproductive justice movement. NOW and other mainstream organizations' limited engagement provides additional proof (i.e., experiential commensurability) of the concerns raised by SisterSong that mainstream organizations claim to represent all women but in practice do not fully address women of color's interests. This has implications for other movements as they too contain different groups framing their issues in what activists perceive as diverging from mainstream efforts.

Finally, for activists, this case provides some lessons. Changing political climate is one external factor that affects use of frames, and may make SMOs more willing to shift its own frame and strategy, as some of the national March cosponsors did when pressed by SisterSong. With the election of Barack Obama, who has relatively more support for reproductive health than previous leaders, a clearly identifiable external policy threat no longer looms as close, although it is far from gone. This reduces the likelihood of organization attempting to link frames to create a consonant frame pyramid. However, shrinking funding sources will require organizations to be more resourceful. Thus, we can expect to see an increase in coalitions that will require more attempts to align frames, providing a fruitful area for future research. Coalitions generally require compromises for all organization. While these compromises are important in the short term, they have the potential to have a larger impact. Ironically, this case shows that the compromises can both mean something such as providing exposure to a new way of thinking while simultaneously showing how far movements have to go until they can truly inclusive, providing many spaces for intervention for scholars and activists alike.

## ENDNOTES

\*Funded in part by NSF Dissertation Research Grant #SES-0850655 and the following UM sources: Center for Education of Women, Department of Sociology, Institute for Research on Women and Gender and the Nonprofit and Public Management Center. In addition to anonymous reviewers, the author would like to thank Kiyoteru Tsutsui, Sharon Oselin, Dennis Downey, Jayati Lal, Elizabeth Cole, and Karin Martin, and the following workgroups for providing comments on earlier versions of this article: G3SG (Laura Hirshfield, David Hutson, Emily Kazyak, Katherine Luke, Carla Pfeffer, Kristin Scherrer), WIPIWG (Megan Gilster, Valenta Kabo, Daniela Pineda), and Writing Group (Lynn Verduzco Baker, Alice Gates, Stephanie Osbakken, Jeannie Thrall). Previous versions of this article were presented at the 2008 Pacific Sociological Association meeting and the 2009 American Sociological Association meeting. Please direct all correspondence to Zakiya T. Luna, Department of Sociology and Women's Studies, University of Michigan, 3001 LSA Building, 500 S. State Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1382, USA or Department of Women's Studies, University of Michigan, 1122 Lane Hall, 201 S. State Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA; e-mail: zakiyal@umich.edu.

<sup>1</sup>NOW's Web site is archived starting in 1995, including its newsletters. This is the first instance of the phrase.

<sup>2</sup>While pictures show many women holding the signs, one interviewee noted that this flip side text had been added after women of color leaders approved the final design. Some felt the addition was infantilizing. In a 2007 RJ 101 training, Ross noted that the signs had been very popular and there had been disagreements about whether white allies should be allowed to hold them. These signs have been used as recently as the February 2010 "Trust Black Women" rally and press conference organized by SPARK RJ and SisterSong held about legislation to stop shackling of incarcerated pregnant women and opposing a bill proposed in Georgia legislature claiming to stop abortions based on race and sex of the fetus.

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