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Afternoon Panel: Coalition-Based Strategies for Improving Health Access and Outcomes for Underserved Women - Redefining Reproductive Freedom to Build Multicultural Coalitions

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Symposium 2001

Afternoon Panel:

Coalition-Based Strategies for Improving Health Access and Outcomes for Under-served Women

Featuring Raquel Donoso, Lisa Cheyemi Ikemoto, and Latonya Slack

Redefining Reproductive Freedom to Build Multicultural Coalitions†

Lisa Cheyemi Ikemoto††

Good afternoon. My name is Lisa Ikemoto. I've been working with a non-profit community-based organization called Asians & Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health. The acronym is APIRH so I'm going to refer to the organization as APIRH throughout this presentation.

One of the questions that I always get when I tell people about the work that I do with APIRH and that the staff gets when they talk about the work that they do with APIRH is: "Why do you need APIRH?" Those who are more honest and direct ask, "Oh, are there reproductive health issues for Asians and Pacific Islanders?" The answer is, "Yes; hell yes!" And that's what I'm here to talk about.

APIRH was formed in 1989 in response to the *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services*, decision. It was formed specifically to raise the voices of Asian and Pacific Islander women in the pro-choice movement. Here's a little bit of background about it. The organization is based in

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Oakland, in the East Bay. It's not a legal center. It uses grassroots organizing within the most marginalized Asian and Pacific Islander communities as its primary tool and primary strategy. Right now, our primary work is with Southeast Asians in the East Bay.

APIRH uses an explicitly feminist and race-conscious lens on social justice work. I want to give you a sense of our definition of reproductive freedom. It was developed among the staff and our members who are teenage girls in high school and who are primarily Laotian, Cambodian, and Vietnamese. APIRH asserts that if women are to have true reproductive freedom, then we must have the economic, social, and political power to protect and to determine all aspects of our physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being. This freedom means that we live in homes free from sexual and physical violence; live and work without fear of sexual harassment; have our environments at work and at home be safe and protected from corporate exploitation; be free from hatred due to sexual identity; value all forms of work and labor; earn equitable and livable wages; eat safe and affordable food; determine and gain access to comprehensive health care for ourselves and our families; have the support and commitment of the government and private institutions to have or not to have a child; and live in an environment that can support our choices. We are thinking in big social justice terms.

My comments today are based largely on what I have learned by working with the staff of APIRH. Some of the work that I'm going to be describing we have not yet started, but it's the direction that we hope to take and that we hope many others in the social justice movement will also take. As an organization that defines itself as doing feminist and race-conscious work in social justice using a reproductive freedom lens, we absolutely have to do coalition-based work. Every aspect of our work is coalition-based. To give you an idea, think about the Asian and Pacific Islander communities. Within those communities, coalition work is necessary. There are over one hundred language groups in our population alone so the coalition work just among a few of the Asians and Pacific Islander groups can be complicated by language alone.

If you add to that the need to do coalition work with allies on the left, the process of simply creating relationships could become consuming. For example, imagine APIRH's work as a set of overlapping circles. Each circle encompasses a group of organizations whose work overlaps with APIRH's—civil rights and social justice organizations; those that frame themselves specifically in terms of racial justice such as Asian American-identified organizations; health advocacy groups; and women's health groups.

For a while, we were putting a great deal of our energies into going to all of those organizations and meeting with them. We were trying to explain, for example, to the civil rights organizations that reproductive

freedom is a civil right. We were going to the Asian American racial justice groups and explaining that Asian-American women have specific issues that should be included on their agendas. And we were going to the reproductive health organizations, the mainstream organizations, and having to make the point that Asian and Pacific Islander women have reproductive freedoms. It turned out to be a great deal of work for relatively little gain. That was part of the realization that led us to turn our attention and our energy to using direct-action organizing as our primary tool rather than trying to work inside existing circles. Now we've refocused our energies. So, what I want to talk about now is the kind of coalition work that we are facing.

First, some background on the reproductive freedom movement. All of you are aware of this, and probably many of you have been a part of it. The mainstream organizations in the reproductive freedom movement, those with access to institutional power, have been predominately composed of white, middle-class women. Their agendas have often, if not mostly, reflected the interests of the people in those organizations. There has been a great deal of work to move the agenda from a single-issue agenda—namely abortion—to a broader reproductive health agenda that includes issues such as coerced sterilization or population control policy for contraceptive use. Those kinds of issues impact disproportionately on women of color. There has been progress, but the mainstream organizations, even now in 2001, are still predominately white, middle-class, and so are their agendas.

Several ways of diversifying the leadership and the agenda of reproductive freedom movement organizations have been tried for years. They've had some success, certainly. I wouldn't want to deny that. For example, some organizations have made a very clear and somewhat effective effort to ask women of color to join the staff or board that was not diverse beforehand in an effort to try to get grounded information to change their agendas. There also have been coalitions, certainly, between mainstream organizations that are predominately white and middle-class and organizations that are more representative of communities of color.

Those coalitions that have been more successful, I think, have been campaign-based, really project-based. I think the coalitions that have been a little bit more difficult, particularly from the point of view of those of us who work for organizations that are grounded in the communities of color, are the kind, that Raquel [Donoso] mentioned, where we are the add-ons. The kind where someone said, "Oh, yeah, we need to deal with Latina issues or Asian and Pacific Islander issues, so let's invite this organization." APIRH often gets asked because it's the only Asian and Pacific Islander organization out there that identifies reproductive freedom as its primary focus.

The third effort at diversifying the reproductive freedom movement that I want to mention has been when women of color have formed organizations or coalitions for themselves. Hence, the three of us up here on this panel. This last approach, I think, has created a situation in which it's possible to imagine very fruitful coalitions between women of color organizations and organizations that have been historically white and middle-class, those organizations being the ones that have access to institutional power. That's the type of coalition that I want to focus my comments on, because it's the type of work that I think really needs to be done.

To give you an idea of the work that needs to be done, imagine a standard graph diagram that represents a vastly over-simplified profile of organizations whose work overlaps with APIRH's. The vertical line on the left charts institutional power. The horizontal line at the bottom charts the political left and right. Grassroots organizations like APIRH have relatively very little access to institutional power. APIRH is near the bottom of that vertical line. APIRH is also explicitly progressive. Because it is doing explicitly feminist and race-conscious work, it is on the far left of the grid. Overall, it is in the bottom left corner of this grid. More mainstream organizations have more access to institutional power. They have more access to the legislature, for example, and to other government-based policy makers. They're also closer to the center of the political spectrum. So, the questions for an organization like APIRH are: where do we think we are, where do we have the potential to do great work on the ground, and how do we move that great grassroots knowledge and power up.

There are some risks in trying to expand the tools that we use. For example, I think there are some risks involved in becoming an organization that uses not only grassroots organizing, but also legal work, for example. When I talk to you, particularly to those law students who are thinking about doing this type of work, there are certain things I would ask you to consider when you go out and do this type of work. I think there are some ethics involved in working with grassroots organizations like APIRH. The aspects of organizations like APIRH and others that are clustered down in that bottom left corner are that we're small and our capacity is relatively low in terms of funding and other types of resources. So our ability to expand our toolbox, so to speak, is limited, just as a matter of practical fact. Our best chance, I think, to maximize our resources and capacity is coalition building.

I see our coalition work as going in two directions. One is horizontal: building coalitions with other social justice organizations who are also doing grassroots work in order to build a real movement, as opposed to just a collection of organizations. Part of APIRH's agenda is not just to build up our numbers and visibility, but also to move a feminist agenda

into the social justice movement. If you think about the other social justice organizations in the East Bay, for example, not all that many of them actually have explicitly feminist analyses or explicitly feminist agendas. Those are things that organizations like APIRH can add to the social justice movement.

The other direction of coalition work for organizations in the lower left corner of the grid is vertical: to build a set of organizations that are stacked up on the grid above APIRH as the vehicle for moving the grassroots knowledge and the grassroots power up to reach the levels of institutional power. I think there are two ways to do this. One way is to create these organizations ourselves. I look to people like Latonya [Slack] who I think is doing exactly that, and I look to her organization with which as a possible sister organization, an organization to build up that vertical coalition.

The other way is to work with existing organizations that may not have obvious connections with our work but have connections with our work that can be developed. Just to give you an idea, one of the big issues for the Southeast Asian communities in the East Bay is dioxin. Dion Aroner mentioned it this morning. For those of you who are not familiar with dioxin, dioxin is a term that describes hundreds of chemicals that are highly persistent in the environment. It's formed by burning chlorine-based chemical compounds with hydrocarbon. Major sources of dioxin include incinerators that burn chlorinated waste, the production of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) plastic and paper mills that use chlorine bleaching. There are industries in the East Bay, located on the water particularly around Richmond, that produce PVC. That is also where many of the Southeast Asian communities in the East Bay are located. They work in those factories, they live there, and they fish there. Southeast Asian communities rely heavily on fish as a food source, and particularly fish that they produce themselves from the beach. The greatest source of dioxin exposure to people is food, and fish is near the top of the list. Because dioxin is fat-soluble, it bio-accumulates up the food chain. In fish alone, the toxins accumulate up the food chain so that dioxin levels in fish are 100,000 times that of the surrounding environment. The dioxin that's in the water gets super-concentrated in fish at 100,000 times the level that exists in the water where it lands from the emissions from the factories.

A great deal of the work that's been done on dioxin has come from the research on Agent Orange in Vietnam. There's a great deal of research on reproductive health outcomes for dioxin exposure. There's data available to show what the reproductive outcomes and harms are on men, and there's emerging data about the reproductive harms to women. What that data shows so far is that, in men, dioxins exist in the body as a toxic breakdown. They're like radioactive material; they have a half-life.

Within our lifetimes, the dioxin we've been exposed to will never fully break down. It's there. It might dissolve slowly if we're never exposed to it again, but it will never completely leave our bodies.

In pregnant women, dioxin can be transmitted to the fetus in two particular ways: by crossing the placenta; and, for those who are breast-feeding, by passing out of the body in breast milk. As for the other kinds of health effects dioxin has on women, there are some studies that show a strong correlation between dioxin exposure and endometriosis. Certainly many of you are familiar with all the harms that endometriosis causes. There are also impacts on the endocrine system and the immune system that which compromise women's abilities to fight disease and other types of injuries. Again, the greatest injury level from dioxin falls on those who receive the greatest exposure because of their diets. In that way, the Southeast Asian communities in the East Bay are particularly exposed.

Just to move on to the coalition possibilities: assume that through organizing, Southeast Asian women and girls in Richmond have come together. They've used participatory action research to document the effect of dioxin on themselves. They've generated some public attention on the issue to trigger the State environmental agency's attention, but they also want to make some other changes. In order to do that, they need organizations with tools that they don't currently have.

A first step might be to identify suitable allies. So, they look for an organization that has the tools and power to accomplish the goals that the women and girls want. They look for a point of entrance convergence. An initial analysis shows that the most obvious candidates are environmental justice organizations because those organizations, particularly some of those in the East Bay, are working on dioxin issues. They've acknowledged that dioxin emissions have reproductive health implications.

The interesting thing is that two years ago, as part of my work with APIRH, we went around and interviewed some of the environmental justice organizations, including Communities For a Better Environment, which does great work out here in the East Bay. We asked them about their gender analysis. Their gender analysis consisted of, "Well, we know that toxins like dioxin have reproductive health outcomes," pause, "And we've also noticed that a lot of the grassroots efforts in environmental justice are led by women, particularly women of color; and that none of the policy-making spokespeople are those women." There is the potential for coalition work here, but there's a lot of work that needs to be done to build the partnership itself.

The other possible ally for the Southeast Asian women and girls would be health organizations, particularly those that work on legal and policy issues arising from pharmaceutical products such as DES, the Copper Seven IUD, Norplant, RU 486, et cetera; again, there are similar gaps.

Certainly, allies among other grassroots social justice organizations are vital. In fact, in early 2001, APIRH joined a coalition with such community groups, including People United for a Better Oakland and Green Action. APIRH members used participatory action research to examine the reproductive health effects of dioxins emitted by a local medical waste incinerator and to enhance the race and gender analysis of the dioxin impacts. In early Fall 2001, Integrated Environmental Systems (IES), the owner of the incinerator, agreed to adopt cleaner technology to reduce emission levels. More recently, IES has announced that the incinerator will be shut down by Summer 2002.

The last thing I would throw out is that in order for the partnerships to really work, they have to be project-based. Where I'm heading with this analysis is that before the project can even start, an initial project, preceding the one to achieve the goals that the Southeast Asian women and girls would want to achieve or might want to achieve, is the project of sitting down together and doing the analysis of where the issues overlap and where the gaps are between those two organizations. The other point I want to make is that those partnerships have to be formed on a set of principles and that there are ethics about the privileges of power involved in developing relationships between organizations that are higher-up on the grid and those that are lower-down on the grid.

For those of you who are going to be going out and doing this work, it is very, very important work. For those of you who are going to be doing this work as lawyers, I hope that you would be willing to sit down with me and work out those principles, working from the perspective of privilege. Thank you.

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