

# Fertile Ground:

## WOMEN ORGANIZING AT THE INTERSECTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

By Kristen Zimmerman and Vera Miao



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## INTRODUCTION

Founded secretly during World War II, the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL), is the well-known site of the development of the atomic bomb. Less well-known are the adverse impacts of the laboratory's activities on the Native people living in the surrounding Pueblos. For more than 64 years, LANL has been dumping toxic and radioactive waste onto Tewa sacred and ancestral lands, including explosives, volatile organic compounds and PCBs. In 2008, the New Mexico Environment Department estimated that approximately 2,093 such dumpsites have been created since the laboratory began operating. LANL itself states that the PCB concentrations in a nearby watershed were 70 times higher than the New Mexico human health standard, and recent research found these toxins within the homes of Pueblo residents. The operation of the laboratory has led to the joint contamination and endangerment of human health and the local ecosystem.

In addition to the health consequences of this contamination, and the pollution of the land, air, and water, the laboratory's activities combined with government science and policy to undermine spiritual and cultural traditions integral to Native life in Northern New Mexico. After LANL was established, the federal government began mandating that Native women receive all health services through the Santa Fe Indian Hospital. This brought an end to cultural practices including home births and midwifery, an essential site for practicing and transmitting traditional knowledge. Meanwhile, LANL and the federal government were monitoring the impacts of nuclear testing and radioactive fallout on the pregnancies and fetal development of local Pueblo women. Without their knowledge or consent, the community essentially became a test population for the federal government.

In 2003, as a result of the long community organizing effort by Tewa Women United (TWU) and their allies, the first home birth in almost 60 years happened. TWU was founded in 1989 as a gathering of women from Northern New Mexico Pueblos interested in understanding the root causes of issues such as alcoholism, suicide, and domestic and sexual violence. TWU evolved into a formal organization in 2001 and became an intertribal women's voice in the Tewa homelands of Northern New Mexico. They started from the deceptively simple belief that "sovereignty is living the truth from the heart."

TWU's holistic approach combines advocacy, litigation, research, and action with cultural revival. TWU's Indigenous Women's Health and Reproductive Justice (IWH) Program encourages Pueblo members and youth to become active participants in their healthcare through all stages of life and aims to revitalize traditional indigenous knowledge and practice in women's health. This recuperation and sharing of cultural knowledge, values, and practice led by women, is also part of a practice of individual and collective healing from the loss, occupation, and colonization of Pueblo land and culture. For TWU, the practices of the laboratory have simultaneously led to human health, cultural, and environmental harms. These women



and the other leaders and organizations interviewed in this report have found that strong and enduring solutions to these issues have necessarily been located at the intersection of environmental justice and reproductive justice. Through this intersectional approach, these leaders are finding innovative ways to connect, frame, communicate, and organize around the issues that matter most to their communities – the health of their children, families, communities, culture, and land. It is also helping organizers highlight previously ignored issues and divisions that have stalled and fragmented countless reform movements. This approach is also creating new alliances, political opportunities, and victories, as well as articulating visionary models of human-environment relations that are simultaneously very old

and very new. The leading edges are often led by indigenous people's movements<sup>1</sup>. In the words of TWU's founder, Kathy Sanchez, "We have to protect and be the environment we vision in order to heal ourselves from trauma."

**EJ/RJ supports the rights of women and families to live, work, play, learn, and pray in an environment that supports their health and ability to reproduce (as families and communities) if and how they choose.**

Policymakers, regulatory agencies, philanthropic institutions, and even social justice organizations have tended to view environmental justice and reproductive justice as two distinct and sometimes distant sectors. Of course, each has its particular focus: environmental justice addresses issues where we live, work and play, while reproductive justice focuses on bodies, gender, and sexuality. Despite these distinctions, the number of organizations defining and tackling issues that cut across environmental and reproductive justice (EJ/RJ) appears to be

growing. They are being led by women's organizing and indigenous movements in the U.S., for whom issues of environmental justice and reproductive justice are inseparable, as the root cause of harm and in the necessity to seek holistic and enduring solutions. Their efforts have resulted in new leadership, a refreshed social justice framework, and more agile, sophisticated change strategies. EJ/RJ represents a paradigm shift away from single-issue efforts to make incremental change, and toward a pragmatic and collaborative approach to ignite transformative change.

For the purposes of this paper, we define EJ/RJ as work that supports the rights of women and families to live, work, play, learn, and pray in an environment that supports their health and ability to reproduce (as families and communities) if and how they choose.

## Inside This Report

This report highlights the powerful contributions EJ/RJ groups are making to secure safer, healthier environments for all women, children, and communities. The work of these groups demonstrate how an intersectional approach to organizing and movement building can lead to more powerful outcomes at all levels. To showcase these lessons, the report is organized around arenas where EJ/RJ work is having innovative impacts on outcomes and processes. We also offer our own conclusions about EJ/RJ's contribution to movement building and its origins. By highlighting this work, we hope to

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1. Another important finding that emerged from this work involves critical lessons that United States social justice movements can learn from indigenous movements. While all of the organizations in this report are committed to holistic and integrated approaches to social change, we find that the indigenous organizations interviewed most embody and articulate the intersectional framework at a deep level.

inspire increased collaboration between EJ/RJ groups and to leverage support for the powerful work that emerges from this intersection.

We have created a joint executive summary with The Women’s Foundation of California’s companion report, *Climate of Opportunity*. Please see that report for recommendations for philanthropy.

## Methodology

This report explores the ideas and work of 24 organizations that embrace both reproductive justice and environmental justice. These 24 organizations were selected in consultation with Lourdes Rivera, Michelle Depass, and Loren Harris, program officers at the Ford Foundation, as well as Surina Khan and Tina Eshaghpour from the Women’s Foundation of California and Vanessa Daniel of the Tides Foundation and the Catalyst Fund. The groups were selected for their focus on the impact of environmental conditions on the health and well-being of women and children, as well as the reproduction of families, communities, and culture. Collectively, they represent a wide range of participants, organizational structures, and social change strategies. While some self-identified as working at the intersection of EJ/RJ, the majority did not.

Our team interviewed 24 groups over six months. More than half of the groups were located in California<sup>2</sup> – both in the State’s urban hubs as well as farm worker communities of the Central Valley. The rest of the groups were located around the country; the majority were indigenous organizing groups, located in “Indian country” throughout the continental United States and Alaska. These interviews were supplemented by observations and analysis of two, two-day convenings of the California groups by the Women’s Foundation of California and by observations made through MSC’s capacity building work with environmental justice and reproductive justice organizations over the years.

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2. The high concentration of groups in California may be due to the legacy of specific movements like the Farm Workers Union and a critical mass of women’s leadership in environmental justice (EJ) and reproductive justice (RJ) organizations in this state. This includes sophisticated alliance and movement building efforts like Expanding the Movement for Empowerment and Reproductive Justice (EMERJ) and the Nail Salon Collaborative, along with a funding infrastructure that has supported the growth of this work. The Women’s Foundation of California has played an important role in nurturing the work of women leaders in both EJ and RJ movements and in developing the intersection itself.

## KEY TERMS

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The following are short definitions of some of the key terms and concepts we are using throughout the paper. For a more complete discussion of the roots of environmental and reproductive justice, please see the Origins Section in the Appendix and the bibliography.

- **Environmental justice** is the right to a decent, safe quality of life for people of all races, incomes and cultures in the environments where we live, work, play, learn, and pray. Environmental Justice emphasizes accountability, democratic practices, equitable treatment, and self-determination. Environmental justice principles prioritize public good over profit, cooperation over competition, community and collective action over individualism, and precautionary approaches over unacceptable risks. Environmental justice provides a framework for communities of color to articulate the political, economic, and social assumptions underlying why environmental racism and degradation happens and how it continues to be institutionally reinforced.<sup>3</sup>
- **Reproductive justice** is when all people have the social, economic, and political resources and power to make healthy decisions over their bodies, their families, their sexuality, and their reproduction for themselves and their families. Reproductive justice (RJ) is inherently connected to multiple social justice and reproductive rights issues. According to Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, “People have RJ when they are able to walk down the street at night and not fear for their physical safety. They have RJ when they can drink water from their faucet and not be concerned about contaminating their health, and when they can create families of their choosing regardless of their sexual orientation. People have RJ when they have access to health care for their families and when they have jobs that don’t expose them to harmful chemicals.”<sup>4</sup>

Both EJ and RJ arise from centering the experiences and concerns of poor and working class communities of color seeking to remove harms and increase their chances to individually and collectively thrive. At the end of the 20th century, this meant redefining issues that had narrowed to reflect middle class and affluent communities’ experiences, perspectives, and solutions.

- **Intersectionality** was a term first coined by legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw in the 1970s to describe the oppression experienced by Black women, and popularized in the 1990s by sociologist Patricia Hill Collins as part of her discussion of Black feminism. According to Crenshaw, Collins and many other woman of color feminist theorists, experiences of oppression cannot be adequately understood individually. In order to understand the knowledge, theory and experiences of women of color, analyses of class, gender, sexuality, racism must be simultaneously considered. Likewise, intersectionality recognizes that systems of power and oppression operate simultaneously at multiple scales of social organization – individual, interpersonal, family, community, and institutional.”<sup>5</sup>

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3. Definition from Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN)

4. Definition from Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (ACRJ)

5. EMERJ, 2008: *Intersections at the Grassroots: Insights from Organizing for Reproductive Justice, Youth Leadership, and Immigrant & Refugee Rights*. EMERJ argues that this definition is the core aspect of reproductive justice and is crucial to all analysis and organizing.

- **Intersectional analysis and organizing** can occur at any level – by individual organizers, groups, alliances, and even more broadly. When an organization uses an intersectional approach they are applying and integrating multiple lenses into their work at the same time. In the EJ/RJ context, this means that organizers are not only thinking about the reproductive justice implications and the environmental justice implications of any particular community issue, they are also considering what happens when those two perspectives interact. As a result, an intersectional organizing approach often highlights multiple issues and communities rather than using “one lens at a time.”
- **Movement building** is the coordinated effort of organizations, individuals, networks, and alliances to engage individuals, the community and people in positions of power, in addressing a systemic problem and promoting alternative visions or solutions. We know movement building is successful when alliances are formed across race, class, and sectors to bring about a large-scale change in public perception, policy, and practice.
- **Cross-sector movement building** is about building coalitions, alliances, and movements that align the work of different sectors. Movement Strategy Center defines a sector as a specific issue-focused part of the social justice movement. Environmental and reproductive justice are each sectors. Through cross-sector movement building, organizations build a shared understanding of how their work intersects, explore potential conflicts in the different perspectives, identify key opportunities for movement building and alignment, and strategize how to leverage these opportunities to advance the movement as a whole.

Photo: Californians for Pesticide Reform. Communities from all over California rally in Sacramento demanding protection from pesticide air pollution.





## IMPACTS: How does EJ/RJ change people's lives?

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The following section provides an overview of some of the key issues common to groups working at the EJ/RJ intersection and the impacts of their organizing locally, statewide, or nationally. We have grouped these impacts into the following five major arenas:

1. Changing environmental policies and practices on toxic chemicals and exposure.
2. Articulating Rights to Clean, Safe and Healthy Environments.
3. Adding Gender and Justice to Climate Change Policy Analysis.
4. Improving research models and processes.
5. Promote alternatives that support healing and long-term sustainability.

### 1. Changing Environmental Policies And Practices On Toxic Chemicals And Exposure

Over the last ten years, scientific and social science research have increasingly documented the impacts of toxic exposure and environmental degradation on women, children, and families. This research has also shown the particular impacts of certain chemicals on reproductive health and details the ways that particular communities are rendered vulnerable to environmental toxins through pathways including food, home care products, personal care products, and the workplace. Thus, the impacts of this intersectional approach towards toxic chemical regulation include: (1) reforming the policy arena to regulate, disclose, and ultimately eliminate toxic ingredients in consumer products, (2) targeting sites that stem the disproportionate impact of chemicals in consumer products on communities of color, (3) expanding chemical reform campaigns beyond a sole focus on a consumer base to include workplace exposure and (4) building stronger coalitions with new racial and geographic formations.

All of the groups in this report grapple with the **impacts of toxic exposure and environmental degradation on women, children, and families**. Women, especially mothers and grandmothers, are often at the center of a family structure and play a significant role in the health and integrity of families. Pregnant women and children, especially those who are small, are the most vulnerable to the long-term adverse impacts of toxin exposure. Research has shown that women carry larger amounts of toxins due to their higher proportion of body fat; mothers pass these toxins on to their children through pregnancy and breastfeeding.<sup>6</sup>

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6. For further discussion of environmental health impacts of toxins on women, see two reports published by the Women's Foundation of California: 2005. *In the Shadow of Pollution: Southern California Women on the Frontlines* and 2005. *Gasping For Air: Why We Must Cultivate a Healthier Central Valley*.

### **From Regulation to Elimination: Chemicals in Consumer Products**

Many EJ/RJ groups work to **regulate, disclose, and ultimately eliminate toxic ingredients in consumer products** including cosmetics, cleaning and household products, and toys/products for infants and children. Currently, neither manufacturers nor the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) are required to prove a chemical's safety as a condition of use. In fact, under federal law the EPA does not have the authority to demand the information it needs to evaluate a chemical's risk. EJ/RJ groups have joined, and in some cases founded and led, efforts to shift the burden of proof away from those

already affected to manufacturers before they are allowed to release products on the market. In addition, groups such as Women's Voices for the Earth and others are increasingly calling for the elimination of toxic chemicals from consumer goods, because of their long-term, cumulative impacts on human health and reproduction, with increasing success.



Photo: Women's Voices of the Earth. Employees of Blackfeet Housing learn about the health impacts of traditional cleaning products and how to make non-toxic ones. WVE worked with Blackfeet Housing to distribute 150 green cleaning kits to low-income residents on the Blackfeet Reservation in Browning, MT.

### **Women's Voices for the Earth, Montana**

#### **Taking the Phthalates Out of Personal Care Products**

Women's Voices for the Earth (WVE) is a founding member and leading organization of the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics, a national coalition of health and environmental groups. The Campaign focuses on requiring the beauty industry to phase out chemicals linked to cancer, fetal developmental disabilities, and other serious health concerns and replace those ingredients with safer alternatives. The Campaign has succeeded in pressuring some cosmetics manufacturers to reduce the levels of phthalates (a widely used and toxic industrial compound) in their products. Between 2002 and 2008, WVE influenced more than 1,000 companies to commit to the Compact for Safe Cosmetics, a pledge to remove chemicals linked to adverse health impacts from personal care products and replace them with safe alternatives. They were able to persuade some major companies, including L'Oreal and Revlon, to remove chemicals banned in Europe from cosmetics sold in the United States. These campaigns have significant traction, have entered into the mainstream consciousness, and engage cross-sector constituencies including consumers, businesses, and government.

### Changing the Regulation Landscape for Poor Communities and Communities of Color

The leadership of EJ/RJ intersectional groups has also provided a valuable and unique perspective in chemical reform by creating awareness about disparities in negative health outcomes from chemical exposure. Several EJ/RJ groups are working to address the **disproportionate impact of chemicals in consumer products on communities of color**. In New York City, WE ACT for Environmental Justice (West Harlem Environmental Action, Inc.) has been collaborating with other environmental and reproductive justice groups to address the impact of chemicals in products marketed specifically to African American women and Latinas. Products including skin lighteners and hair treatments are particularly toxic and can lead to serious reproductive health complications. WE ACT is working in coalition with groups across New York to champion chemical policy reform in the state and nationally. Others are examining how communities of color and low-income communities are targeted as a retail market for discontinued products. Likewise, the Dollar Store Campaign led by Making Our Milk Safe addresses a sector where toxic commodities are often sold to and targeted at poor communities and communities of color, with little to no officially mandated oversight or protections for consumers.

### Making Our Milk Safe (MOMS), California The Dollar Store Campaign

Dollar stores are often the last stop for products that can't be sold anywhere else. Toys, jewelry, cosmetics, housewares, and even food products that have been discontinued, recalled, or otherwise escaped testing, are put "out to pasture" at these stores. The stores are typically located in low-income communities. For years, community organizers and advocates have been concerned about the lack of regulation and oversight of products that end up here. While no comprehensive study has been done, these products are suspected of containing unacceptably high levels of otherwise regulated toxins. A recent report on the public radio program *Quest* highlighted that even informal testing consistently turns up lead-heavy products in these stores.<sup>7</sup>



The communities served by dollar stores are also often outside of the mainstream media and communication systems set up to alert communities about recalls and bad products. Being outside the "information loop" prevents vital information from reaching communities that might inform their choices on the consumer end of the product chain. In collaboration with several other community organizing and social service groups, MOMS recently launched a campaign focused on dollar stores. To start, they plan to work in five cities with five dollar stores per city. "First, we want to prevent bad products from getting to stores. Then we want to close the information loop," says co-founder Mary Brune. The campaign will conduct baseline research with dollar store consumers and owners and then develop strategies for changing practices, getting information out to communities, and influencing decision makers.

7. <http://www.kqed.org/quest/radio/playing-with-lead-part-1>





Photo: Heather Sarantis, California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative. Site visit.

### New Arenas for Chemical Policy Reform: The Workplace

Exciting efforts include ongoing organizing work by **EJ/RJ groups to expand chemical reform campaigns beyond a sole focus on a consumer base to include workplace exposure.** Consumer exposure is miniscule in comparison to workplace exposure, as in farming and female dominated industries such as nail salons and dry cleaners.<sup>8</sup> The push to link attention from consumers to workers addresses the current emphasis of consumer-driven chemical policy reform on primarily white, affluent populations to strategies that highlight, prioritize, and engage low-income and working-class communities. Linking consumer health advocates with worker organizing and advocacy efforts also brings different agencies, organizations, and bases of power into play. For example, Breast Cancer Action raised the importance of centralizing workers in California safe cosmetics legislation. By shifting the bill's focus to workers, the campaign was more able to address disproportionate

and cumulative exposure to key chemicals and draw a wider range of support, including unions and community-based worker organizations. As a result of working together on passing this bill, allied organizations decided to form the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative.

Similarly, the National Healthy Nail Salon Alliance was founded in 2007, after the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics succeeded in pressuring nail polish manufactures, including OPI<sup>9</sup>, to remove the most toxic chemicals from several of their nail polish lines. Founded by the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum (NAPAWF), Asian Health Services, and Women's Voices for the Earth (WVE), the Alliance includes 35 organizations, scientific researchers, advocates, and government agencies whose goal is to protect and improve the health and welfare of women working in the nation's nail salons.



Photo: Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice.

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8. Certain industries such as nail salons and dry cleaning are often relatively small, family-owned and operated businesses where traditional workplace labor and occupational safety and health protections do not apply or have not been enforced. In California and nationwide, the majority of nail salons are owned and operated by immigrant and refugee worker-owners of Vietnamese descent, their families, and neighbors. Importantly, the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative solutions did not pit consumers against workers, owners and worker-owners, or workers against owners. It also brought a new sphere of immigrants and refugees into the formal political sphere of civic engagement for a progressive victory.

9. OPI is the leading brand of nail polish carried in nail salons nationally and was one of the most toxic products listed in a national database of cosmetic products. OPI now proudly announces that their products are free of DBP, toluene, and formaldehyde. For more information, see <http://www.safecosmetics.org/article.php?id=224>.

### **Scaling Up: Building New and Stronger Coalitions Across Race, Geography, and Sectors**

EJ/RJ organizations also see the potential of this approach to build an even broader movement for chemical reform that includes other low-wage workers such as janitors, nail salon workers, farm workers, and other allies. CHANGE (Californians for a Healthy and Green Economy) is a statewide coalition of environmental health and justice organizations representing consumers and workers, which includes many of the organizations interviewed for this report. Reproductive justice organizations have recently begun getting more involved in CHANGE and joining the effort to improve chemical policy as the issues facing mothers and families and community members have coalesced to make reforming chemical policy a priority on multiple fronts.<sup>10</sup>

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10. CHANGE is a statewide network of over 30 worker rights and environmental health and justice organizations groups who came together as a network in 2005 to coordinate and leverage their work on statewide policy. Initially a handful of organizations who wanted to increase their understanding of the science and be able to improve public policy, CHANGE has expanded its geographic reach and the number and types of groups involved. For more information on the CHANGE Coalition, see <http://changeocalifornia.org/about.html>

### **Californians for a Healthy and Green Environment (CHANGE), California** **CHANGEing the Policy Environment for Toxic Chemicals**

“We have the data. We know the information. We know there are toxic chemicals in our homes, schools, and workplaces and that we as women of color are often getting the highest level of exposure to the most dangerous chemicals,” says Martha Dina Arguello, Executive Director of Physicals for Social Responsibility Los Angeles and co-convener of CHANGE. “Now, our challenge is to build the power and find the strategies to change that.”

CHANGE has been involved in several large statewide policy fights and has celebrated several significant victories including building public pressure for a better system of regulating chemicals, which led to California’s Green Chemistry Initiative (GCI), and a few set backs, most notably SB 797, a bill that would ban BPA in children’s food and beverage containers. As members reflected on their strengths and weaknesses as a coalition, it became clear that they needed to build more power on the ground to have a bigger impact in Sacramento and that they had an opportunity to do that by engaging their natural allies in reproductive health and justice organizations to work alongside worker and environmental organizations, who were increasingly getting interested in the impact of chemicals on reproductive health.

Through relationships fostered in the Women's Foundation of California's EJ/RJ Collaborative, and through the increasing scientific recognition of the overlapping effects of toxic exposure on fertility, reproductive health and justice organizations have become engaged in CHANGE.<sup>11</sup>

Dana Ginn Paredes, Organizing Director of Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (ACRJ), who has been working on the connection between workers and the environment, reflected on why ACRJ joined CHANGE and the importance of multiracial, multi-sector organizing, "We work with low-wage immigrant workers, mostly nail salon workers, whom we know are exposed to dangerous levels of toxic chemicals. If we want to lessen the level of exposure to toxic chemicals for these workers, we have a better shot when we connect with others that want to do the same."

CHANGE has been working on the implementation of California's Green Chemistry Initiative (GCI).<sup>12</sup> The GCI was viewed by its labor and environmental health and justice supporters as a way to overhaul California's chemical policy and make it more responsive to science, consumers, and workers. At the

**"This was one more reminder of how critical it is that we are organizing in and with communities of color."**

same time, because the process has garnered a high level of input (and opposition) from the chemical industry, it will be a struggle to end up with a final policy product that is actually "green." The successes that brought the Coalition to a point of being able to scale up successes also brought with them increased scrutiny and opposition, and so the importance of fights on individual chemicals continues to be relevant and important.

Ansje Miller, Policy Director for the Center for Environmental Health and Coordinator of CHANGE, said, "Industry is working to convince legislators that voting for chemical bans is beyond their scope. However, we are facing a situation where exposure to toxic chemicals today can change our DNA and affect our children four generations down the line... CHANGE works to remind our legislators that they not only have the information, but they also have the authority and responsibility, to protect California's children now."

Finally, a recent policy struggle illustrates the importance of organizing diverse communities across issue areas and sectors, especially when industry uses particular communities as wedges against others and against a progressive agenda. For instance, the effort to eliminate toxic flame retardants from certain children's products had the support of fire fighter organizations as well as scientists and physicians. Chemical producers paid for African American families to come to Sacramento and testify on the need for the continued use of these chemicals to keep their communities safe. As Arguello explained, "Industry does not hesitate to bring people of color in to do their work for them, to make the case that their products are needed. This was one more reminder of how critical it is that we are organizing in and with communities of color."

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11. See the paper, *Climate of Opportunity: Gender and Movement Building at the Intersection of Reproductive Justice and Environmental Justice*. (Women's Foundation of California, 2009).

12. AB 1879 and SB 509, passed in 2008, required two departments under California's Environmental Protection Agency to develop a framework for implementing two of the Green Chemistry Initiative's six recommendations. These bills authorize the Department of Toxic Substances Control and the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment to develop a clearinghouse of information about chemicals and then take regulatory action on chemicals. By legislation, the departments have until January 2011 to develop these regulations.

## 2. Articulating Rights to Clean, Safe, and Healthy Environments

One of the most intimate ways we interface with the environment is through the water we drink and the food we eat. Through the process of eating, drinking, and breathing the environment literally becomes part of us – our body’s tissue and cell structure. For many cultures, especially indigenous and Native cultures, the relationship to local water and traditional foods also plays a central role in people’s reciprocal relationship to the land. Indigenous communities in particular are linking the impact of toxins and stolen land to the capacity of their communities and cultures to reproduce themselves. Military and mining activities directly impact sacred sites, traditional food sources, and cultural practices in addition to the physical development of women and children. It’s no surprise then that access to clean water and safe, traditional food systems are critical issues for EJ/RJ groups, particularly those in rural areas and Native communities.

The strategies these organizations engage are likewise diverse, to achieve multiple goals in multiple arenas. All of these groups are using legal and policy strategies to hold the military, government, and corporate parties accountable, but they are also using community and health worker education strategies to better prepare community leaders, doctors, and nurses to respond to the health issues in their communities. While the remedies and justice they seek often include specific and concrete technical fixes, they often don’t stop there. More often than not, the remedies that women of color EJ/RJ organizations ultimately devise are multifaceted and seek to create the conditions under which holistic and comprehensive community health and well-being may finally emerge for the whole community.

### **You Have Dislodged a Boulder: Women Heading Up the Long Journey Towards Environmental and Reproductive Health<sup>13</sup>**

The multiple and cumulative impacts of toxic environmental pollution are seen and felt in women and men’s reproductive health, fetal and infant development, child development, as well as the overall health of local communities. Many of the groups we interviewed have found political traction by articulating frames that highlight the health impacts on women and children. At the same time, their solutions often also start from a place that reinforces cultural and community strength. The Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice (CCA EJ) addresses a number of these issues in southern California, including industrial pollution, air pollution from movement of goods, and military and private contractor pollution. Tewa Women United, Black Mesa Water Coalition, The California Indian Environmental Alliance and other indigenous organizers throughout the west and southwest continue to work on government and corporate accountability for past and proposed military activities and mining in their communities; this includes nuclear testing and waste sites in the southwest, past and proposed uranium mining in the southwest and mercury from gold mining in the west.

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13. This title is borrowed from the paper by Ruth Wilson Gilmore (1999) of the same name. The title encapsulates the idea that once activated, community leaders with holistic views of their communities will not stop fighting for justice. For many women of color leaders and organizations, the issue is the well-being of their communities, families, and children, and the rest are the different pieces that need to be put into place to get there.



## **The Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice, California** Setting Precedents for Superfund Site Remediation Was Just the Beginning

The Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice (CCAIEJ) emerged from the 28-year battle of a small, rural community to stop pollution from the Stringfellow Acid Pits. Stringfellow is California's top Superfund priority site and one of the most notorious toxic dumps in the nation. Mothers of children with fetal developmental disabilities led this struggle based on concerns about how the site was affecting their children's development. The leaders of that fight formed CCAIEJ, stopped human exposure to hundreds of different toxic chemicals at the site, and obtained compensation of more than \$114 million for thousands of community residents whose health was adversely affected by that exposure. Stringfellow is now the only toxic site that has its own section within the CA Department of Toxic Substance Control, and set the precedents for major changes in state and federal policies dealing with toxic chemicals and Superfund site remediation.

Three decades later, CCAIEJ continues to work towards a clean, safe, and healthy environment for the community. Their environmental justice efforts involve tackling issues including industrial pollution, air pollution from goods movement, and military and private contractor pollution, all of which have severe impacts on reproductive health and fetal and infant health. Women's leadership, especially of mothers, continues to be central to CCAIEJ's work. Penny Newman, Executive Director, points out that women fundamentally believe in the link between toxins and health because they see it in their children and already work collaboratively and through informal social networks, making them ideal community organizers.

In addition, CCAIEJ's holistic, intersectional vision and analysis is, in part, a consequence of women's leadership. CCAIEJ mixes community organizing, advocacy, education, litigation and even parks development to achieve its goals. As the organization states, "The goal of the Center is to build a strong movement for change that recognizes the connections between environmental and worker exploitation and oppression on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation and class... We believe that by exploring the interconnections among issues and seeking common ground for cooperative actions [among many groups], we enhance the ability to create fundamental change."

Photo: Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice. Teams conducting a truck counting project – at one residential area they counted more than 800 trucks in one hour.



### **From Removing Harm to Protecting a Public Good**

In the Central Valley of California, primarily low-income, immigrant Latino farm worker communities are forced to buy bottled water for drinking and bathing because the tap water is unsafe for these basic human activities. High levels of nitrates, arsenic, and other chemicals have created an epidemic of blue baby syndrome<sup>14</sup>, miscarriages, developmental disparities, and other environmental health conditions in the region. The cause of the contaminated water and myriad reproductive health problems are fundamentally related to the extremely high levels pesticide use and lack of effective monitoring regulation from industrial agricultural production.

In the past, lack of clear jurisdiction over the many issues caused by pesticide use prevented groups from building alliances that link all of these issues and communities together. Different bureaucratic agencies govern pesticides (Department of Agriculture), toxins (Department of Toxic Substances), and chemicals in consumer products and food (the Food and Drug Administration). Groups including the Community Water Center, Californians for Pesticide Reform, El Comité Para el Bienestar de Earlimart, and Dolores Huerta Foundation have collectively played a major role in state and regional policy governing pesticide use and in creating emergency response and protection strategies for affected communities. At the statewide level, through the leadership of many of the groups in this report, the CHANGE Coalition is flipping the discourse on pesticides by developing an overarching framework that crosses jurisdictions and is grounded in the right of all communities to live in an environment free of toxins. Even more fundamentally, the Community Water Center (CWC) articulates a framework of safe water as a human right. In so doing, both CHANGE and CWC change the terms of debate from removing a harm to creating and protecting a public good.

### **Community Water Center, California** **Safe Water is a Human Right**

Water is essential for life; we need it for just about everything – what we drink, the food we eat, and the environment in which we live. Alarming, access to safe drinking water is becoming one of the major issues of this century. Drinking water quality in the San Joaquin Valley is the worst in California, due to the pollution of groundwater sources from decades of intensive fertilizer and pesticide application and the massive influx of animal factories to the region. These polluting industries form the basis of the local economy. Thus, political will to address contamination has been minimal.

Low-income, immigrant Latino farm worker communities bear the brunt of this inaction, suffering from the effects of widespread drinking water contamination and dilapidated water infrastructure. In these communities, the ground and tap water contains critically high levels of nitrates and other chemicals known to cause both acute and chronic health conditions. In infants, nitrates are known to cause blue

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14. Blue Baby Syndrome occurs due to a reduction in the blood's ability to carry oxygen, which can be caused by high nitrate contamination in ground water. Infants from 0-6 months are the most vulnerable to fatality from this condition.



Photo: Erin Lubin, Community Water Center The glass of tap water that Maria Elena Orozco is holding is plagued with high levels of nitrates.

baby syndrome and sudden death, while in adults they can cause and exacerbate cancer, asthma, and other health conditions. In order to procure clean, drinkable water, Central Valley residents often have to drive up to 50 miles to purchase expensive bottled water even though they also pay water utility rates in their homes.

The Community Water Center (CWC) is a non-profit environmental justice organization based in California's agricultural heartland. CWC seeks to ensure that all communities have equitable access to safe, clean, and affordable drinking water. Its mission is to create community-driven water solutions through organizing, education, and advocacy in California's San Joaquin Valley. CWC employs three primary strategies to accomplish these goals:

- Educate, organize, and provide legal assistance to low-income communities of color facing local water challenges.
- Advocate for systemic change to address the root causes of unsafe drinking water in the San Joaquin Valley.
- Serve as a resource of information and expertise on community water challenges.

CWC is fighting to elevate the issue of water on the regional and state levels and change the root causes and conditions of poisonous water in their communities. This includes changing regional and state water policy, changing standard farming practices and policies (to reduce or eliminate pesticide use), and building water infrastructure in the region. As a member of the Women's Foundation of California's EJ/RJ Collaborative, CWC has helped to centralize water quality and access as a critical



social justice issue and one that exemplifies the EJ/RJ intersection.

### **Decolonizing Toxic Legacies: Native Survival and the Rural Environment**

Broadly speaking, indigenous people have land-based cultures and earth-based spiritual practices; traditional culture and ways of life are inseparable from the land. In Alaska, where hunting and fishing still provide the majority of the food Native people eat, heavy toxins in the earth and water from military and industrial pollution cause significant damage to fetal and child development. In California, many Native diets revolve around fish and fishing, yet mercury from gold mining is present in almost every body of water in the state. Because the fish, animals, and water bodies themselves are so central in Native spiritual and cultural traditions as well as their diets, communities are struggling with how to maintain their way of life while protecting the health of women and children. Additionally, Native communities that practice traditional medicine are forced to balance a traditional plant-based healing practice with the fact that those plants are now contaminated by the toxins in the ground and water where they grow. While overlooked until now by a more urban-based, American reproductive justice lens, these issues have deep, long-lasting impacts on the health of women, children, communities, and their cultures. From the point of view of many Native activist and community organizations, the solutions must likewise address the deep, long-enduring impacts of not just the pollution but the impacts of the causes themselves – environmental resource extraction, colonization, and stolen land.



Photo: Alaska Community Action on Toxics. Yupik youth testing for endocrine disrupting chemicals in local streams.

### **Alaska Community Action on Toxics, Alaska Challenging Military and Corporate Dumping**

Contrary to the popular view that Alaska is a pristine and untouched wilderness, the State is used extensively as a dumping ground by the military and by oil, gas, and mining industries. Many of these dumping sites are in close proximity to Alaska Native villages and traditional hunting and fishing areas. On St. Lawrence Island, off Alaska's coast, community health aides working in Native villages observed high rates of cancer, miscarriages, and birth defects and made the link between these and the huge military site on the island. Alaska Community Action on Toxics (ACAT) was formed in response to urgent toxic pollution problems in the State of Alaska.

As ACAT tackled military contamination on St. Lawrence Island using community health surveys, environmental sampling, and body burden testing<sup>15</sup>, they built their understanding and knowledge about

15. Body burden testing is a type of research that measures "pollution in people" by analyzing blood, urine, hair, or breast milk samples to identify the toxic chemicals we carry as a result of our exposure to environmental toxins. The accumulation of these chemicals is known as our "body burden". The results can be used to document exposure levels of contaminants and help identify chemicals of concern, identify disturbing gaps in our system of regulatory safeguards, and organize for change.



the chemicals people were exposed to daily with deeply adverse reproductive outcomes. Their work has expanded to the over 700 military dump sites statewide and has tackled other issues, including mining, mercury, and other persistent, toxic chemical contamination from local and distant sources. ACAT developed and maintains the only integrated Geographic Information System computer mapping program of over 2,000 toxic sites in Alaska to identify and provide information on the nature and

extent of environmental contamination. The military, under pressure from ACAT, agreed to prioritize its cleanup of St. Lawrence Island among hundreds of sites in the state.

Pam Miller, ACAT's Executive Director, identified the integration of EJ/RJ efforts as necessary because these chemicals were affecting the fundamental ability of people in the area to reproduce. In a state where hunting and fishing still provide the majority of the food Native people eat, heavy toxins in the earth and water from military and industrial pollution cause significant damage. Traditional foods are vital for physical, spiritual, and cultural well-being and survival.

The leadership of women is central to ACAT's efforts. Within ACAT, the majority of staff and board members are indigenous women. In rural and Native villages, whether community leadership is patriarchal or matriarchal, women demonstrate strong leadership in

health and health care issues. Along the same vein, ACAT relies heavily on community health aides who provide the bulk of health care in rural Alaska. They track the health of the predominantly rural population, and communicate information and resources back to residents. For ACAT, it is no surprise that many of the leaders in the larger toxics movement are women as well.

Like other social justice intersectional groups, ACAT spends a considerable amount of time building relationships with a dizzying array of organizations, sectors, and players, all of whom have significant impact in rural, largely Native, poor Alaskan communities. These include Native organizations, health care organizations, public health and nurse associations, community health workers, environmental conservation groups, reproductive health groups, colleges and universities, as well as reproductive justice and environmental justice allies.



Photo: Alaska Community Action on Toxics. Yupik youth and ACAT's director Pamela Miller at Northeast Cape, St. Lawrence Island.



### **California Indian Environmental Alliance, California** Protecting and Regenerating a Way of Life

The California Gold Rush devastated the indigenous tribes of California. Miners used mercury to extract gold from the land and rock, with lasting effects in streams, soil, and people's bodies. As miners rushed in, indentured servitude and bounty hunting were used to control and colonize local tribes. By the end of the Gold Rush, the population of Native people had plummeted from 360,000 to 31,000. To this day, resistance emanates from California Indigenous communities to maintain a way of life that is deeply connected to this land.

Mercury is now present in every major body of water in California from the coast to the Trinity Alps and the Sierra Nevada. The source of the vast majority of this mercury is the estimated 11 million pounds that was released into California's air, water, and soils from gold extraction. The mercury remained for decades, working its way into the food chain through water and soil, most notably through fish. At the same time, the companies responsible for these conditions no longer exist, having gone bankrupt long ago.

Fish is a staple food of California's Native communities; it plays a central role in the culture and identity of most tribes. When fish are contaminated with mercury, all of this is threatened. As Sherri Norris of California Indian Environmental Alliance (CIEA) notes, "For Native people in California, if you take away the fish, you take away the cultural connection, you take away the vehicle for intergenerational knowledge, what it means to be part of the tribe. As native people, we learn we have a responsibility to take care of the land and species within it."

As mothers, women play a central role in maintaining culture and diet in their communities. When women have to avoid fish during their childbearing years, their children and families are also not eating fish and not participating in the rituals, stories, and ceremonies that surround it. It is not culturally appropriate to prevent women from eating fish, so CIEA develops materials for communities to make the best choices.

The International Indian Treaty Council staff including Sherri Norris, now with CIEA, was working with a group of Pomo youth during the 125th anniversary of the Gold Rush. The students described the

physical pain, including stomach aches and nausea they felt as they listened to presentations in school commemorating the Gold Rush. These experiences are commonly related to the post-traumatic intergenerationally accumulated stress of colonization. These experiences sparked a project in which the youth interviewed elders who talked about mercury poisoning and its ongoing impact on Native communities. This project led to the development of the California Indian Environmental Alliance, and a mission to protect and reestablish California Indian People's cultural traditions, ancestral territories, means of subsistence, and environmental health. The California Indian Environmental Alliance's priority is to reestablish California watersheds at levels clean enough to protect and restore a traditional way of life. Sherri Norris explains:

*There is no place you can go, except specific land you are from, to be a native person. The water body has to be able to sustain your needs. In the Bay Delta region, for example, when we talk about clean-up, we talk about the level of cleanliness it needs to be great enough to practice our culture.<sup>16</sup>*

### 3. Adding Gender and Justice to Climate Change Policy Analysis and Organizing

In 2005, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita made the threat of climate change and extreme weather patterns real and immediate to millions of Americans. This and other extreme weather events have contributed to the global scientific and political consensus on the reality of global climate destabilization and illustrated the particular ways in which impacts would likely be stratified along lines of class and race. At the same time, minimal scientific and policy attention has been focused on how women, especially women in frontline communities, are and will be disproportionately impacted by the climate crisis. Still less attention gets focused on how women's lives are wrapped up in the causes and potential solutions to climate change. Key reproductive justice organizations like Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (ACRJ) and the New Orleans Women's Health and Justice Initiative (WHJI) are working to change that. As leaders, they are beginning to apply a gender and EJ/RJ lens to articulate what a just climate analysis and agenda looks like when vulnerable women of color and their communities are at the center. These findings were published in the report *Looking Both Ways: Reproductive Justice and Climate Change Justice* in 2009.<sup>17</sup>

The work of integrating a reproductive justice lens into climate change policy falls into two key areas: (1) creating policy that protects and supports women before, during, and after climate crises; and,

16. CIEA also established the California Tribal Mining Strategy Group in order to build the leadership and power of tribal leaders in local, state, and national decision making regarding mercury clean-up and restoration. With few resources, the staff, student interns, and strategy group accomplish a lot. They have developed culturally appropriate health education materials to educate tribes and health care providers about mercury poisoning. They continue to work on clean-up issues, advocating for best practices, budget priorities, and clean-up sites. They are also working with key agencies to create mapping and sampling strategies that will integrate data about mines with information about tribes and protect sacred sites. Finally, they are also developing a protocol to increase agency partnerships with tribes as partners, using the latest technology.

17. For a longer discussion of Women, Climate Justice, and Reproductive Justice see EMERJ. 2009. *Looking Both Ways: Women's Lives at the Crossroads of Environmental Justice and Reproductive Justice*.

(2) developing solutions that combine a climate justice and reproductive justice approach in order to create green solutions that also ensure the health, safety, and well-being of workers. Applying an EJ/RJ lens to climate crises includes looking at addressing the social, political, and economic conditions that face women in their communities. Specifically, women are most vulnerable to losing their housing, childcare, jobs, and healthcare during and after a crisis, even though they are also least likely to have it before. Women of color and low-income women are likely to become scapegoats for the economic crises precipitated by climate crises, as was the case for women in Louisiana following Hurricane Katrina when women of color and low-income women were blamed for “having too many babies.”<sup>18</sup>

On the other side, women working in mid-range industries are a strategic group to organize in the fight for reproductive justice and climate justice. These women are working in industries like electronics and nail salons that have significant, if sometimes unrecognized, contributions to global warming. They also face long working hours, poor working conditions, and significant threats to their physical reproductive health. By using the twin lens of reproductive justice and climate justice/environmental justice, organizers are advancing a framework to create policy and organizing strategies that help communities and decision makers to “look both ways” when crafting solutions.

### **New Orleans Women's Health & Justice Initiative, Louisiana** **Reproductive Violence and Climate Change**

In 2005, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit the Gulf Coast, devastating the city of New Orleans and the surrounding communities in Southeast Louisiana, coastal Mississippi, and Alabama. The catastrophic disasters that followed became the face of global warming, unmitigated climate change, environmental degradation, and centuries of social neglect and systemic inequality. However, despite the extended around the clock coverage, the national dialogue on Hurricane Katrina and climate change-induced risks paid little or no attention to the racialized and economic-based gender inequality and vulnerability experienced by women in the region. The New Orleans Women's Health & Justice Initiative (WHJI) was formed to challenge these injustices, while forging new opportunities to build the capacity of their community to address women's economic and social needs for healthy and safe environments.

The state of Louisiana ranks highest in the nation for women living in poverty, and worst in the region and nation for poverty among African American women. It also consistently ranks as one of the most polluted states in the U.S. The Mississippi River chemical corridor, better known as “Cancer Alley,” consists of over 300 industries, including 175 petrochemical and heavy industrial plants and seven oil refineries, that line the 85 mile region between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. It disproportionately impacts 80% of the total African American community residing in the nine parishes (counties) that make up the corridor.

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18. Women's Health & Justice Initiative and the New Orleans Women's Health Clinic. 2008. An Intersectional, Reproductive Justice, Feminist Response to LaBruzzo's Sterilization Plan.



Photo: Women's Health and Justice Initiative

Just five months before Hurricane Katrina's landing, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence had hosted its third Color of Violence conference, *Stopping the War on Women of Color*, in the historic Tremé Community in New Orleans, one of the oldest communities of free people of color in the U.S. and home to a vibrant organizing community and culture. Local INCITE! members, who had served as lead conference organizers, continued planning to establish a women of color resource and organizing center. On August 29<sup>th</sup>, at the onset of Hurricane Katrina, the world witnessed the shocking injustices of thousands of women, children, elders,

and others crying out for help, stranded for days without food, water, and basic services. Local organizers with INCITE! formed the Women's Health & Justice Initiative (WHJI) to challenge the social invisibility of women of color and the aggressive use of punitive social policies against low-income and working class women most vulnerable to violence, poverty, and population control.

In Katrina's wake, women of color and low-income women had become political and ideological scapegoats by key policymakers, who blamed the social breakdown after the storm on low-income women of color "having too many babies." Louisiana State Representative John LaBruzzo (R) proposed introducing legislation that would pay low-income women receiving public assistance and housing subsidies one thousand dollars (\$1,000) to be sterilized, rather than providing them with the support they need to recover and survive after the storm.<sup>19</sup> WHJI identified these kinds of punitive policies as forms of "reproductive violence,"<sup>20</sup> describing the systematic and institutional forms of regulation, criminalization, and subjugation of women of color and poor women's bodies, reproduction, sexuality, and motherhood in the region.<sup>21</sup> WHJI was successful in stopping LaBruzzo's planned legislation.

WHJI established the New Orleans Women's Health Clinic (NOWHC) in Spring 2007, which has provided comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services and information to over 4,000 women. NOWHC combines health services with reproductive organizing and health education advocacy to address root causes of health disparities and sexual and reproductive oppression. WHJI has developed a comprehensive curriculum to educate community members and leaders about climate change disasters and reproductive violence and is creating an organizing center to centralize and coordinate the efforts of women of color organizers around the region. WHJI sees its work in a national and even global context. It links its local work to national organizing efforts through alliances with other EJ/RJ organizations.

19. Women's Health & Justice Initiative and the New Orleans Women's Health Clinic. 2008. *An Intersectional, Reproductive Justice, Feminist Response to LaBruzzo's Sterilization Plan*.

20. WHJI defines reproductive violence as "an interlocking system of control, domination, and inequality through the regulation, criminalization, and subjugation of women of color and poor women's bodies, reproduction, sexuality, and motherhood."

21. Women's Health & Justice Initiative. 2009. *Examining the Intersection of Gender, Disasters, Displacement and Reproductive Violence*.



## Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, California

### Looking Both Ways: Reproductive Justice and Climate Change Justice<sup>22</sup>

When Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (ACRJ) began their work in environmental justice in 2000, the threat of global warming was just beginning to hit public consciousness, and key policymakers even denied its existence. Likewise, the pervasive health impact of chemicals in consumer products was hardly a mainstream concern.

**“If we look at it from RJ and EJ together... we ultimately concluded that the production, distribution, use, and disposal of these chemicals was the root issue.”**

ACRJ has applied the reproductive justice/climate justice framework to the nail salon industry, focusing on nail salon workers in Oakland, California, through their worker organizing project POLISH (Participatory Research and Organizing Leadership Initiative for Safety and Health). Over the past two years, POLISH has waged a successful campaign to prioritize education and access to health and safety information for workers and salon owners. Key accomplishments include a commitment from government agencies to collaboratively revamp their health and safety programs to better serve the nail salon community,

including increasing multilingual access to information about health and safety education, materials, and regulations about salon inspections. Currently POLISH is designing a local organizing campaign that will improve the reproductive justice of nail salon workers and reduce the greenhouse gases emitted by products used in this industry.

What do nail salons have to do with climate justice? Through the research, ACRJ discovered that, in the production of some chemicals used in nail salon products, high global warming potential (GWP) greenhouse gases are emitted. While one nail salon may seem negligible, the cumulative emissions across the hundreds of nail salons in any one city and over the total life cycle of these chemicals make nail salons a significant contributor to global warming.

At the heart of this industry are low-wage women workers, the vast majority of whom are of childbearing age. “Corporations have not only been spewing greenhouse gases and toxins into the earth, they have been relying on women as low-wage workers to manufacture and use these products that are also big contributors to global warming,” says Organizing Director Dana Ginn Paredes. Nail salons are only one piece of the bigger picture;



22. For a longer discussion of Women, Climate Justice, and Reproductive Justice see EMERJ. 2009. *Looking Both Ways: Women's Lives at the Crossroads of Environmental Justice and Reproductive Justice*.

industrial agriculture, electronics assembly, food production, and other industries are similar. From this perspective, climate justice is not only a new front for reproductive justice, but also for worker justice, especially regarding toxics issues. Climate change experts agree that mid-market industries, the same industries that often employ women of color, are a critical piece to solving the climate crisis. Yet few discussions of climate change include this perspective in their analysis.

ACRJ found that when they added a climate justice lens to their work in nail salons, they were forced to develop more sophisticated solutions in their campaigns. “If we only look at RJ, we might decide that better ventilation systems are a good solution. But if we look at it from RJ and EJ together, we might conclude that the chemicals used in this industry not only harm women, but also contribute to global warming,” says Paredes. They ultimately concluded that the production, distribution, use, and disposal of these chemicals was the root issue. No amount of ventilation will solve the problem; harmful chemicals themselves need to be eliminated or made unprofitable.

Photo: Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice



#### 4. Improving Research Models and Processes

In recent years, environmental health science has reached a general consensus that poor environment negatively impacts physical health, and that pregnant women, fetuses, and children are the most vulnerable to even low exposure of chemicals and toxins – something EJ/RJ groups have argued for years. In this respect, science is an important tool in the work of EJ/RJ organizers. At the same time, medical standards, research methodologies, and research agendas are often not set up to answer the core questions posed by EJ/RJ – how environmental conditions and the cumulative impact of factors like toxins, social and economic stress, and limited access to healthcare, undermine the health and well-being of women and children. Several EJ/RJ groups are involved in efforts to **challenge ineffective medical standards, research methodologies and research agendas**. Two main issues emerge under this area. The first aims to apply pressure to ensure that research on the effects

of environmental hazards on women, children, families, and communities is timely, adequate, and inclusive of the realities of low-income communities. The second focuses on challenging the medical standards, regulatory system, and research flow that prioritize reproductive technologies and medical interventions over addressing the root environmental causes of infertility, cancer, and other medical conditions.

### Redefining Baselines

As a result, EJ/RJ groups are shaping the commonly held definition of health, especially in determining acceptable and just levels of chemical exposure. To this end, one of the common threads across many of the EJ/RJ groups involved challenging the “average man” model, where the health impacts of chemicals and toxins are tested on a hypothetical, white man of “average” physical characteristics and lifestyle habits. These groups argue this model is an inaccurate baseline for most people, including women, children, pregnant women, farmers, low-wage workers, and people who eat the food they hunt or catch. In fact, they say it is even inaccurate for *real* white men when you factor in where they live, work, play, their health histories, and so forth. Tewa Women United, for example, is trying to promote the use of a new research model, based on a pregnant, female farmer.



### Making Industry Science Accountable

EJ/RJ groups are increasingly using science as a tool to investigate the harmful impacts of toxins on reproductive health. While this recent edge of research is encouraging, science is also an industry that requires oversight and accountability, especially as it is often funded or influenced by other interests who would define reproductive technologies as profit-making ventures. Emily Galpern, formerly of Generations Ahead, spoke on how this plays out when dealing with infertility issues:

*Currently infertility concerns are more focused on using reproductive technologies than on seeking to understand the underlying environmental causes of infertility. Money is being invested in further developing reproductive technology instead of in preventing infertility and dealing with the environmental conditions [that cause infertility]. If you want to make sure vulnerable communities are not impacted in a detrimental way, those most impacted need to be in leadership so that the focus shifts away from spending more money on the industry and technological fixes and returns to the environmental and genetic causes of infertility, on where people live, and what kind of health care they receive.*

Bringing an intersectional justice lens to this rapidly evolving industry is one of the unique connections some RJ groups are making.



## **Katsi Cook, Running Strong for American Indian Youth, New York** **Woman is the First Environment**

Katsi Cook (Mohawk) is an elder woman leader in Native sovereignty, environmental justice, and reproductive justice movements. She traces her work to the early 1970s and the emergence of current indigenous movements that declared five areas of sovereignty and grounds nearly four decades of activism: (1) control of land base and land claims; (2) control of jurisdiction within that land base; (3) control of education; (4) control of psycho-religious life; and (5) control of production and reproduction – of people, knowledge, and culture.

It was this last area of sovereignty – control of production and reproduction – that Cook recognized as particular to her own commitment to women's knowledge and midwifery. In 1980, Cook's and many other families of the Mohawk Nation of Akwesasne were based in an encampment that ensued as part of a two-year standoff over the disputed jurisdiction of New York State on Mohawk lands. The encampment and its Akwesasne Freedom School were located directly adjacent to the General Motors Power-train Division, within view of what would become the largest Superfund PCB dumpsite in the nation at that time. While the Mohawks emerged victorious at this particular historic moment on the issue of NY State's jurisdiction, by 1983 the industrial plants adjacent to Mohawk lands were declared Federal or State Superfund sites, contaminated with an alphabet soup of toxic chemicals.

Women in the community regularly turned to Cook, a practicing midwife, with common experiences of miscarriages and concerns about breast milk quality, fetal development and infant health, subsistence lifestyles, and cultural practices. After extensive research and listening to Mohawk women's stories, it was evident to Cook that environmental reproductive health issues were sovereignty issues. Careful analysis of the price of the industrialization of the St. Lawrence River – lifeblood of the Mohawk people – found great disparities between upstream communities and Akwesasne.

Cook began a lifelong commitment to these issues and organized reproductive health projects to address them. First was the bio-monitoring Akwesasne Mother's Milk Project, that marshaled state and national multidisciplinary scientific partners and local tribal health programs responsible for the health of Mohawk mothers and children. By 1993, the community midwifery practice and environmental health research partnerships Cook helped establish evolved into the First Environment Communications Project. Cook then helped lead the founding of the Akwesasne Task Force on the Environment and its Research Advisory Committee, which published Protocols for Review of Environmental and Scientific Research Proposals based on Haudenosaunee principles of peace, power, and justice.

Currently, Katsi Cook is Program Director for Woman is the First Environment Collaborative, a program that develops American Indian youth leadership to protect and promote social justice in environmental, reproductive, and Native rights arenas. Housed at Running Strong for American Indian Youth, Woman is the First Environment Collaborative works with community-based partners, women's health and environmental networks, and Sister Song Collective for Reproductive Justice to create community movements through women's leadership. Among these leaders are women who were awakened by the transformative power of their birthing experiences, the love of their own Mohawk language, and the ceremonies of thanksgiving and healing that they want their daughters and relatives to enjoy as part of their right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.

## 5. Promoting Alternatives that Support Healing and Long-term Sustainability

The ultimate goal of any social justice movement is to move beyond resisting harm to creating the world we want to see. Many of the groups interviewed for this report are **engaged in proactively moving forward alternatives that promote healing and long-lasting community sustainability**. In their advocacy and community organizing work, these groups are advocating for holistic solutions that address the economic, physical, cultural, environmental, and political well-being of communities. Native groups often lead this push for alternatives, bringing a sophisticated analysis about the relationship between the degradation of environment and the integrity of the Native culture and society. While Native groups cite anecdotal evidence and research linking the effects of coal mining and uranium exposure to cancer, neurological diseases, and birth defects, they also talk about the cultural, psychological, and spiritual harm environmental destruction has had on their communities. Groups like 1 Sky (a project of New Energy Economy) and Black Mesa Water Coalition are pursuing solutions, such as alternative energy and green economy projects, as a means to solve the environmental and reproductive issues in their communities at the same time they create a new economic infrastructure for Native American communities that is ecologically sustainable and culturally appropriate.

This is also exemplified by the focus of so many groups on traditional reproductive practices such as midwifery, home births, and motherhood; practices that have been increasingly suppressed or de-valued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These projects, many led by indigenous groups, are reclaiming traditional practices of women's health that emphasize Native women's autonomy. Many organizations like Tewa Women United, Young Women United, and Running Strong for American Indian Youth have created doula and midwifery projects to this end.

### Young Women United, New Mexico

Young Women United (YWU) is an Albuquerque organization created by young women of color using personal experiences in connection with the broader social justice movement to create positive change for individual growth and community action. YWU was instrumental in key policy victories, including passing a strong sex education policy for New Mexico public schools, and continues to see victories through to implementation. As they worked diligently to defend their hard-earned victories and were facing the evolving needs of their staff and members, YWU began to question their overall theory of change, with its main focus on policy and organizing campaigns. YWU recently took on a new project, Revolutionary Motherhood, which uses mothering as a way to organize strategically. As an example, YWU has joined with another organization, Kalpulli Izkalli, to form a joint apprenticeship program with local *promotoras* to develop a collective of women practicing traditional healing practices within their communities as well as pushing for policy and legislation on birthing, mothering, and toxins.



Still other groups, like Dolores Huerta Foundation, are using a holistic community planning approach to design communities that support the long-term well-being of all community members and the environment. This is demonstrated by the efforts of the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice (CCA EJ) to build a public park in the Riverside area of California. Considered one of the key examples of environmental justice organizing started over 30 years ago, CCA EJ's holistic community vision has led them to take leadership in efforts to build public use green space in a low-income and heavily polluted community.

Black Mesa Water Coalition's work links reproductive justice with energy and climate justice. The solutions they are enacting are part of creating a just transition to a sustainable economic and social system that continues to right the wrongs of the systems that created the problems in the first place.

### **Black Mesa Water Coalition, Diné (Navajo) and Hopi Nations, Southwest Cultural Survival: Linking Reproductive Justice with Energy Justice**

The Diné reservation covers four states, is roughly the size of Ireland, and has a population of 250,000. Situated within the Diné reservation is Hopi territory, with a population of 12,000. This resource rich area is also one of the most actively mined in the United States, with heavy emphasis on uranium and coal. The Black Mesa Water Coalition (BMWC) was formed by young intertribal, interethnic people to address issues of water depletion, natural resource exploitation, and health within Diné and Hopi communities. Formed in 2001, BMWC was the only youth leadership organization working on environmental issues and the only one actively bridging intertribal tensions between the Diné and Hopi.

For BMWC, the environmental degradation, adverse health impacts on Native people (with heavy reproductive impacts), and the cultural survival of Indigenous people are all inextricably linked. As BMWC states, "The continued destruction of Indigenous Peoples' traditional homelands is endangering the cultural survival of the people, it is adding to the many challenges our young people face, and it is significantly contributing to the global climate distresses that we all face." BMWC notes that the Black Mesa, where a key mine operates, is sacred for the Native matrilineal society and is considered a female deity. BMWC links the degradation of those female deities with the prevalent domestic and sexual abuse in the economically and socially embattled communities in which they work. As a result, protection of sacred sites and a return to traditional beliefs and healing practices that honor the earth and women's roles in family are intrinsic to BMWC and many Native groups.

As a result, BMWC combines multiple goals (closing mines, developing a green economy, improving Diné and Hopi health, reclaiming traditional culture, counteracting gender oppression and violence, and building intergenerational bridges between elders and youth) and multiple strategies (community organizing, advocacy, litigation, community development, and leadership development). Among its major victories is BMWC's history of intertribal and intergenerational work. In 2005, the organization succeeded in shutting down half of the coal mine that pumps a huge amount of water for slurry transport. In a community with a 54% unemployment rate and where the coal mine was the largest Navajo employer, BMWC is also working to develop a green economy by reinvesting coal power plant profits in the reservation for building wind and solar power plants to supply California's energy needs.

## INNOVATIONS:

### What makes EJ/RJ organizing effective?

Groups working at the EJ/RJ intersection share a common movement building orientation that defines their work. The stories in the last section illustrate how EJ/RJ groups are tackling critical issues with agility and freshness. By applying an intersectional lens to issues, these groups are able to break past barriers, like the use of wedge issues, that have stymied more mainstream reform movements. **Their power lies not only in what they are organizing but also how they are organizing.**

This section focuses on the key innovations of EJ/RJ's movement building approach and the important insights and lessons EJ/RJ has for other social justice movements.

#### 1. EJ/RJ Leaders Find Solutions in the Experience and Leadership of Impacted Communities

All of the groups we interviewed came to use an intersectional approach in their work because it best reflects the lived experiences of their communities and provides the greatest opportunities for affected communities to take leadership on issues that matter to them.

The communities most affected by environmental degradation and toxicity are often the same as those who face the most reproductive health issues. For these communities, the issues of women's reproductive health and children's developmental health are inseparable from the health of the environment and the community as a whole. The commitment to intersectionality extends beyond EJ/RJ; all of the groups we interviewed integrate other perspectives into their work such as economic justice, workplace/worker rights, education justice, health justice, and housing rights because they better reflect their communities' experiences. Eveline Shen of Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, hypothesized that EJ/RJ leaders approach the work in this way because it reflects their experiences as women of color; through an intersectional approach organizers are able to develop strategies that accurately and powerfully reflect and address the experiences of their communities. In this sense, intersectionality goes beyond being a movement building approach to being a core value and worldview that these groups share.



#### 2. EJ/RJ Groups Broaden the Constituency

Organizing groups find that they are able to connect and engage a broader constituency and base by using the EJ/RJ intersectional framework. In doing so, they are gaining more power and momentum with the communities they work, the general public and electorate, and decision makers.



For example, reproductive rights is commonly understood as a primary focus on abortion rights with an emphasis on privacy and choice. By contrast, reproductive justice expands the conversation to focus on the right to have or not have families in a healthy way. At the EJ/RJ intersection, the dialogue becomes even richer, encompassing the right to live, work, and play in an environment supporting reproductive health. EJ/RJ's strengths are that it has developed a framework to address broader fundamental needs, connect and align the movement across different communities, and connect to the concerns and interests of the broader public. The success of California efforts to mobilize the support of unions and worker organizations in statewide safe cosmetics legislation because of its focus on workplace exposure is emblematic of the potential of EJ/RJ to bring different players to the table.

### 3. EJ/RJ's Analysis Goes Beyond Single-issue Politics to Reframe Issues in Fresh Ways

EJ/RJ groups have sophisticated analyses about the complex, structural forces that their families and communities face. Refusing issue silos and single-issue politics as ineffective for their lived realities, their intersectional analysis enables them to circumvent the limitations of more mainstream approaches and make surprising, non-traditional connections. These leaders believe that the most effective solutions and wins are those that stay grounded in core values and principles and that “winning” cannot happen at the expense of the most vulnerable.

In *Winning Reproductive Justice: Contributions to Policy Change from the Reproductive Justice Movement*, ACRJ argues: “The Reproductive Justice Framework helps us to recognize and avoid short-term tactics that undermine our long-term success and reinforce conservative wedge strategies.” This is true for Physicians for Social Responsibility-Los Angeles (PSR-LA). As a local chapter of a national advocacy organization, they have built strong relationships with organizations working in communities of color. When a number of environmental health groups began discussion about breast milk monitoring legislation, PSR-LA urged the organizations to understand the impacts on communities of color where breastfeeding rates are very low. PSR-LA brought the voice of breastfeeding advocates to the debate and helped organize a statewide call between environmental health groups and breast feeding advocates working to improve breastfeeding rates in communities of color. The result of this effort was a bill that environmental health and breast feeding advocates could both support.

EJ/RJ leaders are also using their analysis to create a policy focus that extends beyond abortion and other single-issue agendas.<sup>23</sup> The right to have an abortion is profoundly limited in its relevance

23. This is exemplified by two national networks and one California network: 1) SisterSong, a network of local, regional, and national grassroots agencies representing five primary ethnic populations/indigenous nations in the US and a key founder of the Reproductive Justice movement; and 2) EMERJ, a national movement building initiative to increase the coordination, collaboration, and strategy of reproductive justice groups across the country, and 3) the CHANGE coalition, a cross-sector alliance of groups in California working to transform chemical policy in the state.



as the single issue for all women, especially those facing poverty, violence, and discrimination. Additionally, the single focus on defending abortion has largely created a defensive and narrow stance among advocates on the national level. Reproductive justice mirrors the environmental justice movement's groundbreaking reframing of traditional definitions of environment and impact, redefining reproductive health and rights to include the right to have or not have a child in a supported and healthy way. The EJ/RJ framework expands this agenda even further by linking the right of all people to have children and build families with the fundamental right to live, work, and play in environments free of toxins and harmful chemicals that impede health.

As SisterSong notes in *Reproductive Justice in the United States: A Funders' Briefing Summary Report*:

*[O]ne of the key problems we collectively face is the isolation of abortion from other social justice issues that concern all communities. Abortion isolated from other social justice/human rights issues neglects issues of economic justice, the environment, criminal justice, immigrants' rights, militarism, discrimination based on race and sexual orientation, and a host of other concerns directly affecting an individual woman's decision making process. Moreover, support for abortion rights is even frequently isolated from other reproductive health issues. We believe that the ability of any woman to determine her own reproductive destiny is directly linked to the conditions in her community and these conditions are not just a matter of individual choice and access.*

Through their analysis, EJ/RJ groups are modeling how the broader social justice movement can use an intersectional analysis to create stronger, more powerful policy agendas that circumvent the pitfalls of single-issue politics.

#### **4. EJ/RJ Builds and Strategically Leverages the Leadership of Women, Especially Women of Color**

Organizers at the intersection of reproductive justice and environmental justice are making a critical contribution to the broader social justice movement by developing and nurturing the leadership of women in general, and women of color in particular. While women play important leadership roles throughout the social justice movement, the critical mass of leaders at the EJ/RJ intersection are women of color and mothers. EJ/RJ groups are modeling how women's roles in the family, community, and society (as mothers, grandmothers, matriarchs, guardians, bridge builders, social networkers, and organizers) can be strategic assets in social justice efforts. Their perspective is not only fundamentally shaping the evolution of this intersection, these leaders are making their mark by developing



Photo: SisterSong Women of Color  
Reproductive Health Collective

new frames of analysis, new movement building and organizing approaches, different communication strategies, and new forms of collaboration and alliance.<sup>24</sup>

The groups we interviewed referenced how women are often:

- Involved with food and nutrition;
- Responsible for the caring and nurturing of children and family;
- “Natural organizers” with large, informal social networks;
- Direct witnesses to the connection between toxins and health, especially in their children; and
- The actual, if not recognized, heads of households.

In addition:

- In some Native matrilineal societies, women hold historical and fundamental leadership authority; and
- In low-income communities, women often bear the child-raising, health care and economic responsibilities of the family.

Time and time again the groups we interviewed spoke about how they are leveraging these roles to strengthen their local networks, base building, community organizing, and development of more sophisticated organizing and communications strategies. They observe, for example, that women:

- Hold unique power and moral authority as spokespeople for their children and families;
- Develop organizing and social change models that reflect their role and distinct perspective on family, community, and society; and
- Develop a worldview premised on intersectionality.

## **5. EJ/RJ Groups Use Multiple Change Strategies with Agility and Pragmatism**

The EJ/RJ groups we interviewed are particularly adept at using multiple change strategies with agility and pragmatism, both within a single organization and through alliances and collaborations. This approach mixes short-, mid-, and long-term strategies and multiple modalities (kitchen table organizing, research, policy advocacy, community building). In some cases, a single organization can be involved in direct-action community organizing, developing a community park, providing political education for community health workers, building alliances with local churches, and litigating against corporate offenders. In others cases, groups partner with organizations and individual leaders who are playing a complementary role. For example, Community Water Center has a strong partnership with a state-level advocacy group in Sacramento. They provide the advocacy group with an up-to-date picture of the issues on the ground, and the state advocate keeps them abreast of developments in the state capital. Native organizations that work equally on reclamation of traditional language and practices (such as midwifery) as well as organizing, advocacy and alliance building, exemplify this agility.

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24. It is also important to note the key role young people have and continue to play in the social justice, EJ/RJ movements. Especially RJ, where much of the leadership is intentionally cultivated between multiple generations of women, with young women under 40 playing key roles in a relatively new movement. This is true for Native communities as well. As Anna Rondon of New Energy Economy points out, “51% of the Navajo nation is under 24 years old. We are a young nation and need to educate our young people from early childhood to ensure the survival and strength of our people.”

## 6. EJ/RJ Leaders Value and Support Different and Complementary Movement Building Roles

EJ/RJ also demonstrated a value for and skill in supporting groups and individuals to play complementary movement building roles. This skill is particularly important in helping groups achieve a greater impact and scale in their work. Many groups spoke about partnerships they have not only with EJ/RJ groups, but with researchers, advocates, policymakers, scientists, and others. These alliances helped EJ/RJ groups to build credibility and establish their leadership in local, state, and national arenas.

A few EJ/RJ groups are playing an important role as bridge building organizations within the EJ/RJ intersection. Physicians for Social Responsibility, Los Angeles (PSR-LA) is illustrative of this role. Grounded in a social justice analysis and committed to movement building, deep and working relationships are being built across traditional organizing and advocacy divides. Martha Dina Arguello of PSR-LA has intentionally built strong relationships with people of color groups within EJ/RJ movements and notes, “We like working with local groups that have not been engaged in environmental health policy work and finding ways to bring their voices to the table.” PSR-LA and Breast Cancer Action spoke about how they often help frontline organizations and policy advocacy groups understand each other and build productive relationships.



## 7. EJ/RJ Leaders Use an Approach that Mirrors Their Core Values and Vision

Many of the groups we interviewed discussed how using an approach that mirrors their core values and vision ultimately helps them to make a bigger impact. Many of these values are described above: leadership of the most affected communities, relationships and collaboration, and working for long-term change. Additionally, many EJ/RJ groups incorporate a commitment to healing and renewal into their work as a result of a big picture vision about an ideal world. While these groups engage in struggle and resistance like other social justice movements, they are also focused on the continuity of life and culture. Groups acknowledge it is not enough to fight all the time; they have to replace what they tear down with something they build up in its place. As a result, community organizing groups often engage in spiritual and cultural work as well as alternative institution building as part of their overall theory of change.

This work is not without challenges. Few groups had significant male participation or male staff of any kind. Penny Newman, founder of Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice, observes:

*We have always had difficulty retaining male staff members, many who come from a more traditional organizing tradition. Our holistic analysis and vision includes healing and renewal strategies that are not traditionally defined as community organizing. We find that women developed from the community understand this definition of community organizing implicitly.*





Photo: Women's Health and Justice Initiative. Public housing action by Coalition to Stop Demolition.

## **8. EJ/RJ Leaders Integrate Gender, With Race And Class, as a Central Lens of Analysis into Social Justice Sectors**

EJ/RJ groups are reintegrating gender along with race and class as a central lens of analysis within social justice movements. These groups are not only influencing sectors like environmental justice and climate justice, but also economic justice, education justice, and housing rights. New Orleans Women's Health and Justice Initiative's (WHJI) efforts to address the disproportionate burden poor women of color in the Gulf have had to bear post-Katrina are an example.

Many of the groups we interviewed spoke about how this is helping to strengthen the work and analysis of all social justice sectors and to heal the wounds and divisions created by wedge issues. As EJ/RJ groups reinsert gender as a central lens of analysis, they are contributing to the reinvigoration of a movement that centralizes women's leadership and cuts across community, geography, generation, and economics.

## **9. EJ/RJ Leaders Prioritize Relationship Building, Alliance Building, and Collaborative Action**

The EJ/RJ groups we interviewed have a fundamental reliance on relationship building, coalition and alliance building, and collaborative action as central to building the social, intellectual, political capital and power for change. But historically in social justice movements, inter-organizational competition, infighting, and resentment crippled effectiveness. EJ/RJ intersection groups openly acknowledge those challenges and their desire to move beyond them and prioritize working collaboratively. California Latinas for Reproductive Justice exemplifies this priority, making alliance building a formal program component and organizational goal rather than considering alliance building just as a strategy or means to an end.



Photo: California Latinas for Reproductive Justics

## Expanding the Movement for Empowerment and Reproductive Justice (EMERJ), California

### Strategic Alliance Building

The organizers at Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (ACRJ) see their work in the context of a broad social justice movement and a long history of women of color leaders working for a more just future. Individuals at ACRJ emerged from several different social justice sectors – economic and racial justice; youth organizing; health justice; and LGBTQ organizing and reproductive health, rights and justice. They see these relationships as a key asset in their alliance and movement building work.

*We have always been allied with social justice groups as well as reproductive rights and reproductive health organizations. Intersectionality allows us to connect with a breadth of organizations and to authentically speak to their vision, values, and constituencies.*

— Eveline Shen, ACRJ

Expanding the Movement for Empowerment and Reproductive Justice (EMERJ) is ACRJ's national movement building initiative. The long-term values-based relationships built through EMERJ provide critical movement infrastructure and a model for movement building. By building and strengthening relationships between key individuals and organizations in the reproductive justice sector, EMERJ helps the most impacted communities build the social, political, and economic power to make change. EMERJ allies use a variety of strategies, including research, policy advocacy, grassroots organizing, strategic communications, and direct service. EMERJ helps its allies coordinate and leverage these different strategies for a common purpose. It also hosts strategy sessions, publishes analysis, and generates tools and materials to advance the thinking and practice within the sector. In addition, EMERJ has been instrumental in building relationships with organizers in other sectors and articulating an intersectional analysis; this helps to create the conditions for a cross-sector social justice movement. This approach differs significantly from the reproductive rights sector because of its intersectional framework, deep relationships with marginalized communities, and proactive strategies that support a justice movement over the long term. Through EMERJ, reproductive justice groups have developed a common vision, purpose, and strategy for the sector and then aligned and leveraged the work of their individual organizations toward this greater purpose.



## CONCLUSIONS

### 1. EJ/RJ's Core Strength is that Its Analysis and Organizing Strategy Builds from the Entirety of People's Experience.

EJ/RJ's intersectional analysis and cross-sector organizing strategy emerged from, builds on, and reflects the entirety of affected communities' experiences. Because of this, EJ/RJ is able to flip the rules of typical advocacy strategies and bureaucratic decision making and create conditions that help vulnerable communities win.<sup>25</sup> Fundamentally, this approach challenges reform movements' focus on individual rights. By valuing and practicing interconnectedness, EJ/RJ is able to break out of silos, go beyond single-issue approaches to change, and reframe critical issues that otherwise would fall through the cracks.



The EJ/RJ intersection is made up of a dynamic group of organizations working to increase the overall well-being of women, children, families, and their environments. These organizations are working on issues that fundamentally question our values and how we live – what we consume; the chemicals we use; and the impacts on our environments, communities, and future generations. This sophisticated approach enables organizers to engage communities with the complexities and contradictions of their lives in a way that single-issue binary approaches cannot. It also allows organizers to build alliances and connections across identity, generations, and geography. Ultimately, organizations are able to leverage and engage new constituencies, partners, and alliances because this framework reflects and resonates with so many different communities.

Leadership by women of color has been critical to this work. Their perspectives and lived experiences deeply inform the intersectional analysis and pragmatic approach of EJ/RJ groups. Across many different communities and constituencies, these leaders are making connections that no one else has been able to achieve. In particular, Native organizations contributed substantially to our understanding of the intersection. Indigenous organizers have firmly rooted worldviews that emphasize interdependence, continuity, and integration. At the same time, they are by necessity building alliances with non-Native organizers and leaders; in doing this they have developed the concepts and skills needed to translate and link social justice and indigenous frameworks. In order to build a stronger intersectional movement, social justice leaders need to better understand and build alliances with Native organizations as well.

25. Gladwell, Malcolm. "How David Beats Goliath" New Yorker Magazine. May 11, 2009.

## 2. EJ/RJ is a Politically Timely and Effective Approach to Social Change Both On the Local and National Levels.

With the 2008 election, the United States experienced a major political shift at the national level. Barak Obama's presidential campaign demonstrated the power of grassroots, bottom-up organizing on a national scale. His administration is characterized as vision-driven and pragmatic, values-based and results-oriented, directive and collaboration focused. Furthermore, his administration has ties with and understanding of communities of color and their issues and with social justice principles and movements. This shift was a manifestation of a much larger transition in the political climate and psyche of the country - a yearning for something different, leadership that can handle the complexities of our time, and the major challenges ahead of us. The progressive movement also is searching for ways to be more proactive and less reactive, to lead rather than just resist.

The issues at the center of our economic, political, and environmental crises – global climate change, health care, food and water, security, and the impact of chemicals on our bodies and the environment – sit right at the core of EJ/RJ. Scientific data is confirming what women and mothers knew for a long time – even minimal exposure to toxins is harmful to children and the reproductive system. There is now widespread, mainstream awareness of the presence of harmful chemicals in toys, food, and body care and household products. A substantial consumers campaign is linking these issues to the everyday lives of all people; the growing drive to centralize workers in this movement has the potential to make this an even more powerful and widespread campaign. Furthermore, concern for climate change and environmental degradation has become a burning public issue, centralizing the questions of EJ/RJ in the public consciousness. Perhaps more than ever before, the public is open to new ideas for how to live and be in the world. In this sense, EJ/RJ is in step with a much broader trend in the country and is in a good position to provide leadership.

By strengthening and connecting social justice sectors to each other, EJ/RJ groups have been able to circumvent roadblocks that have rendered the more mainstream reform-focused movements less effective. EJ/RJ has engaged new constituencies, new messages, and broader support for social justice by reframing familiar issues in new, accessible ways – moving beyond wedge issues and a narrow single-issue analysis, building a broader base of support by engaging new constituents and allies, creating new coalitions and alliances that cross different sectors and communities, and advancing EJ/RJ victories that include policy and transformative change.

EJ/RJ leaders can build on this moment by identifying opportunities to build additional strategic cross-sector campaigns and alliances. These alliances should be pragmatic and build around a clear, shared purpose that leverages the work of frontline groups to create local-to-national change strategies. The EJ/RJ intersection already has a strong movement infrastructure it can use to advance this work, including alliances like CHANGE and the Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative, and networks like EMERJ and SisterSong.

## 3.



### 3. Intersectional Work Happening on the Ground Gives Us Insight on How to Make Effective Change without Repeating Mistakes Made by Other Reform and Justice Movements.

Following the broad, visionary wins of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 70s, progressives quickly began to see the political tides of this country change. Since then, progressive organizers have struggled with the conservative movement's ability to divide communities and the electorate using wedge issues like abortion and same-sex marriage. The inability to effectively address wedge issues, work across issue silos, articulate a proactive vision, and build broader coalitions has significantly limited the social justice movement's effectiveness.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, the centralized top-down strategy of national advocacy organizations has been ineffective in mobilizing and inspiring grassroots groups and the broader public. A new model is sorely needed.

The EJ/RJ intersection shows us what an evolving social justice movement looks like in the current time and context. By increasing their understanding of intersectional organizing practices and cross-sector movement building, social justice leaders can strengthen the work of the progressive movement as a whole. EJ/RJ groups create models for regional, state, and national organizing that centralizes the leadership of affected communities. This work is being advanced by a new generation of organizers who embody a new approach to movement building.<sup>27</sup> In addition to the qualities described above, these new models have the potential to engage new communities and build broad, multiracial, multiclass alliances that work toward a common vision and goal. Through strategic collaborations, these groups have been able to maximize the efforts of their relatively small to modest sized organizations and leverage greater power and influence. The relational and grassroots movement building approach of EJ/RJ is central even among state and nationally focused advocacy groups at this intersection. These larger organizations share a commitment to a social justice framework that prioritizes the leadership of impacted communities, collaboration, and systemic change. This local to national approach to movement building is starting to be applied on a scale that many did not think was possible. Alliances like EMERJ are using alliance building to increase the leadership and influence of organizations led by women of color to impact national politics. This capacity represents a critical step for progressives, opening up the possibility of a broader, stronger, and more aligned social justice movement.

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26. This stance is starkly illustrated by the reduction of the broad women's liberation movements to the narrow focus of the pro-choice movement to maintain abortion rights. Despite the dedicated focus on "choice", reproductive rights continued to be eroded and the issue proved to be a powerful wedge in the culture wars. Similar dynamics occurred across the progressive movement as organizers tried to apply older tools, frames, and strategies to new situations. Despite their best efforts, the movement became narrower, more fractured, and was losing ground.

27. This evolution reflects generational shifts in the movement at large and intergenerational work within EJ/RJ organizations. Many of the current leaders of EJ/RJ groups are in their 30s and 40s; older leaders are actively engaged in the development of younger leaders. As more and more generation X, Y and millennials take on leadership roles in the movement, organizing sensibilities have changed to reflect current conditions, using multiracial organizing, alliance building, and technology to build power through creating and leveraging relationships. Healing is an articulated component of a vision of just and healthy communities, and many groups centralize the role of shifting culture and core values as a central part of their work. In Native communities, young people are often at the leading edge of efforts to reclaim Native languages, traditional beliefs, and traditional customs. This work often includes generating new connections to community elders.



## APPENDIX

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### ORIGINS: Where does EJ/RJ work come from?

What are the origins of EJ/RJ work? How do the organizations and leaders advancing this work come to the EJ/RJ intersection? Three things define the origins of this intersection: the pathways into it, the social justice framework grounding it, and the leadership guiding it. This section highlights the different paths groups take into the work, the common social justice framework that groups share, and the influence of women of color's leadership on the evolution of the intersection.

#### 1. Pathways to the EJ/RJ Intersection

The groups and leaders interviewed for this report generally come to the EJ/RJ intersection through four different pathways: Environmental Health and Justice (EJ), Reproductive Health and Justice (RJ), Indigenous Sovereignty Movements, and Community-Based Organizing. From each of these entry points and pathways, the intersection looks slightly different at first. However, it soon becomes clear how they each help to contribute to the bigger picture and answer the others' questions. For example:

- **EJ Pathway:** Women working in EJ who are addressing how environmental health and justice issues are impacting women, their children, and families. They often identify with EJ, but may be outliers because they are centralizing women's experiences of EJ issues.
- **RJ Pathway:** Women working in RJ who are concerned with the environmental context/reasons for why women, children, and their families have reproductive health issues. They are looking at how workplace exposure and living in polluted communities adversely affects reproductive health and justice.
- **Indigenous Pathway:** Women in communities (mostly indigenous and rural) that are concerned about the holistic well-being and sovereignty in their communities. They are looking at the sacred value of the land as well as the negative impact of its exploitation. They are also looking at women as central players in the community's survival as the ones who bear and most often raise children and who maintain the culture.
- **Community-Based Organizing Pathway:** Women in both rural and urban communities who are concerned about developing the leadership and capacity of specific communities to address issues that impact them.

The following section provides some history and context regarding each pathway and its contributions to the intersection.

**The EJ Pathway.** While environmental justice emerged in a distinct form in the 1990s, it has roots that reach back to the civil rights movement and indigenous struggles. By 1990, local groups had been organizing against pollution in communities of color for several decades. In the early '90s the coining of

the term “environmental racism” and the convening of the first National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit were benchmarks of this growing social movement. Environmental justice revolutionized how we think about issues, particularly how we think about the environment. By defining the environment to include the places where people live, work, play, and worship, environmental justice broke down the separation of nature from people common to environmental conversation efforts. People and the developed world are now fundamentally part of the environment. EJ redefined the terms “environment,” “justice,” and “racism” in an era of dwindling legal and political avenues to claim collective rights. The “live, work, play, and worship” lens also sets the precedent for establishing an intersectional social justice framework; many other sectors still take inspiration from this model. EJ laid the groundwork for the long-term and careful cultivation of relationships that brought together the strengths of the environmental, civil rights, labor, and native sovereignty movements’ perspectives, tactics, and resources. Environmental justice has also fundamentally touched mainstream consciousness by setting the stage for the current toxics reform, whole food, and climate change movements.

A less-told story about environmental justice is the pivotal and longstanding leadership role that women and mothers played in the movement. Much of the kitchen table organizing at the roots of environmental justice was led by women and focused on core issues such as lead paint and asthma. Concerns about the environmental health and well-being of their communities, and the disparate health impacts of environmental toxins on communities of color, were at the heart of their organizing. Women were often the backbone of the early movement, organizing based on passion and concern for their communities rather than a theoretical framework. They often played this leadership role despite the challenges they faced from families, partners, and cultural norms. Many of the groups and individual leaders interviewed for this report grew out of this legacy of women’s leadership in the environmental health and justice movement.<sup>28</sup>

**The RJ Pathway.** Many of the groups interviewed for this report connected to the intersection through the path of reproductive justice. Reproductive justice may have emerged as an organized sector of the social justice movement recently, but its roots are deep. Before 1980, this path included a rich legacy of grassroots organizing by women of color dedicated to preserving the well-being of their communities. In the 1980s and 90s, an explosion of organizing by women of color helped to establish autonomous reproductive health organizations. These organizations focused on the particular issues and needs facing women of color and their communities, ranging from environmentally caused reproductive health issues to reestablishing indigenous traditions of midwifery. In 1994, “reproductive justice” was coined as a term by a group of African American organizers when they spontaneously organized a Black Women’s Caucus at a national pro-choice conference. Over the next ten years, organizing efforts like the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective helped to build momentum and synergy among women of color. This early movement building work generated a new vision and energy at the same time that the mainstream pro-choice movement was increasingly under attack and on the defensive.

In 2005, Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (ACRJ) released a groundbreaking report that helped to define reproductive justice as a movement and link it to broader social justice movements.

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28. For a related discussion of women’s leadership in environmental and transportation justice, see Women’s Foundation of California. 2008. *Ports of Opportunity: Gender and Movement Building at the Intersection of Environmental and Transportation Justice*.

*A New Vision for Advancing Our Movement for Reproductive Health, Reproductive Rights, and Reproductive Justice* provided a framework for understanding reproductive justice in relationship to reproductive rights and health and for seeing it as a fundamentally “intersectional” movement. By centralizing the question of how control of our bodies, gender, and sexuality impacts issues like our experience of family, economic opportunity, and health and safety, the sector fundamentally links the well-being of individuals to that of their communities and families. At the heart of this work, many organizers are asking how the environments in which women live, work, and play impact their own health and the health of their families and communities.

Over the last decade, the emerging reproductive justice sector has had a significant impact on broader social justice movements. The sector matured during a period of active reflection by the political left. The reproductive justice movement in particular was informed by a deep analysis of the mistakes of the women’s and pro-choice movements and how a once vibrant movement had, for the most part, been reduced to a single-issue focus on abortion.<sup>29</sup> Reproductive justice helped to broaden the vision for women’s liberation by reasserting gender and sexuality as core social justice issues that are fundamentally linked to immigration, racial justice, and class. Reproductive justice also helped to reassert the central role of women of color leadership within broader social justice movements.<sup>30</sup> Most fundamentally, reproductive justice helped to regenerate a vision for a proactive, integrated social justice movement. By developing new analytical tools and organizing methods that prioritize strategy, agility, and intersectional thinking, the sector is setting a new precedent for what 21st century movement building can and should be.

**The Indigenous Pathway.** All of the indigenous groups interviewed for this paper approached both reproductive justice and environmental justice issues from a broader holistic framework of Native sovereignty (the right to self-governance as independent peoples and nations) and cultural survival. The Native sovereignty movement is rooted in over 500 years of resistance to European colonization in the United States and throughout the Americas. From the time of first contact through expansion of US territories and relocation of Tribes and First Nations to the boarding school era, Native peoples have been fighting to preserve their way of life, the survival of their communities and environments, and their right to self rule.

Before the 1960s, much of this organizing happened in specific tribal communities. In the late 1960s, inspired by other civil rights and power movements, the American Indian Movement (AIM) helped to define a new era of indigenous organizing in the United States. Using a combination of direct action, media strategy, and community organizing AIM helped to create a truly inter-tribal movement that linked urban and rural Native communities. AIM used a variety of strategies, including highly publicized occupations (such as that of Alcatraz Island in 1969-71), freedom schools, marches (including

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29. The primarily white middle-class leadership of the pro-choice movement was not equipped to reflect the diverse interests of women of color and low-income women. At the same time, a rising conservative movement had successfully launched a series of “culture wars”, which mobilized backlash against women in general and abortion in particular, making it a core wedge issue in national elections. As a result, the broader women’s movement became more and more isolated, defensive, and focused on a single issue. Through the lens of reproductive justice, a new focus on the leadership and needs of women of color and low-income communities would help revitalize the broader movement for women’s liberation.

30. Despite these contributions, RJ efforts by women of color continue to be vastly under funded compared to mainstream reproductive health and rights efforts (see *Climate of Opportunity*, Women’s Foundation of California). Women of color funder networks have been pivotal to highlighting the importance of RJ work and the need to fund it.

the Trail of Broken Treaties) and the establishment of AIM services (including a legal rights center and a patrol to address police brutality) to catalyze this new movement. Initially AIM was primarily made up of young people based in urban centers. In 1973, a pivotal standoff at Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge reservation helped link these youth organizers to elders and spiritual leaders; AIM had been called to Pine Ridge to protect traditionalists in the community from the federally backed tribal government and the FBI. This standoff helped to center spiritual practice and the preservation of traditional ways of life in the movement.

In 1977 a gathering of Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) scholar-activists met to ask what sovereignty is and how to work with Indian nations to use the idea to more effectively push for rights and social change. This meeting was pivotal in defining sovereignty and helping to create a common agenda. They identified five key areas of sovereignty: control of your land base, control of jurisdiction within that land base, control of education, control of psycho-religious life, and control of production and reproduction – not just of bodies but of knowledge and culture. More recent organizing has also emphasized environmental/ecosystem stewardship, economic sovereignty, and the control of natural resources.

Over the last two decades, Native organizing, particularly projects led by young people and women, has further centralized protecting and regenerating indigenous ways of life. Given that indigenous communities are land-based cultures and have earth-based spiritual traditions, a holistic worldview and vision grounds this work. While Native organizers still use a range of strategies (including legal, direct action, media, community development, and advocacy) to protect their communities from harm and address injustice, this focus places greater emphasis on strategies for cultural renewal, environmental sustainability, and economic and political independence.

**The Community-Based Organizing Pathway.** Other organizations identify primarily with their communities rather than a particular issue. These organizations ground themselves in the tradition of community-based organizing that focuses on the empowerment and well-being of the community as a whole. Many traditions – including popular education, kitchen table organizing, and freedom schools – fit into this pathway. In these organizations EJ/RJ issues arise because they affect the community as a whole. Often, these issues are also linked to economics, political participation, education, health, community development and other issues. Both urban and rural organizations identify as community-based; many of the indigenous organizations could also be included in this pathway.

## **2. Shared Social Justice Framework at the EJ/RJ Intersection**

All of the organizations interviewed demonstrated a deeply held commitment to social justice,<sup>31</sup> longstanding histories in different justice movements and traditions, and a core movement building orientation. While the groups we interviewed came to the work with very different worldviews, through talking with them we were able to surface a common framework and set of values that underlines their

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31. Ultimately it was the indigenous groups, Tewa Women United (TWU) in particular, that helped us surface a shared social justice framework that made sense across all of these contexts. Their experience of traversing many different worlds – from local indigenous communities to national Reproductive Justice circles to negotiations with the military and partnerships with midwives and researchers – led them to create a model to explain how they maintained their own center and continuity in the midst of such complexity. When we shared this framework with urban and rural groups in California, they expressed that the framework was something that felt like second nature to them but at the same time had been so difficult to articulate to others.

work. The three common components were a deep sense of interdependence, human rights, and a sustainable and holistic vision for the world.

**Interdependence.** Most fundamentally, a social justice framework links the well-being and rights of individuals to their families, communities/cultures, environments, and ecosystems. It centralizes the experience and leadership of the most vulnerable communities as a way to ensure the well-being of all people. From a social justice perspective, all these layers are inseparable from and interdependent with each other – an individual’s well-being cannot be separated from the well-being of her family, community, or ecosystem. This framework is fundamentally different than our mainstream culture that values individualism, compartmentalization, privatization, and specialization.

Different sectors of the social justice movement may have different starting points in this universe, but they ultimately take into account the whole picture in their analysis. For example, reproductive justice starts with concerns about the control of individual bodies, gender, and sexuality but links it to the well-being of families, communities, and the environment. Environmental justice starts with concerns about the environment, but it fundamentally links it to people, families, and communities.

**Human Rights.** Most of the organizations in this report integrate a universal human rights framework into their understanding of social justice. For decades, the human rights framework has provided the international community an elegant and comprehensive vehicle to advance the fundamental rights of an individual, family, community, and arguably even an ecosystem.

In practice, groups have used this framework to develop strategies that go beyond resistance to injustice to those that actively affirm and promote life and justice. At a recent state policy agenda meeting organized by California Latinas for Reproductive Justice, organizers spoke about how Article 16 in particular (which speaks to the right of all people to build a family and that families have protection of the state) resonates with the communities they worked in; organizers also said the framework helped them build cross-sector relationships and alliances with a wide range of players to achieve their vision.

There are some challenges related to using a human rights framework in the United States. Some organizers caution that the framework has no teeth in the U.S.; the Bush Administration in particular was openly hostile to international frameworks and accountability. Others feel that the human rights frame is too often interpreted as protecting individual, rather than collective, rights in the U.S. Nevertheless, most organizers agree that the framework is a powerful and comprehensive articulation of fundamental rights that transcends borders, and most wanted to find a way to leverage it in their work. This is especially true for groups based in immigrant communities.

**Holistic and Sustainable World.** The third component of the groups’ shared social justice framework was their commitment to a holistic approach. This commitment informed their vision, values, and organizing leading to proactive and broadly inclusive strategies and solutions that seek to address everyone’s social, cultural, economic, and political needs in an integrated way. As mentioned above, the indigenous organizations had the most sophisticated expression of this commitment. These organizers grounded their work in the survival of their culture, their people, and the ecosystems around them and connected this work to the survival of the broader world community. However, this commitment could be seen in all of the other groups we interviewed, too. For example, Teresa DeAnda from



Californians for Pesticide Reform expressed her big picture vision of sustainable and chemical-free agriculture as a way to ensure that no community would ever be poisoned by pesticides in the future.

### 3. Women of Color and Mothers' Leadership

The evolution of the EJ/RJ intersection is strongly influenced by and indebted to the leadership of women of color and mothers. Interviewees discussed how the life experiences, community and family roles, and social capacity of women of color has shaped both the analysis and approach of the intersection. For example, the heart of the work is an understanding of intersectionality and how multiple issues work together to shape our lives. This analysis is deeply influenced and illuminated by the life experiences of women of color and mothers.

*Without an intersectional lens, you can't see how intersections of oppression play out. It helps us in our organizing; we can address issues in more holistic ways and capture the truth of folks coming from diverse places and experiences. Intersectionality allows us to be more powerful.*  
— Eveline Shen, ACRJ

The leaders of this work are often moved to action because they have direct experience with critical issues that others often cannot or do not see. This includes pervasive issues such as the long-term impact of chemicals on pregnant women, children, families, and communities or cumulative workplace exposure to toxins. Others spoke to the role that women and mothers traditionally play in communities as guardians, caregivers, teachers, culture-keepers, doctors, relationship and network builders, and community hubs. EJ/RJ organizers are using this role strategically – to organize but also to establish a moral ground and authority as spokespeople. These roles and social capacity also shape how the work began and is evolving – with a heavy emphasis on relationships, alliance building, and using the strengths of different allies and players for a common goal.

Many organizers believe women's leadership is ultimately helping to foster a movement that is focused on creating caring, generative communities. From this perspective, organizers are expanding their focus beyond the central role of mothering to include guardians, caregivers, and community stewards. This approach focuses on the core values of creativity, nurturing, stewardship, and guardianship and holds the potential to create a really broad movement that engages people at all points in the life cycle.

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Movement Strategy Center strengthens the movement for social and racial justice by increasing the capacity of individuals, organizations, alliances, and sectors to be more strategic, collaborative, and sustainable.

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