



Confronting Attempts to Control and Divide Us: Women of Color Surmount Obstacles on Race, Abortion and Sex Selection

Sex selection is a controversial practice that raises important questions about sex and gender discrimination and stereotypes, reproductive autonomy, and the ethics of choosing children with specific characteristics. It is the practice of utilizing medical techniques to have an offspring of a preferred sex. In the United States, many reproductive rights and women's organizations are deeply troubled by the stereotypes and discrimination that underlie sex selection, but have hesitated to take a public position opposing sex selection because of concerns about reproductive autonomy and access to abortion. By using an explicitly reproductive justice analysis and strategy, Generations Ahead has successfully worked to fight against anti-choice legislation on sex selection and encourage reproductive rights and justice organizations to take a clear position of opposing sex selection.

In September 2008, Generations Ahead and several South Asian organizations received a surprising call from the office of Representative Trent Franks (R-AZ). Franks was about to introduce a new bill called the Susan B. Anthony Prenatal Nondiscrimination Act of 2008. The bill would prohibit abortion for "sex selection" and "race selection" in order to eliminate "discrimination against the unborn". Would Generations Ahead support the bill because of the organization's past involvement in sex selection discussions?

Recognizing the bill as anti-choice legislation that would erode abortion rights for women of color, Generations Ahead worked with Sister Song and National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum (NAPAWF) to mobilize a diverse array of groups to take action. The three organizations coordinated a conference call, a letter to Congress signed by multiple organizations, and a strategy session to counter Franks' bill. The results went far beyond the bill itself: The call, letter and strategy session seeded an unprecedented coalition of reproductive rights, reproductive justice, anti-violence, LGBTQ and women's health groups on an extremely complex issue.

In April 2009, Generations Ahead, NAPAWF, SisterSong and the Center for Reproductive Rights organized a daylong values clarification workshop on sex selection. For the 25 reproductive health, rights and justice groups that participated, this was an opportunity to work together to develop an intersectional, human rights analysis of sex selection and identify shared values from which to develop policy positions. Participants clarified that they were concerned about both limiting abortion rights and supporting gender equality and diversity. The values they all shared included: strong pro-choice position, promoting/respecting human rights, centering the voices of those most affected, and intersectionality. They distinguished between four different aspects of sex selection: 1) Sex selection in Asian immigrant communities; 2) Sex selective abortion as a clever (anti abortion and anti-immigrant) strategy



on the part of the Right; 3) Sex selection as a commercialization of reproductive technologies; and 4) Sex selection as a form of genetic determinism. By developing a more nuanced analysis of sex selection, participants began to feel more comfortable advocating within their own organizations for an organizational position on sex selection that would both protect abortion rights and opposing gender discrimination.

Based on the feedback from this workshop, Generations Ahead approached both NAPAWF and Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (ACRJ) to collaboratively design a toolkit for reproductive health, rights and justice organizations to use internally to develop pro-active organizational positions on sex selection. This toolkit includes a 5-page report on sex selection in the United States, interactive exercises for groups to use to explore values and positions on sex selection, an analysis of current and pending sex selection legislation at the state and federal level, and recommended policy principles for taking a position. The toolkit is current at the graphic designers and will be disseminated to more than 50 allies in January 2010.

The Franks bill was a useful wakeup call for the reproductive rights and justice movement. Generations Ahead had been pushing for conversations about sex selection for four years, but reproductive rights groups were hesitant to address an issue that would in any way implicate abortion rights. However, reproductive justice groups like Generations Ahead and NAPAWF were able to chart a path through polarized abortion politics using an intersectional analysis and human rights analysis to demonstrate how reproductive health and rights groups could both protect abortion rights and oppose sex selection.

Generations Ahead won significant victories on this issue – through our work more than 25 reproductive health, rights and justice organization came to understand sex selection as an important reproductive justice issue, they improved their ability to respond effectively and collaboratively on the issue of sex selection through collaborative, cross-movement and intersectional work, and many organizations are using a reproductive justice perspective in their policy advocacy on this issue. In particular, the Center for Reproductive Rights, one of the largest reproductive rights organizations, took an organizational position opposing gender discrimination, sex selection, and sex selective abortion bans, a first for the reproductive rights movement in the US.

