

## **Coming Together Across Movements A Generations Ahead Success Story**

In September 2008, Generations Ahead and Manavi, a South Asian domestic violence organization 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?

Generations Ahead sprung into action. Recognizing the bill as anti-choice legislation that would erode abortion rights for women of color, Generations Ahead along with Sister Song and National Asian Pacific American Women’s Forum (NAPAWF) mobilized 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, while the strategy session itself resulted in three active working groups. These working groups are now the foundation for countering future threats to reproductive rights and justice, and for developing racial and gender justice approaches to emerging genetic and reproductive technologies.

### **The Immediate Threat: Trent Franks’ Wedge**

Sex selection technologies have become increasingly available around the world, and the possibility of choosing an increasing number of genetic characteristics hovers on the horizon in the U.S. In this context, Trent Franks may have seen an opportunity to piggyback off progressive advocates’ concerns over responsible uses of these technologies.

Claiming that a higher rate of abortion among African American women amounts to “race selection” or racial discrimination, and that “certain segments within the United States” are engaging in sex-selective abortions, Franks introduced his bill in a purported attempt to protect against discrimination. He even likened his legislation to the laws that gave women the right to vote and that freed African-Americans from slavery.

Generations Ahead, Sister Song and NAPAWF saw through Franks’ co-optation of civil and human rights language and recognized his bill for what it was: the latest conservative attempt to divide communities in order to erode abortion rights.

### **Overcoming the Wedge**

The three organizations quickly organized a series of actions that brought together groups with a clear stake in this issue. These groups were a mix of DC and NY-based organizations focused primarily on reproductive rights advocacy, and community-based and policy groups focused on a variety of movement-building issues including reproductive justice, LGBTQ rights, and domestic violence work.

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Because of their differences in method, scope and issue focus these groups had rarely if ever worked together in the past. But Generations Ahead led the drive to unite these groups under the common short-term goal of exposing the underlying sexism and racism of Franks' legislation.

Generations Ahead, Sister Song and NAPAWF coordinated a conference call to generate coordinated messaging and determine next steps. Seventeen organizations participated in the call, which led to a joint letter to Congress signed by 35 reproductive health, reproductive justice, LGBTQ and anti-violence organizations from across the country. Multiple perspectives led to effective social justice framing around gender and racial equality rather than addressing it as a traditional privacy/choice issue.

The letter stated, in part:

“Instead of addressing health disparities and ensuring accessible and culturally competent medical care for all women, the Prenatal Nondiscrimination Act will further isolate and stigmatize some women—particularly those in the Asian American and Pacific Islander and African American communities—from exercising their fundamental human right to make and implement decisions about their reproductive lives.”

In December the three organizations coordinated a strategy session that resulted in three working groups – Franks Bill, Reproductive and Genetic Technologies, and Reproductive Justice. The strategy session was a significant moment in the Generations Ahead-led effort to overcome the Franks bill wedge: rather than give in to complex differences among organizations, the strategy session successfully brought together a diversity of participants, centered the leadership of women of color, allowed for a breadth of conversation, and generated new momentum for organizing across social justice sectors.

### **Building Toward a Vision of Justice**

The Franks bill is unlikely to go far in a Democratic controlled Congress, and if it makes any progress whatsoever there is now a ready coalition poised to stop it.

Beyond this, the Franks bill turned out to be a useful wakeup call. Generations Ahead had been pushing for conversations about sex selection for four years. So when an immediate threat arose, other groups looked at Generations Ahead as a knowledgeable and trusted source on the issue. Through Generations Ahead's leadership and that of other women of color-led organizations, a coalition was forged to not just react, but to envision the tools, partnerships, framing and strategy needed to bridge across issue, region and constituency – to ensure that genetic and reproductive technologies serve the interests of all.

“As long as social justice movements are ambivalent about what to think about genetics and selection technologies, we are vulnerable to the Right and their wedge issues,” says Sujatha Jesudason, Executive Director of Generations Ahead, “But now we can collaborate across sectors through these working groups. Where we were previously vulnerable, we have become stronger.”