



“While we’re fighting each other in our own Oppression Olympics, the neofascists and neoliberals are kicking our asses. They’re killing us. And only a united movement for all of our human rights will save us.” — Loretta Ross of Sistersong

Plenary speech by Loretta Ross, national coordinator, SisterSong Reproductive Health Collective, at the Task Force Creating Change Conference, Nov. 12, 2006

I come representing a lot of organizations, a lot of community work that I’m doing, mainly because I don’t know how to say no to some things I probably should say no to. But I am representing SisterSong, our national women of color reproductive health collective that was founded 10 years ago. SisterSong is a collection, a coalition of over 90 women of color and allied organizations that work on reproductive justice issues in the U.S.

And when I talk about reproductive health issues, I want to be clear, this is not just a substitute word for pro-choice. Pro-choice is a very good word, it is an excellent word, for people who actually have choices.

It’s just that we recognize, as women of color, that we don’t have those kinds of choices. What reproductive justice is, is a paradigm shift. It’s a look at the fact that reproductive rights must be embedded in a human rights and social justice framework for it to have any meaning in our lives. Let’s be clear.

But because we’re subjected to population control strategies, and, like our queer community, strategies to control our entire communities, we have to fight for the right to have a child too.

And, speaking of causes in common, we have to fight for the right to parent the children that we have. So when you talk about reproductive struggle, realize it’s a three-way struggle: It’s not just about the right to abortion and contraception. It’s about the right to live a life based in human rights, a right to live life the way we choose, but also, and this makes us a little different from the sexual rights or sexual freedom expression, not only the life we choose, but to have the social supports necessary to live that life we choose, cause having choices without enabling conditions to exercise those choices doesn’t make sense.

Let me see if I can make this plain. It is my private decision to take a plane from here to Atlanta tomorrow. The government cannot tell me what plane to catch, or even whether to fly. But I do think the government has a responsibility to make sure that plane is safe, so the sucker don’t fall out of the sky. It has a responsibility to make sure that airline ticket is affordable, so that you don’t have to be Bill Gates to catch it, and it has a responsibility to make sure that airline is accessible, so that I don’t have to drive eight hours to catch it. So safe, affordable, accessible are the obligations of our government to our private decisions. We need to be clear on that.

So, SisterSong is having a wonderful conference next year I want to invite you all to. You have a card in your packets for Creating Change. We are having a conference because we are very very dissatisfied that both the right and the left have somehow moved conversations about sex off of the radar screen. Now, I mean, the right's never been right, so I'm clear about that. But there's hardly any left left, you know?

We are having a conference called "Let's Talk About Sex, Baby" and this ain't gonna be one of those clinical conferences like that sex education class you *might* have gotten by that teacher who was too embarrassed to say the word "penis." The conference is going to be May 31 to June 3 in Chicago, Illinois. It's called "Let's Talk About Sex," it is offered by SisterSong, but it is open to all. By the way, SisterSong is open to all. We are a coalition founded by women of color, serving women of color but we are not only women of color, because that would be a little racist to just segregate us that way, cause it ain't true. But we're having a conference so that we can talk about the human right to sexual pleasure, so that we can talk about what does this whole concept of sexual rights mean, you know.

The whole concept of sexual rights, what does it mean? It's a phrase that has had a lot of conversation overseas, but I don't know if we've had a structured conversation in the United States about what it means. I haven't been part of those conversations. Maybe they had them and didn't invite me, which is also possible, cause you know I cuss people out, but I don't think the conversation has happened here yet. Our workshops are going to be organized in tracks reflecting the movie rating system, so it's gonna be P, PG, R, X, XXX, okay, so don't come if you're not prepared to actually hear some frank conversations about sex. We will be organizing our workshops that way but we will not be carding at the doors, okay. But participants at our conference will be as young as 14 years old and on up, talking about the human right to sexual pleasure and we want y'all to join us.

I'm also representing the Committee on Women and Population in the Environment. Our representative, Cara Paige, was here along with Causes in Common and the Center for Genetics in Society, We sponsored a workshop last May in New York on designer genes and genetic technologies and how queer bodies are being deselected in reproductive technologies, so I want to invite you to visit our Web site at cwpe.org to find out more about how we need to create a movement that engages our whole queer community to understand how the regulation and lack of ethics in this reproductive technology movement are actually putting our futures at risk, putting our lives at risk. We need to understand that we've also got to void this biological determinism that really is the basis of the nuclear family. Every human being has the right to parent, but who says it's got to be your genes? Where did that come from? How, in our attempt to deconstruct patriarchy, we end up recreating it and calling it our rights is the real question.

And of course I come here representing the Mapping Our Rights collaboration, between IPAS, SisterSong and the Task Force, where we have created a wonderful project. You can go to our Web site called mappingourrights.org, click on your state and find out how safe is your state in terms of looking intersectionally at all the laws that might affect you, your bodies and your rights. This is a wonderful project because before if you wanted to find out what's the civil rights laws, what's the queer rights laws, what's the reproductive rights laws, you had to go to all different sites to figure it out. But people don't live lives in that differentiated, flattened out, kinda way. We live intersectional lives, so we felt the need to create a one-stop resource for you, so I invite you to stop there.

I've seen a lot of social change throughout the years. I've worked in the anti-rape movement, had the privilege of being the director, the third director of the first rape crisis center in this country. And I've had the privilege of watching the movement to end violence against women grow to become the most successful social justice movement in the world. I mean, I don't think anybody could argue that there's not a place in the world where people are now recognizing that violence against women is wrong, and they're working to stop it. For those of you who may not recall how short a time ago that was, the first rape crisis center was only founded in 1972. Nineteen seventy-two!

So in a very short period of time, we've changed the whole fuckin' world, you know? And I use that experience to say: Now we gotta do it again, but bigger. One of the observations I made from my 30-something years in the movement, I see how we operate as the divided and the conquered. There was a time when we had to be forcibly separated. Now we self-separate and we call this progress. We exist as separate and parallel social justice movements, often indulging in the excess of our identity politics, criticizing to a fault anyone who doesn't look like us, act like us, talk like us and belong to us. And I'm not saying not having your identity clear is not important. I certainly want you to know who you are before you sit down at the table with me because it ain't my job to figure that out for you. That's not what I'm talking about. But I'm saying that when people think many different ideas and move in the same direction, that's a movement. When people think the same idea and move in the same direction, that's a cult. So are we building movement or are we building cults? How much energy are we spending making sure everybody thinks exactly like us, rather than thinking for ourselves and figuring out how to work with people who don't think like us?

That's the real question, and all this BS has to stop right now. Because while we're fighting each other in our own Oppression Olympics, the neo-fascists and the neo-liberals are kicking our asses, they're killing us, and only a united movement for all of our human rights will save us. Now what do I mean by a united human rights movement? I would not be surprised if I'm asked this classic question. Because all of us have heard the phrase "human rights," right? I bet you if I asked, how many of you, by show of hands, can name the eight categories of human rights protections to which we are all entitled? Look around the room, y'all. Kinda like freedom, we all got our own definition of it.

By human right, there is a reason we don't know what our human rights are, a very specific reason. Those of you who like to read, I recommend a wonderful book called *Eyes off the Prize* by Carol Anderson where she talked about how in the 1950s the leading civil rights organizations intentionally abandoned the human rights framework in favor of the civil rights framework because they were afraid of being called communist. So we have modeled ourselves on a movement that failed to embrace the human rights framework.

That's a critical problem, people. So let me talk about these eight categories real quick before I run out of time. The first category is civil rights, the right to be treated as an equal to anybody in society, nondiscrimination rights are part of civil rights. Obviously we are part of a civil rights movement. Why? 'Cause we don't have full equality yet, that's simple. But it's possible to achieve equality and still be denied justice. 'cause all America has to do is treat you equally badly!

And then you had fought and died to be treated as badly as they treat anybody else. Does the marriage struggle come to mind?... The second category is called political human rights: our freedom of speech, our right to vote, our right to assembly. We have recently discovered our right to vote does not include the right to have our votes counted, but they exist nominally.

The third category is called economic human rights, and that's the right to have an economy managed in such a way that it meets the needs of the people. Queers for Economic Justice understand this very clearly. How can I fight for queer rights when I'm poor? You know? Freedom to marry doesn't mean shit if you ain't got no food to eat! You know? Unless you believe like the Heritage Foundation that marriage is gonna lift you out of poverty, yeah. That's a whole 'nother question. I told you, I don't often get invited back, (Laughs) 'cause I can step on some toes.

The fourth category is called social human rights. These are the rights that are based out of our human needs. Our right to food, our right to education, our right to health care, our right to social services. These are our human rights, not the charity of the government. It is the government's obligation to provide these things. Therein lies why our government has never wanted us to know these are our human rights. Cause as long as they can treat us like we are the undeserving people claiming things that are not ours, they can actually defang our struggle a little bit, can't they?

The fifth category is called cultural human rights. The right to practice the culture of our choice; the right to speak the language of our choice. The entire English-only movement is a violation of the right to cultural human rights.

The sixth category is called environmental human rights. Some bright soul finally figured out that if we didn't have clean air and portable water, than the rest of our human rights might be a little short-lived. But the right to have food that has not been genetically modified without our permission, that's a human right.

But the seventh category, that's a little bit harder to describe because it's called developmental rights. This is the rights that people in developing countries have demanded to control their own natural resources. What a novel thought that is. Some of us would argue that the war against Iraq is in violation of their developmental human rights because we've never been able to explain how our oil got under their sand....

And the eighth category, that's the one that gets my panties in a wad, that one's sexual human rights. The right to determine one's sexuality, the right to determine if and when you will marry, if and when you will have children, if and when you will have sexual pleasure. Those are the rights that we kinda like to talk about.

But I also want to emphasize that you can't fight for one set of human rights by violating another set of human rights. It doesn't work like that. So it's gonna have to work so that we do our work in a way that respects everyone's human rights. We cannot work against homophobia in a racist way, we cannot do work against racism in a homophobic way, it just don't work that way. The extent to which you allow other people's human rights to be violated, yours will be diminished too. It all works together.

To honestly say once I understood that, it kind of pissed me off. Because I got up every morning, really energized by hating a lot of people. Hating a lot of people, hating the Ku

Klux Klan, hating anybody that you know talked about how they wanted to be a white fundamentalist Christian whatever. I even hated colored people. You know my mother used to say he might be our color but he's not our kind. So I used to get up angry at rapists, angry at everybody. And once I understood the human rights framework, I was like, damn, these folks I'm fightin' got the right to the same human rights I'm fighting for! So I cannot do my human rights work in a way that's gonna violate their human rights. Now, doesn't that make things a little bit more complicated. So we gotta figure out how to be together in a different way.

Secondly we got to understand that multi-issue work, cross-racial work, transgender work, multi-generational work aren't options; they are vital. 'cause we cannot build a human rights movement by leaving somebody out. It ain't gonna work that way. And we cant' sell each other out. Now I know I am about to really get in trouble right now, especially with the policy people who work in D.C. You know, with the election of so many conservative Democrats, I'm scared about the support for queer rights and women's rights, which is now being portrayed by the media as out of trend with the mainstream, too extreme for America. I'm really suspicious of these new centrist politics because I'm a child of the South. I remember when the Democrats made common cause with the segregationists to keep power. They were called Dixiecrats. Now are the Democrats going to make common cause with the people opposed to abortion and women's rights and the homophobes in order to keep power? That would piss me off.

I mean, it's not that I'm blind to the difference between the neofascists and the neoliberals. The neoliberals, while they want to oppress us, they still want us around. The neofascists are about extermination. I do understand the difference between the two but at the same time neoliberalism is not my reason to celebrate, let us be clear. So I'm glad that the Democrats won the House and the Senate. I do not expect a whole lot out of them just because they did. I just expect them to listen to this lesson for just a minute because based on past that's just about all I can expect. We've never had an election where we can vote for candidates that promise how many of our human rights their going to uphold rather than how many of our human rights they're going to violate. We've never had that in our system. How many kids are you gonna send to college instead of jail. We've never had that kind of candidate to choose from. So, in the words of Thomas Jefferson, a slaveholder with no sense of irony,... he said we have to be eternally vigilant. I can get with that.

So our job is to do what Gandhi, Malcolm X, Audre Lorde wanted us to do, which is build a movement for human rights in this country. It's never been done. We've had the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the queer rights movement, but if you want to put your mark on history and do what hasn't been done before: let's build a human rights movement for America, because that's what we need.

And finally I wanna... thank you, thank you...

I just wanna say finally we have many many causes that we have to fight for. So, I'm not saying that by building this movement that we have to lose sight of any of these struggles each one of us has. It's not about that melting pot that you melt into that ball of wax and nobody knows what you're talking about. It ain't about that. But, even though we have many causes we do have one struggle and we have to learn the process of being brave together not being brave going at each other. I've always been a little critical of people who want to do community organizing yet are afraid to talk to their own

families about their points of view. I'm like, if you can't be brave with your family, and I don't say that idly, I had a baby out of incest, my son's now 40 years old, I got issues with my family too. Try raising a child born out of incest and talk about issues with your family. But I've learned that if I couldn't talk to my family I would never have the skills to talk to strangers not in the way that needed to be done.

I often wonder why the human rights movement that preceded us finds it so much more comfortable to talk about tortured prisoners in a jail overseas, while stepping over a homeless man to mail the letter. 'cause somehow it's a lot easier to do social justice work if you don't do it too close to home and actually change how you do it in a community. Well, we've got to be brave together and create change together and I'm really glad that we were gifted this human rights framework by many people who have come before us, because I believe we can create change by building a new movement and calling it the human rights movement of America. Thank you.