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“There’s No Such Thing as a Single-Issue Struggle”

A Conversation with Kitana Ananda, Naa Amissah-Hammond, and Quanita Toffie

In this conversation, Kitana Ananda, racial justice editor at NPQ, Naa Amissah-Hammond, senior director of Grantmaking at Groundswell, and Quanita Toffie, senior director of the Groundswell Action Fund, discuss the history and current state of the reproductive justice movement in the United States.

Kitana Ananda: I’d like to start with talking about Groundswell Fund’s work in the context of the broader reproductive justice movement. At Groundswell, you fund reproductive justice organizing led by people of color. For folks who are newer to this movement and language, can you speak a little about what reproductive justice is, why it’s important, and what makes reproductive justice organizing different from other kinds of organizing around abortion rights and access or being “pro-choice”?

Naa Amissah-Hammond: Groundswell’s focus is on reproductive justice organizing, as you mentioned, and on intersectional organizing by women of color and trans people of color.

And we use our grantee partner SisterSong's definition of reproductive justice—one of the founding organizations of the RJ [reproductive justice] movement—who define RJ as a human right. So, it's grounded in the human rights framework—the right to bodily autonomy, to have a child, to not have a child, and to parent the children that you have in safe and sustainable communities that are free from state violence and also from injustice.

So what does that mean for us? We talk about reproductive justice as deeply intersectional. So, our grantees are Alaskan Native women organizing against toxics in the Arctic and the impacts that they might have on our health and also our environment. They are trans women of color organizing in New York for housing justice, and who look to abolition and also, in the meantime, reforms to policing and prisons to support trans communities. They are Latinx women organizing on the border, and in the Rio Grande Valley in Texas, for abortion access and immigrant justice. And we tie those issues into the conversation around reproductive justice. And I think the way that we talk about this work being different, and our grantees talk about it being different, is that it isn't a narrow focus. The pro-choice framework is a white feminist framework that singularly focused on the key issue that was really important to white women in particular in the '70s and '80s: abortion rights. And this is super important for our communities, right? It's an issue that all of our grantees work on. But it is not the only issue our grantees work on.

We often raise up Audre Lorde's words, "There's no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives."¹ Our grantees are telling us over and over that we can't have this conversation about abortion in Black communities if we're not also talking about maternal health. We have to be talking about the full spectrum of reproductive healthcare. And we also need to be organizing in that way, because that's what brings the most people along in our fight. So, I think that's how we see our grantees' work as being different than just a narrow focus, such as the pro-choice framework, that very often will only be focused on a legal strategy or sometimes advocacy strategy, and doesn't look at all the many different strategies that groups are using to change hearts and minds and win reproductive freedom for the long run.

Quanita Toffie: To underscore what Naa already shared around reproductive justice being not just about choice, it's also about access—so, being able to afford to have an

abortion, afford the cost associated with traveling hundreds of miles to the nearest clinic, and so on—there is no choice when there is no access for our communities. The reproductive justice movement is rooted in racial justice. It is centered and rooted in the racial justice framework. And that is really critical, given the history of racism, classism, and sexism within the white feminist movement space—as is acknowledging that there were also women of color and trans and gender-expansive people of color affected by other things, like the history of forced sterilization, and acknowledging that the fight for reproductive justice is on a much broader scale and spectrum than just that choice framework.

KA: Particularly after the *Dobbs* decision, there has been renewed media attention on abortion rights, and there has been some discussion of reproductive justice more broadly. But I think there are still folks who are not familiar with the movement and the distinction between the two frameworks. What have you observed about how people are engaging with the movement after the *Dobbs* decision? Are you seeing new people coming into the movement? Are you seeing different kinds of coverage of the movement and how that's impacting the organizing that your grantees are doing?

NAH: I would say, yes, there's increased attention to reproductive justice just even in the mainstream conversation. We've had presidential candidates talk about reproductive justice for the first time, in the last few years; we've had larger organizations finally talk about reproductive justice, not just reproductive rights or health. And I think that we need to give credit where credit is due: This is happening because of the organizing that many of our grantees—who are grassroots people-of-color-led organizations—have done for a long time, saying, We cannot have this conversation about rights and health separate from a conversation about justice. You can have all the laws on the books, but if you don't have a base of people to protect them, if you don't actually address the root causes of why injustice is occurring, then it doesn't matter—those laws will be overturned eventually. Our grantees have often been the leading voice over the last twenty-plus years in terms of talking about how we need to have a conversation about reproductive justice that's rooted in a conversation about racial justice and economic justice and trans justice and immigrant justice—and I could go on and on—that is rooted in seeing the connections among these issues.

Our grantees name that they've seen many more people wanting to get involved, to volunteer, to donate. But I think

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that oftentimes some of the larger national organizations with more access or communications departments and fundraising are the ones that get a lot of the attention—whereas the groups on the ground at the state and local level that are BIPOC-led and grassroots don’t often have the ability to get that access and shine, even though they have been the ones for years organizing in those communities and fighting to defend reproductive justice when nobody was talking about reproductive justice.

QT: An additional layer is that even beyond this immediate moment, in the last five or six years there’s been an exacerbation of attacks on our basic civil and human rights across the board—and with that, a politicization of many more individuals who weren’t necessarily involved in movement work or social justice organizing. We’ve seen these moments come up way more frequently over the last six years—around the Women’s March [2017], the Black liberation uprisings in 2020, the election in 2020—and there are newly politicized folks who are waking up to a reality that our grantee organizations have been awake to and on the frontlines about and organizing around for a long time. So there is definitely an interest in the work now that we haven’t seen in the past—but I want to underscore what Naa shared, which is that this work has been steady and consistent. The leadership and organizing of our grantee partners for the last couple of decades have paved that way for new folks to be welcomed into and introduced to and educated around what needs to happen. We put out a call to philanthropy earlier this year around investing in the infrastructure that already exists, to that end. And a lot of our role here at Groundswell is about ensuring that those new folks with interest and fervor around RJ know where to put their time, money, and energy. And to make the connection, too, with this election cycle—with the politicization of all of our rights to such a degree. There is also more interest and understanding that wasn’t there even four years ago around the connection between abortion access and voting rights at this moment.

KA: With the *Dobbs* decision and the end of *Roe* as precedent, we know that people have feared that there will be even greater criminalization of pregnant people, especially folks of color, for seeking access to comprehensive reproductive healthcare, including abortion. I’m wondering, as this year draws to a close, what you have observed about access to abortion and the state of reproductive healthcare in the United States in 2022.

NAH: At Groundswell, we have the privilege of supporting almost two hundred organizations a year, and over one hundred of those are focused on reproductive justice specifically, in forty-nine states—all except for West Virginia at this point; but we also support groups on the ground in DC, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands. This year has been a pretty devastating year for the RJ movement, even though I think RJ movement leaders have been warning for years that this day was coming—that *Roe* was never going to be protective enough, and that actually *Roe* is the floor and hasn’t protected many in our communities. Thinking about undocumented folks, thinking also about folks who couldn’t afford abortions in the beginning—so many of our communities have already been living in a post-*Roe* reality. But the Supreme Court decision—and how, very rapidly, other states followed suit by passing abortion bans—still stung for many of our organizations. We saw Texas last year being the front-runner there.

At the same time, we’re also seeing attacks on gender-affirming care, on trans youth and trans communities—and on voting rights, as well. And at Groundswell, we see all of these issues as deeply interconnected, as a way to mobilize opposition against the growing power of Black and Brown communities. We want to make that connection really clear to people, that these are not just separate attacks—they’re coordinated attacks, and they’re part of a fifty-year strategy that opponents of reproductive freedom have been pursuing.

So, I think in the immediate term, there has been a lot of shock and grief that people are experiencing at the same time that many of our grantee partners have had to spring into yet more action. They were already some of the frontline organizations that communities depend on to receive access and to fight for their rights. And now our grantees are being flooded with phone calls from communities who are terrified and confused and worried about what this means for their life if they’re seeking an abortion or if their child needs gender-affirming care in states that are now

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criminalizing care. Many of our grantees have had to step into supporting much more triaging and service provision, I would say, dealing with communities that are facing a lot of fear and panic—particularly communities with the least access already: undocumented communities, young people, Black and Brown people generally.

But I think what has been so inspiring is that our grantees have often been leaders in saying, “Okay, here are the solutions that we’re going to put to work regardless of what the legal landscape looks like.” I think abortion care has always happened on this land, and it always will happen, regardless of what the law says. Our grantees and others are part of how to maintain access for people. Thinking about self-managed abortion, thinking about how to access abortion funds to get people to care in other places if care is limited where they are now because of abortion bans, and helping to provide those networks of care so that our communities are not facing the brunt of these terrible bans and laws. And as Q named, one of the things that we’ve been watching out for is there’s been a lot of media attention around the criminalization of people seeking abortions and less attention to the criminalization of people seeking gender-affirming care. And that is really important. We also want to name that one of the impacts we’re concerned about is the criminalization of organizers and providers who work on reproductive justice and trans justice issues, because they’re key targets in the states where they work—in the South, Southwest, and Midwest, which are Groundswell’s key priority regions.

Foundations need to be thinking about how they are supporting organizations they fund to deal with this new legal risk and jeopardy, in addition to the work they do to support the communities that are bearing the brunt of attacks on abortion and trans rights. What’s been exciting is that most of our grantees are still focusing on the full spectrum of reproductive issues and trying to triage and find ways to do that if part of the work that they’re doing has been criminalized or is being criminalized in their states. One of our grantees in our

birth justice fund, CHOICES, in Tennessee, has a beautiful full-spectrum reproductive healthcare facility that they opened in 2020, and unfortunately they had to relocate the abortion services to Illinois because of Tennessee banning abortion care. But they’re still managing to figure out how to maintain their model of making sure no one is left behind—regardless of what kind of care that they need. And at the same time, they still continue to organize in Tennessee to change the laws and to build a base and to talk about how this is not going to be permanent, that we are going to fight for our people and our freedom even if it takes us the next ten years, fifteen years, to do that.

KA: Given that—and particularly the criminalization of organizers and providers as something that needs to be addressed, and that foundations need to be thinking about how to support organizations that are dealing with that threat—can you offer any examples of how people are dealing with this, or offer recommendations for best practices to support those who are on the movement’s front lines?

QT: I think one example is what Naa just lifted up, in terms of how much our grantee partners are holding in this moment by stepping into the gap to provide access to reproductive healthcare—which has never been a certainty for our communities—while also advocating for the laws and policies that are going to lead us to change, and holding on to that longer-term vision around building a world we have not yet seen.

I do think that this piece—local- and state-level organizing and building power such that communities can advocate and vote in their self-interest to gain the self-determination around bodily autonomy—absolutely necessitates a voting engagement strategy, as well. That is critical for seeing through the kinds of laws and policies that will change the material conditions for everyday people. So, one of the ways that we support organizations that are stepping into the gap and holding so many different elements and consequences of the *Dobbs* decision is to provide not just the funding but also the support for organizational resilience, such that

groups are able to mobilize hundreds of thousands of voters to turn out in key elections.

And we're providing—and have provided—the support for organizations to build the kind of infrastructure that can allow them to have a multipronged approach. That includes bringing new community members into the organization but also holding electeds accountable after a major moment like this. We know the work will only continue after the midterm election, and we will have to defend and protect wins. We're building that base of support where we'll always be out-moneyed but have the people power to ensure that we can make those changes and leverage the electoral moments for the sake of our communities, and be able to change things like district attorneys in our states who ultimately have power around how the criminalization of people seeking abortion will look.

Our grantees have highly expert and sophisticated approaches to holding all of these pieces while serving the communities and engaging in longer-term strategies such as around voter engagement—which needs year-round support, because engagement is happening in and out of the cycles. I can share in more detail why that kind of capacity is needed around the voter engagement strategy. One of our longtime grantee partners, Black Women for Wellness, is one of the organizations that received technical assistance around adopting a voter engagement strategy. They had been working on the full spectrum of reproductive justice around comprehensive sex education, dealing with the penalizing of Black women and girls—they're based in LA County—and they also work on the issue of Black maternal mortality rates. They have been building power over the

last two decades with the community who they serve directly through connecting folks to access to healthcare, but have also been very successful in raising the visibility and importance of reproductive justice for the state of California. So, for example, when SB 8 [Senate Bill 8, the Texas law banning abortion as early as six weeks into pregnancy] was passed in Texas last year, California, now a reproductive freedom state, saw an influx of folks seeking abortion. There were something like from around forty thousand to a million within that short period of time. So, after building more power within their state to elevate this issue and bring along varying coalitions that represent different sectors of civil society in California, Black Women for Wellness were able to gain more power through their voting program as well, where they were responsible for getting several local-level progressive leaders in office with their c4 organization Black Women for Wellness Action Project. In the wake of SB 8 in 2021, they, along with other allied rights, health, and justice organizations, started the California Future of Abortion Council, to provide key recommendations and hold the state of California accountable to protect and expand reproductive healthcare and even provide a blueprint for other states. Several state legislators joined the Council once Governor Newsom announced that the state would participate. This didn't occur in a vacuum: Black Women for Wellness had been at the forefront of policy advocacy for a long time, and when they organized their constituents and began turning out voters on the issues they cared about over the last several cycles, this base of community members equaled people power that the state could not ignore.

KA: Do you have other examples of what today's grassroots organizers are doing to fight for access to care within and across different communities? And who or what do you think needs more attention and support to be able to move forward with this work to fight for justice and provide full-spectrum care?

NAH: Holding elected officials accountable is so important, because we live in this strange reality where the majority of people in this country support reproductive justice and yet our elected officials do not—they do not reflect the ideas of the majority of people in this country. So, our grantees are talking about how we need to talk about democracy and make sure that our leaders actually represent the majority of people in this country—that they are aligned with reproductive justice. I think one of the amazing things that our grantees are doing is galvanizing this moment as a base-building

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opportunity—and as Q was naming, an opportunity to further engage our communities in this important conversation about voting and getting out the vote.

Groundswell has over the years been doing an annual evaluation of the reproductive justice movement so as to name for other funders the power that we see in this movement. And last year, when we surveyed our grantees, we saw that they had engaged over eight hundred thousand leaders to take action for reproductive justice across the country—in every single state. And in terms of long-term base-building, one of our grantees, National Latina Institute for Reproductive Justice, has been talking to us about not just its deep movement building work with the community but also its deep *listening* work—getting people engaged in this conversation around reproductive justice and helping them to understand as Latinx communities, as other communities of color, how this connects to all the issues that we care about, and helping to mobilize and activate people. So, I would name the deep base-building work, which is not a three-month or even a one-year project—it's a many, many years-long project. And funders need to support the work of base-building groups over the long term to be doing deep organizing in communities. This is a really important way that grassroots organizers are stepping into this moment. And I've heard our grantees talk about, "Yeah, we need a strategy that matches what the other side has been doing for fifty years." I think the advice to other funders is not, What are you going to do over the next two years? It's, How are we helping our grantee partners think about the next five years, ten years, twenty years? And really looking toward the future instead of always in these small grant cycles. So I'll name that.

I will also note that our grantees continue to do important policy advocacy work and systemic change work in every state. So, progressive states like California, as Q named, where Black Women for Wellness is active, where it's going to be really important in the next few years to continue to shore up laws that protect reproductive freedom, because it's no longer just for the communities in the states that are progressive—it's now for folks seeking care from neighboring states and from far away. I'm in the state of New York, and our grantees on the ground here are talking about how do we pass laws, how do we get things into the budget, so that we are supporting our neighbors who are coming from other states? And that's really important. But at the same time, we're a national funder that's deeply committed to the South,

to the Southwest, and to the Midwest as underfunded regions, because we know that liberation work needs to start—and will happen—in the places where there is the most reproductive oppression.

So, many of our grantees are still continuing to do harm-reduction work in states where abortion bans have passed, are trying to fight and think about how we can be proactive and defend reproductive freedom even in states where harmful laws are passing. Many of our grantees, such as the National Network of Abortion Funds, are super active in trying to support work to get people to care and provide practical aid on the ground for their member funds and communities seeking care. But many of our grantees are also thinking about how to create coalitions with other movements and to advance a reproductive justice agenda, knowing that now there are also a lot of people who've been mobilized in the wake of these terrible bans. And we've seen voters coming out in Kansas, for example, around that—voting very loud and clear that they do not support a constitutional ban on abortion. So, I think that there are unique opportunities there, and I just want to underscore that we're not abandoning any of the work in the South, Midwest, and Southwest. And in fact, that's going to be very important ground to continue to robustly support in the years to come.

KA: I'm hearing that there's a lot of work happening in different places, and that the needs are very different depending on whether you're in a state where the laws and policies support reproductive freedoms and gender-affirming care and voting rights or whether you're in a state or regions of the country where there are very repressive laws. What do you see as the future of grassroots reproductive justice organizing? Where do you see the movement headed in the next five and ten years?

QT: As Naa was speaking, it was sparking for me the ways in which our organizations have to use every tool in the toolbox right now, including really flexing and building even other entities to withstand these attacks and build toward a different future. When the *Dobbs* decision came down, our organizations that have been organizing and building their base for many years now pivoted to turn their base out and mobilize for reproductive justice. But because of their c3 status, they aren't able to fully leverage that power.²

And so, for example, our c3 organizations are doing the important work of educating on how and where to vote, helping folks get registered, helping folks change and update



their information if they've moved or been displaced due to hurricanes or other storms. Just the immense amount of infrastructural damage that has occurred in the South from storms creates barriers to the voting process. So, our c3 organizations are doing that—and then they have to stop short from actually saying to organizations, “We know this issue is important to you, so you've got to go out and vote on this issue this election.” This is where having a c4 strategy can make the greatest impact by ensuring that organizations can turn out those pro-RJ voters, because that is allowed.

But far and wide, because the ban is so very unpopular with the general public and so very much a politicized issue that the more extreme factions—the Republican Party and others—are fully using as their campaign agenda, it's hard *not* to touch this issue in any place, any state, right now. But our groups don't get the kind of funding that allows them to flex their power by using a c4 strategy or having PACs and other sorts of tools that allow them to tackle this issue head-on at varying levels. In order to do that, they would need the kind of funding that is unrestricted and that allows them to lobby as much as they can to ensure that whatever happens after this election, there will be opportunities to defend and protect vis-à-vis the laws and policies that come through while also building a more political infrastructure that will continue to grow between cycles.

So, our groups are hampered by the boom-and-bust cycle that exists and that will continue to exist. And we need to break that cycle, which is partly Groundswell's philosophy around our long-term, year-to-year deep investment in infrastructure building. What usually happens is that, after an election day, money dries up and campaign infrastructure has to basically go away. And that happens just as the legislative advocacy and lobbying opportunities are right there. You're essentially breaking up a needed infrastructure—an infrastructure that could help you to take that win or loss to the next level—and there's just not enough support that will ensure that groups are able to bridge those moments and then continue to build and learn from the wins and losses of an electoral cycle. So, c4 funding is very, very important—particularly in a year like this—and it doesn't flow fast enough. And there isn't enough even just *trust* in our organizations' abilities, in the folks who are actively building power independent of the political parties. I live here in Florida, where electeds on both sides of the aisle are making poor decisions about our lives. And our communities are very wise to that fact. Part of why we

need to ensure that our organizations have the mechanisms to build that political power is because they actually represent the needs of our communities. And our grantees have become, for many, political homes within their states, because there's a total breach of trust. These election cycles are about boom and bust—about using our communities for votes and then leaving, and the resources going away. So, our groups are building that infrastructure year to year, day in, day out. That support needs to come now *and* later *and* after this election cycle *and* all the way through, and in unrestricted ways such that our groups can determine the strategies that are needed—in this case, to achieve reproductive justice, particularly in this moment when there is a very practical and urgent need around it.

NAH: I will just name the thing that they're up against. Last year, we were trying to track how many bills were entered—I think there were something like 541 abortion restriction bills introduced this year across 42 states, and more than 300 anti-LGBTQ bills and 393 voting restriction bills introduced, as well. So, I think we are going to continue to see this intensify. And our grantees need, as Q said, that flexibility to be able to respond, because the attacks are coming on all fronts. And these issues are deeply interconnected—and if we give up the fight on one in one area, we're ceding ground for everything else. So, our grantees need that flexibility.

KA: You've been speaking throughout this conversation about how funders can support the future of grassroots reproductive justice organizing, and not only in the short term. It's clear that there is a lot of work that needs to be done with a more strategic timeline—especially since opponents have a half-century-long strategy that has been very successful for them. So, I'm wondering if you can say a bit more about what unrestricted funding would do to support grassroots reproductive justice organizers. Are there any particular examples of ways in which funders have already started to do that work that you would want to amplify? And are there any particular examples of organizing that could benefit from that kind of funding?

NAH: Q named a lot of the things that Groundswell tries to practice and that we see as best practices for the field around general support, long-term funding, allowing groups to do as

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much lobbying as they need to do and want to do. For me, as a funder, it has felt a little disheartening that, for years, reproductive justice leaders who are women of color and trans people of color have been waving their flag, saying, We’re going to lose if we keep going down this path of a single-strategy focus that isn’t doing deep organizing within communities, isn’t looking at voter engagement. And no one listened. These organizations have very small budgets—they’re grassroots organizations. Even some of our powerful organizations that we’ve named in this conversation have small budgets in comparison to some of the larger, white-led reproductive rights and reproductive health organizations. And yet, when the Supreme Court came out with its decision, I watched people turn and say, “Oh, my gosh, what are we going to do?”—everyone in the reproductive rights and health movement was suddenly looking to the women of color leaders as if to say, “You’ve been talking about voter engagement and about organizing? Can you do it? Can you fix this?” And I want to just name that that is the dynamic that also happens—that funders give very liberally to white national organizations, allowing them to fail, allowing them to experiment with things, allowing them to just do a strategy and it not work out and do something different, allowing them to staff up adequately. And when we talk to our grantees, 64 percent of them say that their work would be more powerful if they had enough resources to staff up.³ They don’t have the staff that they need. And they’re constantly working on project grants that have a short grant term and that are not going to be renewed,

and they’re trying to piece together resources to build up their infrastructure. There’s an imbalance here. And I think it’s a racial justice issue and a racial equity issue within philanthropy around which organizations get imbued with funders’ trust. And “trust” meaning dollars, meaning flexible dollars, meaning multiyear dollars. Part of the reason we are in the situation we’re in is because we didn’t trust women of color, we didn’t trust trans people of color, who’ve been telling us for decades that we need an organizing strategy, that we need to be doing movement building, that we need to be working in intersectional ways, not just on one issue. So, I just want to name that. And many of our Black-led grantees talk about the need to Trust Black Women. We need to trust women of color, trust trans people of color—and that means put your money behind your trust and give in the same way that philanthropy has given to white-led organizations for so long.

QT: Thank you, Naa, you said that perfectly. I think I will just underscore that along with trusting Black women and trusting trans people of color, we must also trust the strategies of organizing. Invest in that strategy, invest in grassroots organizing. These are tried-and-tested strategies that have won many of the freedoms we enjoy right now in our lives that are absolutely being attacked. Investing in those strategies by the communities who are the most vulnerable and who actually have the solutions because of the impacts that they have had to face and navigate for so long—and trusting in those strategies and in those communities—is ultimately how we’re going to advance reproductive justice in this country.

NOTES

1. Audre Lorde, “Learning from the 60s,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 134–44.
2. See “Comparison of 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) Permissible Activities,” Bolder Advocacy, A program of Alliance for Justice, accessed November 10, 2022, bolderadvocacy.org/resource/comparison-of-501c3-and-501c4-permissible-activities/.
3. See *See us. Lift us. Fund us.: 2021 Impact Report* (San Francisco, CA: Groundswell Fund, 2022); and Kitana Ananda, “Organizing for Reproductive and Birth Justice: ‘Fund Us Like You Want Us to Win,’” *NPQ*, July 28, 2022, nonprofitquarterly.org/organizing-for-reproductive-and-birth-justice-fund-us-like-you-want-us-to-win/.

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