

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: U.S.A.

**Transcript of Loretta Ross
Interviewer: Zakiya Luna**

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Loretta Ross, born in 1953, is an activist on women's issues including reproductive justice, human rights, and opposition to hate groups and right wing organizations. In the 1970s, Ross was one of the first African American women to direct a rape crisis center. In the 1980s, she served as a director of Women of Color Programs for the National Organization for Women, organizing the first national conference on women of color and reproductive rights in 1987. She successfully organized women of color delegations for the massive pro-choice marches NOW sponsored in 1986 and 1989, and in 2004, she was national codirector of the March for Women's Lives in Washington, DC, the largest protest march in U.S. history with more than one million participants. From 1990 to 1995, Loretta served as National Program Research Director for the Atlanta-based Center for Democratic Renewal. She directed projects on far right organizations in South Africa, the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi involvement and anti-abortion violence in the U.S. Following this, she founded the National Center for Human Rights Education, a training and resources center for grassroots activists. She is co-author of the book *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organizing for Reproductive Justice*. Ross is currently writing a book on reproductive rights entitled *Black Abortion*. A graduate of Howard University, in 2003, Ross received an honorary Doctorate of Civil Law from Arcadia University. Loretta is a founding member of and current national coordinator of SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective, a network of over 70 women of color allied organizations that work on reproductive health issues.

Zakiya Luna is a graduate student in the joint-Ph.D. program in Sociology and Women's Studies. She received her B.A. in Women's Studies from University of California at Davis where she also worked at the Women's Resources and Research Center providing educational programming for the campus and local community. Her research interests include women of color's activism, particularly in relation to the state and transnationally.

Transcript of Loretta Ross

[Song] *We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes
We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes¹*

Zakiya Luna: Hello and welcome to the Global Feminisms Project. I am Zakiya Luna, a graduate students in Sociology and Women’s Studies, and I am here with Loretta Ross. Thank you for coming today.

Loretta Ross: Thanks for having me.

Zakiya: So first we’re going to talk about your background and discuss the areas around which you’ve been active. Then we’ll talk about your vision for the future and, you know, we’ll talk for about an hour. Sound good?

Loretta: Sounds good to me.

Zakiya: Great. So, first, can you tell us a bit about your background, where you grew up, and if there was sort of any significant events that, looking back, sort of helped lead you on to this path.

Loretta: Well, I’m from a military family. I was kind of like the classic military brat², moving around every 12 to 18 months. My father’s an immigrant from Jamaica, married my mother. I’m one of eight kids. There’s five boys, three girls and I was the middle girl, and the number six kid. So I was kind of squashed down in the middle in my family. But we lived all over the place and I claim Texas as my home, both because my mother was born there and that’s where I graduated high school, after all that moving around, San Antonio, to be exact. So I think coming from an immigrant family affected my background, coming from such a large family affected my background. My family was very patriarchal too, you know, with the five boys. I remember being very resentful of my mother, because she used to make me get up and cook my brothers breakfast for school. And I swear I think every man in my life has suffered since because I don’t automatically cook for anybody anymore [laughter]. And I loved to cook. It’s just, you know, resenting that patriarchy. So those were the kinds of things. My mother was a domestic worker. And I remember swearing to her when I was about 10 years old that I would never work on my hands and knees. And she said I was pretty sure back then that whatever I did it was not going to be, you know, doing domestic work. Probably had

¹ These lyrics from “Ella’s Song” by Sweet Honey in the Rock precede a biographical montage of each US site interviewee.

² “Military brat” is a slang term to describe children whose parents are in the military.

some impact on me deciding to major in chemistry and physics in college, because whatever you did with those majors, it was not going to be on your hands and knees.

Zakiya: [laughs]

Loretta: Though I must say, my first job as a chemist was sterilizing huge vats of glassware, so I was like a glorified dishwasher [laughs]. That probably didn't change that much. But my mother's family is from Texas. She's a classic Texan. They moved there in 1867 from Selma, Alabama, and they had been slaves on a peanut plantation in Selma up until the Civil War. So apparently, as legend has it they went from Selma to Mobile. My ancestor built a boat, crossed the Gulf of Mexico. We landed in Natchitoches, Texas. And we were one of those original Texas families that actually celebrates Juneteenth as our family reunion, because it was a holiday that meant a lot to us³. And so my mother's family spread out all over Texas. And my father's family, as I said, is from Jamaica by way of Baltimore, and so all of that made a very rich and precious childhood. I didn't know we were poor, you know. I thought we were like everybody else in the military, and dad was a sergeant with a lot of kids. Uncle Sam does provide in a way, you know. We never really suffered for food or suffered from health care, because that was provided. But I did remember being very resentful that they couldn't afford to give me braces to fix my gap. So [laughter]...But...And I turned out to have been kind of like childhood intellectual, not knowing why. I actually found out recently that I've always been allergic to the sun and to heat. And I went to my dermatologist and they told me that I was allergic to the sun. And I called my mom, I said, "Mom, do you know I'm allergic to the sun?" And my mother said, "You didn't know?" I was like, "No, ain't nobody ever told me this one." She said, "When you were a baby, I couldn't put you outside in your carriage because you got heat stroke, so why do you think you were in side reading all the time when the kids were outside playing?" I said, "I thought it was because I liked to read." She said, "Nah, you couldn't go outside." And so...those were childhood things that I remember. Very religious family. Very conservative family. My father, which is kind of special, was Elvis's drill sergeant when he was stationed I believe in Oklahoma⁴. And I didn't believe my dad when he was telling this tall tale, what I thought was a tall tale. And it wasn't till we were at his funeral and his Army buddies validated the story that I realized that I had not given my father the benefit of believing him during all of his life. So I felt kind of bad at his funeral, but I was like, "Daddy, that was true?!" you know. Anybody could have claimed to be Elvis's drill sergeant, and I thought my daddy was making it up.

Zakiya: [laughs] **Wow. So...Are there any other sorts of things whether it's the sort of family structure or any sort of major events that sort of you think, besides, you know, staying in the room and reading a lot, that sort of helped sort of get more active?**

³ *Juneteenth* is celebrated within African-American communities. After President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, U.S. slaves were freed. However, in Texas the slaves were not notified of the Proclamation and remained enslaved until June 19th, 1865. See <http://www.juneteenth.com/>

⁴ Loretta is referring to poplar singer/actor Elvis Presley, who was enlisted from 1958-1964. See <http://www.army.mil/CMH/faq/elvis.htm>

Loretta: Well, my sister, my youngest sister Toni, is really disabled. She was born normal, but this was in the 1950s, the days of polio epidemics, muscular dystrophy epidemics and stuff, and so Toni was apparently born with a depressed or non-functioning immune system. So she got muscular dystrophy and spinal meningitis and polio, I mean, just quickly in succession, like within the first year of her birth. And so growing up with a severely disabled sister probably made me a lot more sensitive to issues of ability and disability. We were a crowded family. So three girls slept in one bedroom, five boys slept in the other. My parents had a bedroom. And so I recall sleeping in a bed with Toni up until I was 16 years old and left home. And I have to honestly swear that that was not at all the most comfortable thing, because she was incontinent and I just thought I suffered as much as she did. I know it was just totally selfish of me. Toni had her cross to bear and we all had to participate in taking care of her and so...From an early age, mom made us feel very responsible. And as a matter of fact to escape taking care of Toni, I became a candy-striper⁵ at a local hospital during the Vietnam days. And so I had to deal with soldiers who were amputees back when I was 12, 13, 14 years old. And it gave me a life-long commitment to anti-war activism. Because I actually saw...

Zakiya: Saw, yeah.

Loretta: ...what war did. This was not some remote thing for me. And even my graduating class, I came to my 10-year class reunion, and there were all these walls of men, pictures of men on the wall. These were boys I had graduated with who had died within a couple of years of going to Vietnam. And so now that we're in the middle of protesting the war in Iraq, it...I get a sense of déjà vu. And I also get a sense of frustration because we shouldn't be having to do this again. We shouldn't be having to pull our country back from an unjust war. We didn't learn the lesson of Vietnam as a society. And I'm remarkably angry about that. And I think because I feel the cost of war. I felt it as a child, and I feel it as a grandmother.

Zakiya: Wow. So you mentioned that you had been volunteering at the hospital, but then you also mentioned that you ended up leaving home around 16 and then...then you actually were directing, you know, one of the first rape crisis centers in the 1970s. But what was sort of happening in between that sort of...leaving home was sort of...Did you just leave and directly go to the crisis center?

Loretta: Oh, no, honey. It was drama, drama, drama getting up getting there [laughs]. Um...

Zakiya: Can you shorten it a little bit...?

Loretta: Yeah, just a lot of drama. Um, I was a victim of what would be called sexual assault when I was 11. I was actually out on a Girl Scout outing, which should be a safe kind of thing to send your daughter on, but I was kidnapped from this outing and

⁵ *Candy striper* is an old term for a young woman who volunteers in a hospital. Traditionally, the women wore red and white striped uniforms, reminiscent of peppermint candy.

dragged into a woods and raped when I was 11, and so that was traumatizing enough. And then at age 14, I was being babysat by an older cousin, experienced incest, became pregnant. I mean, the story is not that unusual. I mean, it sounded pretty dramatic to me, because it was happening to me. But as I later started studying sexual assault, particularly in the African American community, I saw it was not that rare. But anyway, so I became pregnant at 14, had a baby at 15, because this was before Roe v. Wade when abortion was legal. And graduated high school at 16. But by the time I went off to Howard University on a scholarship, I'd felt that I had lived a pretty full life, because I'd had all this stuff happen to me. And I was really fortunate in that I did have strong parental support. So my family took care of my kid while I went off to college. They encouraged me to go to college. I actually had a scholarship to Radcliffe that got withdrawn when they found out that I was no longer the upright moral person that they have offered the scholarship to. And how did they find out? Because it was very common back in the 1960s, that when girls got pregnant to give the baby up for the adoption. And then go back to school and pretend that you'd been on an extended visit with an aunt or something. And because I made the decision to keep my child instead of giving him up for adoption, then I became the visible fallen angel, and my school became very punitive. I actually had to sue for my right to return to school.

Zakiya: **Wow.**

Loretta: And Radcliffe became very punitive. They withdrew the scholarship they had offered me. And so that's how I actually ended up going to Howard University⁶. At the last minute, I was sending out applications trying to figure out where I was going to go since it wasn't to Radcliffe and Howard offered me a full scholarship. So I went to Howard majoring in chemistry and physics at the time. And was pretty lucky to have been at Howard at that time, because again, this was the hotbed of student activism.

Zakiya: **Um-hum.**

⁶ *Howard University* is one of approximately 80 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). See <http://www.ed.gov/about/inits/list/whhbcu/edlite-index.html> . Established in 1867, Howard was a particularly politically active HBCU. For example, Black Panther Stokely Carmichael graduated from Howard, and *Mother Jones* magazine named it one of the Top 10 activist campuses of 2003.

Loretta: I mean, it was the time of Kent State⁷, Jackson State⁸. We were protesting the Vietnam War, but we were also protesting racism, and it certainly was my first encounter with anything called radical politics. Because I'd come from a solidly conservative Black family. And I remember my freshman year in college, people put the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *The Black Woman*⁹, by...Cade...Toni Cade Bambara in my hand, and it was like a universe had opened up for me. And I quickly decided that I was a Black feminist, even though I probably couldn't spell the word at the time. But that was the only thing...Actually, we used to call it Black Pan-Africanist Feminism¹⁰. Was trying to indicate this global consciousness that I was getting. Um, we had a student riot at Howard University my freshman year. We ended up shutting down the campus. Howard was going through its own changes, because we got our first...what looked like a radical president in James Cheek. It turned out he was a closet Black Republican. But we didn't know that at the time, because he wore the dashiki¹¹, so persuaded us that he was far more radical than he actually was. And compared to his successor, he was. But we protested things like mandatory ROTC for the boys¹². Every woman, though, had to take a mandatory health and hygiene class. And we protested that, because it definitely sent the signal that Black women were both dirty and needed... and went to college to learn how to be clean, which we thought was just ridiculous. Co-ed visitation, you know, there was a lot of...And at Howard at the time, you had to send in a photograph of yourself and pass what they called a paper bag test. Your skin had to be lighter than a brown paper bag to be accepted for admissions, unless you were a legacy admission¹³. And so we felt we had a lot to protest, both within the campus and externally, we had to fight for Howard to start Black Studies on campus. We thought that a historically Black college, asking for African American Studies or Black Studies shouldn't be that deep, but in fact it was...

⁷ On May 4, 1970, four Kent State students were killed by the Ohio National Guard, and nine others were injured. For days leading up to the shooting, students across the nation had been protesting the invasion of Cambodia. It is estimated that in the days following the Kent State shooting, million of students went on strike and hundred of campuses closed temporarily.

⁸ Late in the evening of May 14, 1970 a group of around a hundred black Jackson State students had gathered on Lynch Street following rumors of the murder of Charles Evers. By around 9:30 p.m. the students had started fires and continued general protest of current issues. Firefighters dispatched to the scene requested police support. Local police, Mississippi State Police, and National Guardsmen responded, with later FBI reports estimating that over 400 rounds of ammunition were fired in under a minute. Phillip Lafayette Gibbs, a junior and a local high school student James Earl Green were both killed. Twelve others were injured. Dispute arose over who shot the initially and while official enquires were held, no arrests were made. A monument stands on the campus as a reminder of the event along with many still-visible bullet holes.

⁹ *The Black Woman*, a critical anthology of Black Feminist thought was published in 1970.

¹⁰ *Pan-Africanism* is an ideology that supports the unity of the African Diaspora.

¹¹ A *dashiki* is a African shirt often with colorful patterns. From West Africa, they became a popular symbol of unity among some African Americans during the political turmoil of the 1960s .

¹² The *Reserve Officers' Training Corps* (ROTC) program provides funding for college in exchange for early enlistment in the military. Participants who receive scholarships continue to take courses while engaging in training. Upon graduation, they enter the military at a higher rank than if they entered without ROTC training.

¹³ Loretta is referring to the "pigmentocracy" in African American communities, in which lighter skin was preferred. The paper bag test was literally a test in which someone's skin was compared to a paper bag and if it was darker than the bag s/he would not be allowed to join an organization or participate in a particular event.

because the administration was like, “We’re a Black school, why do we need to study Black history?” Missing the irony of that question totally. So...but it was great time to be a student.

Because just by being in class, your consciousness was raised. You were challenged. Now, we had a lot of professors who were fired for engaging in Marxist thinking and Marxist teaching and stuff. And so Marxism because like the forbidden fruit for us intellectually. And so probably we got more into studying radical political economics than we normally would have simply because we were forbidden to. But taking that all in, you know, at that time, truly was consciousness raising for me. And when I got a chance to volunteer at the DC Rape Crisis Center it was kind of like all these pieces of my life kind of fell...fell together, you know, the early sexual assault, the chance to work in a women’s organization. And the women who had invited me is a woman named Nkenge Toure and she had been in the Black Panther Party. And at the time I always admired the Black Panthers, because I thought they was like the hardcore radicals. I mean we were the dilettantes, they were the real hardcore people. We were in college, they were on the streets right? And so when they came, she invited me to come over the Rape Crisis Center, I was a bit skeptical because I was like, I don’t know if I want to work with those White women. And she said, “Sister, trust me.” And I think hearing that from a sister who had been in the Black Panthers was enough to make me take the risk to go into the Rape Crisis Center, so...more than anything, Nkenge is responsible for me knowing anything about the women’s movement because I walked across her bridge of trust and haven’t looked back.

Zakiya: Yeah. Well, this is a good segue. Obviously we’ve already started talking about some of the one of the main areas where you work in which is sort of reproductive rights and women’s health. And one of the areas that you began being active in in the reproductive rights movements was around involuntary sterilization of women. And many people who will view this interview may not be familiar with the issue on...in the U.S. So could you tell us a bit about sort of how you got involved with that, and maybe how it connected with the earlier work, such as working at the Rape Crisis Center.

Loretta: Well, sterilization abuse became part of my personal narrative because when I went to Howard of course I was trying to prevent future pregnancies. I already was a teen mother. And I was not what they call a good contraceptive. In other words, I couldn’t take that birth control pill every day. I kept forgetting it and ended up getting pregnant again having to have an abortion. And so I was seeking a more effective contraceptive. And available at the time was something called the Dalkon Shield manufactured by A. H. Robinson up in Richmond, Virginia. And the Dalkon Shield was an IUD¹⁴ that was inserted and if your body successfully accepts it, prevents contraception. I mean, prevents pregnancy indefinitely. And there was only one small problem—the Dalkon Shield was defective. And it was defective for the most banal of reasons. It was a small piece of plastic, a triangular piece of plastic with a string hanging down.

¹⁴IUD: Intrauterine Device, a type of contraception.

Zakiya: Yeah.

Loretta: And the only reason that string was on that thing was so that the doctor could easily pull it out. But the string...the string served as a bacterial wick. And so it was wicking up into the uterus all kinds of dangerous bacteria. And ending up causing acute PID¹⁵ for 700,000 women.

Zakiya: Wow.

Loretta: It ruptured my fallopian tubes as well as causing sterilization and hundreds and hundreds of thousands of women. Ended up in a class action lawsuit against the manufacturers of the device because they had suppressed their own research showing that it had this design flaw. And so I ended up being one of the first women to sue, because at age 23, my tubes had ruptured and I was no longer able to have kids. And my own OB/GYN found all this research data that the company had tried to suppress¹⁶. And so my lawsuit ended up opening up the floodgates in a way for all the other lawsuits. I know I sound like a litigious person. I don't just sue all the time. But when people piss me off, I take...try and get [laughter] back at them. And so my own reproductive career had been so brief. I mean, one full-term pregnancy, one abortion, one sterilization. And it was pretty much at that point, I decided that no matter what else I was trying to do with my life, my plumbing kept getting my attention. So, whether the sexual assault or dealing with the sterilization. And so I entered reproductive rights work fighting sterilization abuse. I mean, putting this in a broader context, it was very common for Black and Native American or Mexican American women to be sterilized in the '50s, '60s, and '70s.¹⁷ So much so that they called it the Mississippi Appendectomy.¹⁸ And there was a case of two sisters who were 12 and 14—the Relf sisters who had been illegally sterilized. They had just gone in for regular checkups and they were 12 and 14 and got sterilized. And so there was a lawsuit brought on their behalf that ended up creating the first federal regulations against sterilization abuse in the mid-1970s.¹⁹ But thousands of us had gone through the mill leading up to that. And so a lot of women of color entered

¹⁵ PID: Pelvic Inflammatory Disease.

¹⁶ OB/GYN: Obstetrician/Gynecologist.

¹⁷ In the 1970s, it was discovered that many poor women, in particular women of color, were being *sterilized* illegally (without their consent, when they were too young, without having an interpreter, etc.). Although there were laws against this illegal sterilization, racist ideas of individual doctors as well as government officials made the problem continue. Even today, there are reported cases of the abuse of sterilization. Because poor women and women of color have been targeted for “birth reduction” programs they are often critical of the white middle-class arguments of “choice” as choice is often a questionable term.

¹⁸ Here she is noting that the life-altering procedure appeared to be so common in some states that it was as prevalent as an appendectomy, a procedure for what most agree is an unnecessary organ, unlike a uterus.

¹⁹ The Relf's, a poor African-American family, including three daughters Minnie (12), Mary(14) and Katie(16), lived in Alabama. In 1973, when the family moved into publicly funded housing, a Family Planning Services nurse began unsolicited visits, injecting the girls with Depro-Provera. She forced two of the daughters, Mary and Minnie, to come to a doctor's office for “shots”, then transferred them to a hospital. Their illiterate mother was told to sign papers, which she did not know were authorized the sterilization of her daughters. The family's lawsuit helped pave the way for legislation requiring stricter regulations for obtaining informed consent for such procedures.

the reproductive rights movement, not fighting for abortion rights but fighting for the right to have children, which is different than how middle class White women frame the issue. And the first organi—one of the first organizations that women of color put together was called the Committee to End Sterilization Abuse, CESA. And then when we added White women to the mix, it became CARASA, the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse. And that’s where you saw the first 20 of the right to have and the right not to have a child working within the same formation. But I got into feminist work through my body. I mean, it was not an intellectual thing for me. I didn’t...there were no Women’s Studies courses at the time, or anything like that. There were people who were pissed off about what had happened to us and we were kind of committed to it not happening to others. I mean, I’d already had the child sexual abuse, the sterilization abuse and I didn’t necessarily see myself as anybody’s victim. I saw myself as a woman who was pissed off and was pretty much gonna fight to make sure that what happened to me didn’t happen to other women. But I was really lucky to have found a home of...of similarly thinking...similar thinking people at the DC Rape Crisis Center. Because that became a hotbed of Black feminist activity in the ‘70s and ‘80s, and lot of stuff grew out of the Rape Crisis Center, and a lot of the relationships I developed there, you know, have endured for over 30 years, so...

Zakiya: So then, you were active, though, with the National Organization for Women²⁰, right? And you had served as their director of Women of Color Programs in 1985, right?

Loretta: Yeah, you have to kind of like fast forward ten years, you know, then I was active in NOW. And it was a big challenge whether or not to take the job at NOW. I had gone to the Nairobi World Conference for Women in 1985²¹, and my roommate there is a woman named Donna Brazile who’s pretty famous kind of now. Come to think of it, she was Al Gore’s campaign director. Anyway, Donna and I were talking about what we were going to do when we got back from Africa, because neither of us had jobs at the time. Well, she was actually the director of the National Political Congress of Black Women that was founded by Shirley Chisholm and C. Delores Tucker, but she had a job, but she didn’t have a paycheck. I didn’t have a job nor a paycheck. And so Donna told me about how every time a new administration is elected at NOW, the entire staff has to hand in their resignation. And the new administration gets a chance to select who they’ll keep or what have you. So she said, “Well, go to talk to Ellie Smeal²². Because Ellie’s the

²⁰ *National Organization for Women* (NOW) was founded 1966, with the goal of taking action to bring about equality for all women. NOW works to eliminate discrimination and harassment in the workplace, schools, the justice system, and all other sectors of society; secure abortion, birth control and reproductive rights for all women; and end all forms of violence against women; eradicate racism, sexism, and homophobia; and promote equality and justice in our society. However, NOW has also been criticized for being focused on what is good for middle-class white heterosexual women.

²¹ The *Third World Conference on Women*, sponsored by the United Nations, was the culmination of the UN’s Decade for Women campaign.

²² *Eleanor Smeal* was president of the National Organization for Women and later founded the Feminist Majority Foundation. FMF focuses on women’s equality and reproductive rights and has among its projects Afghan Women. The FMF site credits Smeal with leading the first national abortion rights march in 1986.

newly elected...been re-re-elected president, because she had been president before. And she may have a job opening for you.” And so I went and talked to Ellie Smeal, and that’s whole ‘nother story, but eventually I got hired to be what Ellie thought was the minority rights staff person. And I quickly told her, I’m not your minority. And so we changed the title to the Director of Women of Color Programs. And we actually shifted the paradigm, because Ellie thought my job was to bring Women of Color into NOW. I thought my job was to figure out why women of color hated NOW. So [laughs], it was...I became more like an ombudsman than a recruiter, which I thought was a really important distinction.

Zakiya: Yeah. Well, many women of color have had strained relationships with women, sort of mainstream organizations, such as NOW, sort of feeling that these organizations either ignore issues of race or don’t see how race is a feminist issue. And so if you could speak a bit more to that, and sort of...you know, you’ve been sort of a pioneer in many cases in sort of mainstream organizations, for example, with NOW in this position. And so if you could talk a bit more about your experience and sort of what your strategies were in working with the organization, and sort of...you talked about sort of, you know, redefining what your position would be and things like that. And so I’m wondering if you could speak to that a bit.

Loretta: Well, most mainstream organizations, to be fair to them, are not intentionally racist. I mean, they don’t have as part of their mission statement we’re going to piss off Black women. I mean, that’s not how it happens. What they are is intentionally focused on their own needs and who they see as their constituency. And for the most part, their constituency is middle class Black women...I mean, middle class White women who are mostly in denial about their own tenuous class positioning. I mean, within, the European American community, I see a *lot* of sensitivity and denial and class issues like they’re only one generation from poverty, but you’d never know that kind of thing. And so they don’t...fail to represent Black women like this is some great conspiracy, it’s that they are representing a small slice of White women, and that they’re hanging on by their plastic fingernails. And what you find is that they practice a form of power politics on each other that is very competitive, serious as a heart attack, very much creates a condition of brutality with which they treat each other, particularly in an organization like NOW which is, you know, by anybody’s definition, the most influential feminist organization that’s ever been. And so for a Black woman, you constantly have to try to figure out what’s the normal treatment with which they treat White women versus how they treat me. Is it racism or is this just politics as usual? And you have to navigate that pretty carefully, because you lose all credibility if you call something racism when it wasn’t. I mean, if they normally brutalize each other and it just spills over on you, that ain’t racism. Okay, now, if they genu—you know, if they genuinely put you in the photo op so that they look diverse and then they ignore your voice thereafter as they’re making policy decisions, that’s racism. And so you have to develop some skill at distinguishing between the two. One of the criticisms I offer women of color is that we generally throw that charge of racism around pretty loosely without doing our homework. And so we lose a lot of credibility using it badly. And we sell “wolf”²³ tickets. “Well, we’re going to boycott you if you don’t do this.” Well, like, yeah. Yeah, right. How can a multi-million-

²³ “To cry wolf” is to claim a factor is present that is not actually there.

dollar organization care about our 35 dollars. So I mean, we tend to paint all White women with the same broad brush without understanding the conflicts and tensions within them. We don't understand the role of anti-Semitism in dividing White women, you know, old forms of European nationalism that are still being played out among White people. We don't even understand the construction of Whiteness and what goes into that. And so we're not as sharp as I'd like us to be in understanding how to use and manipulate power within the mainstream movement. Um, and as a result, you know, some of us, like my current work, is into forming our own autonomous movement because it's exhausting to try to study, I mean, getting into that. Not everybody is prepared to be a bridge. You know, not everybody is prepared to give up the right to protest personal racism when you're there to serve a larger purpose. And so that's why I'm into SisterSong now, because we get to deal with White women on our own terms. But that's a whole 'nother story.

Zakiya: **Yeah. And we will get to that.**

Loretta: [laughs]

Zakiya: **But I did want to, you know, sort of know the answer to this question generally, but sort of the issues, you've talked about sort of with mainstream organizations are also some of the reasons that sort of some of the other women of color that we've interviewed for this project have found this term "feminist" sort of problematic, and that that's why they don't want to use it, or they qualify using it, and so I guess it's a two-part question. Sort of first, do you consider yourself a feminist, and if so, how does this influence your ability to sort of work with mainstream organizations, or does it influence it at all?**

Loretta: Well, I'm a flaming feminist. Yes, I gladly use the F word and proclaim in pretty loud letters which tends to scare off all the men I'm attracted to, but [laughter]...Yeah. But it wasn't an accident that I started using the phrase. I started doing feminist work in like 1972, '73. But it wasn't until 1985 that I actually chose the word "feminist" for myself. Because I used to say, "I'm not a feminist, but..." yeah [laughs] "I'm not a feminist, but this is wrong, you know. Violence against Black women in the Black community is wrong. But I'm not a feminist, but I think this is wrong" kind of thing. And that was my mantra for so many years. But when I took the job at NOW, the question was called. Because a lot of people thought that I had sold out my Black credentials by taking the job at NOW. And I had actually went and leave other organizations that I'd been a part of. That were women of color organizations, or Black organizations, because I think...thought I'd sold out to the White women. And yet NOW didn't trust me because I wasn't, quote, "feminist enough." I mean, I was paying attention to the anti-Apartheid movement and to Black politics. Like I said, I was a Pan-Africanist feminist in my kind of mind. And so I wasn't totally into the gender thing as much as they thought I should be. I was, thought I was into gender, felt I was a good gender advocate. But gender at the intersection of race, class, nationalism and all those other things. Not just gender in and of itself. You know, I never had the illusion that women united will do anything. But I always...never believed in angels or devil

either...any...either way, you know, so...I was a bad fit for them, in that way and yet I was in the Black Nationalist movement raising all these embarrassing gender questions. They thought I'd sold out to the White women, and the White women thought I hadn't sold out enough, so...It was a interesting time. But when it was time to mobilize for the first march, the '86 march. I had the job of going around to all these women of color organizations and talk about abortion rights. And a couple of them kept asking me, "Well, are you a feminist?" and at that point, "I'm not a feminist, but..." wasn't making sense anymore. How can I organize women to participate in a movement I'm afraid of claiming? And at the time Alice Walker had written her first work on womanism²⁴, so I a lot of Black women were using the term the womanism, but that seem...felt like cheating to me. It's like, "I want all the benefits of the feminist movement, but I don't want the baggage." But you don't have to...you know, for me you have to fight the baggage, you have to...if you're going to get the benefits, then you have the responsibility of fighting the baggage. And, now womanism has since evolved in definition. I tend to see people who are womanist now as adding a decidedly spiritual component to feminism that feminism being far more secularly oriented. But at the time, it was more like half-hearted feminism. "I'm into gender politics, but..." kind of thing. But, you know, I'm a feminist and kind of proud of it and...And I'm a feminist that likes macho men, so that's a whole 'nother contraction.

Zakiya: [laughs] Yes, we talked about that a bit last night, didn't we?

Loretta: We talked about it then...

Zakiya: [laughs] So you left NOW. But then in 2004, you were involved with the March for Women's Lives, right? Which NOW was one of those sort of majors sponsors of. And you were actually a national co-director for it. So how did you come to be involved with the March? And sort of what was that experience like?

Loretta: Therein lies a tale. I left NOW in 1989 to go work for the National Black Women's Health Project because I had worked within White feminist organizations so I wanted to go see what Black feminists were...looked like, and enjoyed that. Then I did anti-Klan work, monitoring hate groups. Trying to explain to my mother why a Black woman was going to Klan rallies. And then got into human rights work. As part of my human rights work, we founded this organization called SisterSong, which is a women of color reproductive health organization. And SisterSong was basically founded by women of color working in the reproductive health field, who were tired of trying to fix the mainstream and get them to understand what our women of color perspectives, issues, needs are. We were like sisters doing it for themselves. We were going to organize our own. And so at our 2003 national conference, the four organizations who decided to do the March—the National Organization for Women, the Feminist Majority Foundation,

²⁴ Walker's 1983 book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* popularized the term "womanist." The term had a multiple-part definition, the first of which was "a black feminist or feminist of color." The definition also included aspects of caring about one's whole community—not just women—and spirituality.

Planned Parenthood Federation of American²⁵, and NARAL Pro-Choice America²⁶ – sent representatives to SisterSong’s conference asking for our endorsement. And it was obvious why they came to us. We had 600 women of color together at our national conference, the biggest gathering of women of color ever on reproductive health issues. And when they first asked for our endorsement, I was the first one to say, “Hell, no.” Been there, done that 20 years ago, you know. I’ve moved on and the last thing I want to do is drop everything we’re doing yet again for White women and their agenda. And fortunately, there were other women within SisterSong that said, “Hey Loretta...” and young, it was the younger women who hadn’t been through the experiences of the ‘80s and the ‘90s that... “Well, let’s give them a chance, let’s give an audience and let’s see what they have to say.” And so I thought it was particularly telling that of the four organizations that were pulling off...what they fir—then were calling it the March for Freedom of Choice, they didn’t even all have women of color to send to represent them at our conference. And that was just so unacceptable for me. It’s like, I have worked with you all 20, 25 years ago over this same question. And here it is in 2003, you don’t even have women of color in senior management? You know, not all of them, but notably NARAL didn’t. And that kind of pissed me off, yeah. And they want to send a White woman to ask women of color. I was like you’re not even qualified to speak to these 600 women of color as far as I’m concerned. But anyway. Thank God there were other voices at the table [laughter] than mine. Um, so they came and we did a plenary session on whether women of color should participate in the March for Women’s Lives. The plenary, the audience, basically came up with some conditions. They said first of all that the name of the march had to change. The March for Freedom of Choice was not a big enough thing for what we’re talking about. Because I’d talked about “abortion or not to abort” that is not how women of color organize, because we feel that not only do we have to fight for the right to *have* a child, but we have to fight for the right to *parent* the children that we have. If you look at the foster care system the criminal justice system, the zero tolerance policies kicking our kids out of school, I mean, reproductive rights means a whole lot more than to abort or not to abort as far as we’re concerned. So, the March for Freedom of Choice wasn’t working as a title. We wanted women of color to be added to the March steering committee, which is the decision making body. And that was pretty important. Because every one of those steering committee seats required a commitment of a quarter of a million dollars to seed the march.

Zakiya: **Wow.**

Loretta: So for NARAL to sit at the table, they had to put up a quarter of a million dollars. Planned Parenthood, NOW, Feminist Majority, to put together the first million

²⁵ *Planned Parenthood* is a national organization of member clinics who provide a range of reproductive health services to women at low or not cost. They also provide abortions although, due to governmental regulations, these are not reduced in cost. Along with operating clinics there is also an advocacy and activist side to the organization as they work on state and federal levels to fight for “choice.”

²⁶ The *National Abortion Rights Advocacy League*, NARAL Pro-Choice, is an organization which advocates and organizes for abortion rights. NARAL supports abortion providers as well as campaigns for governmental recognition of abortion rights.

dollars to organize the March. And so when we demanded that women of color should be allowed to sit at the seat, at the table, we knew those women of color weren't going to put up a quarter million dollars to get those seats. As a matter of fact, the cash flow was going to reverse itself. Because for women of color organizations to drop what they're doing to participate in it, that time has to be bought. Because we're talking about organizations with three to four staff people. So if they send somebody to sit at the steering committee, the organization's going to suffer, and we had detailed this in our book *Undivided Rights* how when we try to work in coalition with the mainstream, the mainstream benefits and we don't, so we were clear about that. And that was...so getting women of color onto the steering committee, was one of our demands. And then broadening the focus of the march was the third set of demand. And much to my amazement, they called our bluff. They changed the name of the March. They added the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, and the Black Women's Health Imperative to the steering committee, which actually ended up bringing in the ACLU²⁷ as the seventh steering committee partner. And then they started reorganizing the March using our reproductive justice language that SisterSong had pioneered. And so then, after they called our bluff and they asked me if I would be the March co-director, I felt like, oh, shit. Okay.

Zakiya: Now [laughs].

Loretta: Which I had not intending on doing. I was like, you know, go winding back in my personal history 25 years to work with the same people, you know, Ellie and Kate and Gloria that I had left 25 years ago, to work with them again. But it really did work out very, very well, because it generated a discussion amongst the mainstream about the human rights framework which is what we wanted them to do, you know, which is the basis of the reproductive justice framework. And it brought in a lot of new voices that historically that had not supported a women's rights march. I mean, for the first in its 95-year history, the NAACP endorsed the women's rights march. It had never done so. You know, La Raza, I mean, just, you know, the immigrant rights movement, the anti-war movement, the anti-globalization movement, all coming together to support a women's rights march. And I think it was because of our insistence that they use the human rights reproductive justice framework as the organizing base. And so it paid off. I mean, it was by far the biggest march we'd ever thought we were going to pull off. I think it had one million, 150 thousand participants there. And I think...The sad part is though, despite the success of the march, the four mainstream organizations that started all of this mess, I think they saw diversifying the organizing as a great way to mobilize for the march, but I don't think they saw it as a great way to transform the movement into the future. Because immediately after the March, they went back to business as usual.

Which is, you know, something SisterSong could have predicted that they'd do. They figured it out but they didn't. And, um, you know, they somewhat lost the potential for using the women's human rights framework as a way of building the new movement. But that's what SisterSong is doing. So we went back to our business which had been delayed by a year because of the March organizing.

²⁷ ACLU: American Civil Liberties Union.

Zakiya: Well, that's actually a good segue into this sort of next part, which is talking about SisterSong, for which you are the national director, as you were talking about the sort of involvement, you know, started at this sort of conference, sort of the involvement with the March and that there was quite a large impact as far as this, you know, women of color being represented in this march. But it starts sort of from SisterSong and this sort of unique way of looking at reproductive rights, sort of going beyond just the issue of choice. So if you could talk a bit about sort of what SisterSong does and sort of how it developed and sort of any... you know, basically how it's been going since the March.

Loretta: Well, a bunch of us were at a AIDS conference in 1997 in Asia. And at that conference was a representative of the Ford Foundation, named Reena Marcelo. And informally Reena asked us as...had some women of color organizations that work on reproductive health issues, what would we like to see done? And a number of us and I'm saying "us" as a general term, because I was actually not at the meeting I was heading a human rights organization at the time, not a reproductive rights organization. But anyway, we asked...she asked us what we'd like to see done, and a number of us said, "Well, we need a trade association, a national network of women of color organizations. We've tried to do so four different times." And we've never had the resources to actually do so. You know, the first one was in the '80s and the '90s and going on. And so Reena heard us and when we got back to the States, she funded two symposia, on the Reproductive Health Issues of Women of Color, one in Savannah, and one in New York City, and after our second symposia in New York City, she devoted her entire portfolio, which was four million dollars to helping us found SisterSong. And when we first started, we were 16 women of color organizations: four Black, four Native American, four Asian American, four Latina. They came together, and we were kind of mechanical. You know, four, four, four, four. We were desperate to be balanced and all of that stuff. Um, and we were challenging the Ford Foundation because the way Reena wanted to give us the money, based on the requirements of the Ford Foundation is that she wanted us to engage in new programmatic work on reproductive tract infections. Which is all nice and good, but we pushed back 'cause we said, wait a moment. Every foundation in the world has a new idea for what work we should be doing.

Yeah, be we have an idea that we need to strengthen our organizations first, because most of us are...half the organizations of the 16 were all volunteer, they didn't have paid staff. They didn't have computers and fax machines. They didn't have boards of directors, financial policies...

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: ...I mean, this...they were organic organizations that had come out in their communities, but one of the criticisms we constantly offer is that lack of sustained monetary and leadership investment into women of color organizations, so that they can actually compete with mainstream...

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: ...organizations. I mean you see multi-year grants going to mainstream organizations...

Zakiya: Yeah.

Loretta: ...and project grants going to Sis—to women of color organizations. So capacity building over there, work on RTIs²⁸ kind of thing. And so we push back. We even threatened to turn down the four million dollars if we weren't allowed to use it for capacity building. And that's what we did. We won that fight. And at the time, another kind of special story was that at the time Ford Foundation didn't believe in buying computers, because they didn't believe in *capital* acquisitions, you know. And we pushed back because they told us that as a condition of our grant we had to lease computers. I'm like, "Excuse me, lease computers for like, you know, three or four thousand dollars a year, when a thousand dollars you can buy the whole computer?" This was not making sense for us. And so the ability of a grantee to say, "Hell, no," was experience by SisterSong. So I mean, usually, I'm like, we didn't have anything to lose, you know.

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: We're already not funded. What were they going to do...

Zakiya: Yeah.

Loretta: ..pull the funding? [laughs] And that actually a real impact on the Ford Foundation. Because we found out that there actually wasn't a rule against allowing grantees to buy computers. It was a urban legend starting by some project officer or program officer, who didn't want to be bothered doing...to do depreciation on computers or whatever.

Zakiya: Hm.

Loretta: And so he or she had attached a no-computer-purchase clause to his grants, and it just became an urban legend throughout the foundation that grantees couldn't buy computers. And once we asked Reena to look into it for us, it turned it wasn't prohibited at all! That, you know, SisterSong felt really empowered...

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: ...because they pushed back and said, "Hell, no." And it turns out that it benefited every foundation grantee after that, who now can buy computers...

Zakiya: [laughs]

²⁸ *Reproductive Tract Infections* (RTIs) can be the result from sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), overgrowth of organisms usually present in the reproductive system or infection after medical procedure.

Loretta: ...and any other equipment that they need to per—to, you know, execute a grant. And so we got the four million dollars for Sisters...from...for...to establish SisterSong, and it sounds like a whole of money, but when you split it, it was 16 organizations for three years.

Zakiya: Um-hum. Okay.

Loretta: Which actually is not a whole lot of money. Worked out like to 150,000 dollars per organization per year or something like that. But it did allow us to get established. We've seen grown to 70 organizations.

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: Seventy-six as a matter of fact. We've gone beyond the mechanical four-four-four that we started out with. And we've added new populations. In 2003, we added Arab American Middle Eastern/North African women to our mix. And in 2004, we added White women, a European American allies, and male allies. So SisterSong now has evolved into that radical progressive home for anybody who has a critique of the liberal Pro-Choice Movement.

Zakiya: Um-hum. And how does SisterSong make that critique? Sort of what is the framework SisterSong uses?

Loretta: Well, the basis of our framework is the human rights framework.

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: What happened is that we had a chance as individual women of color to participate in the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, as well as the Beijing Fourth World Conference for Women in '95, and it turned out that our international counterparts are much more familiar with the human rights framework...

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: ...and they use it in their activism, where in the United States, we tend to limit ourselves to the Constitutional framework of *Roe v. Wade*. And so as women of color, we went to Beijing and Cairo and came home wanting to use that human rights framework here at home. And we first coined the term, "reproductive justice" as a way to marry reproductive rights to social justice.

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: We did that in '94, and this was even before SisterSong. But once SisterSong got organized, we decided to intentionally popularize the reproductive justice framework, as a way to express the human rights framework in a U.S. context. Um, and then we started articulating a concept that we call reproductive oppression...

Zakiya: **Hm.**

Loretta: ...which is those human rights violations that not only keep a woman from deciding what happens to her body, but causes...calls attention to the fact that every time a woman is pregnant—actually every time a woman even thinks she’s pregnant because misses a cycle...

Zakiya: **Um-hum.**

Loretta: ...she doesn’t even actually have to be pregnant to start counting the calendar. But anyway, she is trying to figure out what she’s going to do with this pregnancy in the context of what’s happening in her community.

Zakiya: **Um-hum.**

Loretta: So if she’s in a community that lacks access to healthcare...

Zakiya: **Um-hum.**

Loretta: ...if she’s in a community that’s suffering from immigration raids, or if she’s in a community where there’s a lot of violence and there’s a lot of surveyance by the state or by the police...

Zakiya: **Um-hum.**

Loretta: ...she has to take all of that into account before she can talk about what’s going to happen...

Zakiya: **Um-hum.**

Loretta: ...to her body or whether she’s going to keep or not keep the child. Does she know if she tells her partner that she’s pregnant, is she going to get beaten? If she tells her employer that she’s pregnant, is she going to get fired? I mean, all of these are the calculations that women—all women, make by the way.

Zakiya: **Um-hum.**

Loretta: It’s not just women of color. All women make these calculations. And so part of our criticism is that the pro-choice movement has removed all of those other complicating...

Zakiya: **Yeah.**

Loretta: ...factors from the discussion, as if it’s only, “Can I have an abortion?” “Can I afford it?” and “Is it legal?” I mean, they...

Zakiya: Um-hum.

Loretta: ...just reduce that whole really complicated woman's life to that.

Zakiya: Um-hum. That's right.

Loretta: And that is an objectification very similar to what the right wing does.

Zakiya: Hm.

Loretta: Only they objectify the fetus and the women and we're objectifying the woman and the fetus. So I mean...

Zakiya: Hm.

Loretta: ...many of us offer a critique about the anti-abortion and the Pro-Choice Movement for objectifying women. So anyway, we draw attention to reproductive oppression, because reproductive oppression is economic violence. It's, you know, immigration raids, it's violence against women, it's removal of children from foster...into foster care. It's all of those things.

Zakiya: Yeah.

Loretta: The lack of affordable housing. The lack of child care. All of these things form that...that quilt called reproductive oppression. And the only way to address reproductive oppression is through organizing people to protect their human rights.

Zakiya: Um-hum. Um-hum.

Loretta: And the full panoply of human rights, not just gender rights or sexual rights, but the full...the right to have a job paying a living wage or the right to receive services in a language other than English. I mean, all of these are human rights. And the other thing that we think the stigma should...the SisterSong perspective from the Pro-choice perspective is that we offer a very strong critique of what we call the population control movement.

Zakiya: Hm. Um-hum.

Loretta: Um, necessarily because of the opposition to women's rights and birth control and abortion by the right wing and the fundamentalist is develop what we call a unholy alliance between those of us who are into women's health and women's empowerment, and those of us...and those of our movement who are into fertility management and population control. And, yeah, we both share support for abortion rights and contraception, but for different reasons.

Zakiya: **Yeah, right.**

Loretta: Because there are parts of our movement that think there's a population explosion, that too many of the wrong people are having children...

Zakiya: **Um-hum.**

Loretta: ...and let's reduce those population by any means necessary. And they're responsible for dumping unsafe contraception...

Zakiya: **Um-hum.**

Loretta: ...contraceptive around the world, and ignoring the fact that it is systemic underdevelopment of these countries that is as responsible for population growth, as the lack of access to birth control.

Zakiya: **Um-hum.**

Loretta: You know, you could convince a woman in a developing country to have fewer children if you provided some actual economic and educational opportunity.

Zakiya: **Um-hum.**

Loretta: That actually works much more so than forcing contraceptions down... contraceptives down people's throat and still leaving them mired in poverty. I mean, so...

Zakiya: **And so SisterSong brings out the [inaudible].**

Loretta: We offer a critique of the population control wing of the Pro-Choice Movement...

Zakiya: **Um-hum.**

Loretta: ...which makes us feel good about yourselves, but then has a definite negative impact on our available funding, because the funders who fund the population control movement are the only available funders to fund the kind of work we do.

Zakiya: **Hm.**

Loretta: So we actually had a funder read our newsletter one day and tell us that they could fund us if we removed the phrase "population control" from our newsletter. So...

Zakiya: **So then how does SisterSong...**

Loretta: Life goes on.

Zakiya: Yeah [laughter]. So what are just sort of a couple of the projects that sort of SisterSong has been working on?

Loretta: Well, next week, oh [coughs] – excuse me – we have a press conference in Washington DC, [coughs] – excuse me – because we’re debuting a map that we developed in partnership with Ipas²⁹, which is...called Mapping Our Rights. It’s a state-by-state analysis of what laws affecting women’s reproduction exists in a state-by-state manner. So if you’re in Michigan and you click on Michigan you can find out all the laws on abortion, all the laws on contraceptive use, pharmacy refusal, midwifery, lesbian and gay rights—all of those things in one source, so that you’re not having to go all over the map looking for what’s happening and what affects you in your state. So we’re debuting the website called Mapping our Rights next week. One of the other things that Sister Song has to pay particular attention to is missing research data. It’s amazing, but we live in a country that if you can’t articulate it and if can’t quantify it, it might as well not exist. And so for example, in the research data from the CDC³⁰ or the National Institute for Health...National Institute of Health or Office of Women’s Health, there’s missing populations. For example, all Black, Caribbean and African immigrants are subsumed under the category, “African American,” even though their actual experiences may be very different someone whose family’s been in this country for 400 years. I mean, they’re using skin color to just group people together without really looking at the distinctions they should be making. Similarly from the Asian Pacific Islander population, that represents somewhere between 17 and 27 subgroups. And so you can’t easily compare the reproductive health outcomes of a woman from Guan from main—to mainland Japan which is by most definitions a First World country. I mean, you just can’t easily compare, you know, Bangladesh to Japan. But they’re all grouped together, missing populations. Another hybrid is Spanish-speaking Black women from Latin America. Again, grouped within Latin American women without...or South American women, without understanding that, you know, the English-speaking people on the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua may have more in common with people from Jamaica than they have with, you know, the Spanish-speaking people of Nicaragua. And so we’re having to challenge those researchers to...to disaggregate the date, to really look at the data in more specific ways, because if you’re working with a Pacific Islander community, you need data actually on Pacific Islanders. Not data that just groups everybody together. And then we find that those health conditions that predominantly affect women of color are understudied by the research institutions. I mean...fibroids is something that a lot of African American women have to deal with, but it’s being understudied in the Office of Women’s Health, or NIH or CDC because it’s not disproportionately affecting White people. So we have to call attention to missing research data. And so what we do is we publish a newspaper, a national newspaper, the only...called *Collective Voices*, which is the only one by and for women of color looking at our reproductive health issues. And then we feel that a big part of our mandate is to create spaces for women of color to come together. And so sponsored a lot of conferences and meetings and think tanks and things

²⁹ “Ipas works globally to increase women's ability to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights and to reduce abortion-related deaths and injuries.” See <http://www.ipas.org>

³⁰ CDC: Center for Disease Control

like that, so that women of color have a chance to put their heads together. And then we sponsor what we call our mini-communities, so that all the indigenous women can have a place to get together and talk about reproductive health issues or all the Latina women or even within a subset of the Latina...the Puerto Rican women within the Latinas, you know, those kinds of things.

Zakiya: Wow, so you're working on quite a few different projects and um

Loretta: Long as you don't call it population control...

Zakiya: Um, because something interesting you said was that a lot of U.S. organizations, sort of when you went to this conference weren't thinking of things in sort of a human rights framework. But you had also...you'd founded a sort of the National Center for Human Rights Education, sort of. And I'm wondering if you could talk a bit about that and how sort of that sort of connected with the work with Sister Song, this sort of founding this organization and...

Loretta: Yeah. Well, it was actually at the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995 that this light bulb went off in my head around the human rights framework. Because it was definitely the dominant framework that the global women's movement was using. And I saw Hilary Clinton up there promising that we were going to respect the human rights of women, and then I came home and I started asking people, you know, about the human rights framework, and almost everybody thought about the tortured prisoner in a jail somewhere as the stereotype of human rights. Nobody really knew what it meant. And so I actually had a chance to ask one of my mentors, a Reverend C. T. Vivian, who was the board chair for the Center for Democratic Renewal where I'd been working, about the human rights framework, and he surprised me, because he said, "Well, you know, Martin..." and he was referring to Dr. Martin Luther King³¹, because he was his field director. I mean I would never be so rude as to call him "Martin."

Zakiya: [laughs]

Loretta: But he could because they were best friends. He said, "Well, Martin never meant to build the civil rights movement." And I was like, "What you talking about?" you know, because...you know, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King civil rights leader is like one word [laughs], you know, so what are you talking about? And he went on to say, "Martin meant to build a human rights movement." And he actually showed me copies of Dr. King's last Sunday sermon, where he called on us to build a human rights movement and then he was assassinated four days later. And so I was like, "Well, why hasn't nobody done this?" I mean, why, in 1995 nobody's done it. And then he says, "I don't know." And I said, "Well, certainly we can't fight for rights we don't know about, so I went on to, you know, to found the National Center for Human Rights Education to teach

³¹ *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* is one of the most recognized civil rights leaders in U.S. history and the most visible advocate for non-violence and direct action as methods for social change. King was the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. On the 4th of April 1968, King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee.

us about human rights. I just found out though a decade later...Carol Anderson has written this fabulous book called, *Eyes Off the Prize*, in which she details how the African American Movement of the 1950s, particularly the NAACP, intentionally jettisoned the human right framework for fear of being called communist. And I swear, that's the missing why-don't-we-know-about-it question that I asked ten years ago. Because it had intentionally been abandoned in this war between W.E. B. DuBois and Walter White, with, you know, male egos—ah, forgive me. But anyway—I mean, I don't mind sleeping with men, but working with them is a whole 'nother thing. But, you know, the whole movement got set back between this battle between DuBois and Walter White, where the NAACP said, "We will not even say the word human rights, we will only say the word civil rights." And I was like, okay. So anyway, short answer. There are eight categories of human rights: civil rights, political rights, economic rights, social rights, cultural rights, environmental rights, developmental rights, and sexual human rights. And so my job at the National Center for Human Rights Education was to teach people what all those categories of human rights are, and how to leverage those categories in our activism for social change. And so Sister Song felt that for us to talk about what women of color need, we need to talk about the right to a living wage, the right to affordable housing, the right to healthcare, the right to be free from violence. You know, all of these affect our reproductive destinies. You just can't talk about pregnant or not. And so we felt that the human rights framework was the appropriate framework for us, but at the same time, we weren't sure that the American public would understand the human rights framework, because it does take that intervention to teach us about it. And so, again, we use the phrase "reproductive justice" as reproductive rights married to social justice as...as what we mean. Now we've since evolved our definition of reproductive justice. Because now we tend to see it as the full achievement and protection of women's human rights. So that the labor, the reproduction, the sexuality of women and girls can no longer be exploited. Um, and the end of reproductive oppression. We've got a lot of discussion papers about it. And in a way, we're like doing cutting edge analyses, because we're looking at all the old theories of intersectionality. People like Kim Crenshaw³² and Audre Lorde³³ and Tony Cade Bambara even wrote about what we're looking at, intersectionality through a reproductive rights lens. The same way the Anita Hill case made us look at sexual harassment through an intersectional lens and stuff like that. And so that's why Sister Song is kind of like...it's not only exciting to us as women of color, but it's exciting to White women who are looking for a radical home. You know, and so that's what we've kind of become.

Zakiya: So I want to, you know, I have a few more questions. And I want to talk about something that might seem like a bit of a shift, but even before going to the National Center for Human Rights Education, you were actually working on the Center for Democratic Renewal, which was known as a sort of before-hand the anti-Klan network. And some would see that as a bit of a shift to go from that sort of

³² *Kimberle Crenshaw* is one of the leading theorists on the concept of "intersectionality" which considers how experiences of women of color are affected not just by gender, as is theorized in mainstream feminist thought, but also race.

³³ *Audre Lorde* (1934-1992) was an African-American lesbian poet and feminist theorist.

work to human rights to reproductive rights. And I just sort of wondering if you could talk about sort of, well, how you see the connection between those areas of like reproductive rights organizing, human rights organizing, and fighting the right...

Loretta: Well, actually the biggest shift was that after 15 or 20 years working in the women's movement, I got offered a job to work in the civil rights movement. And I...I have to honestly say I didn't know much about the civil rights movement. I had launched my career in the women's movement. And I was a Black person, but that don't mean I knew about civil rights. I mean, you don't get it through osmosis biology. You actually have to work. And so when they first offered me the job as program director at CDR, I was a little skeptical, because the civil rights movement is still a strongly patriarchal movement. And it is a extremely religious movement. Now, I neither believe in the patriarchy nor religion so I felt like a bad fit. But I'm glad I took the job because one of the things that frustrated me about working in the women's movement is I had to work on racism through a gendered lens. Where as when you're work...taking in the Ku Klux Klan, you get to work on racism. White supremacy, no lenses need apply. You really get to work directly on racism and White supremacy and understanding the interplay between the far right, the religious right, the ultra-conservatives like, you know, the George Bushes of the world. And then the institutional everyday bigots we have to put up with. Understanding the relationship between those four distinct but cooperative forces. And so it felt like a leap going from women's rights to civil rights. But then transitioning from civil rights to human rights didn't seem like such a big leap. Because as I say, civil rights is one of the categories of human rights. And then bringing it all together into reproductive justice where I am. It feels very smooth to me. But I have to honestly say the five years I spent monitoring hate groups gave me an understanding of White supremacy that I still use today. Because I actually do believe that a large fight...a part of the fight over reproductive rights and abortion rights is about forcing White women to have more babies. I don't think White America really wants women of color to have more babies. I mean, nothing in our history has convinced me that they suddenly find our children desirable, you know? [laughs] But I do think that they're trying to outlaw abortion and contraception as a form of population control directed towards White women. Young White people at that. I mean, when you couple sexual ignorance, abstinence education, the removal of birth control and prohibitions on abortion into one seamless narrative, the only thing you're going to end up with is a lot more White babies for very young women. That's the only thing that's going to happen with that scenario. And it's hard for me to be persuaded that it's accidental. That they don't know what they're doing. And I think people of color end up being road kill in that scenario. They don't really mean for us to have more babies. They don't really mean for us to, you know, to...to fall into that trap. And so an analysis of White supremacy is something that I think the Pro-Choice Movement does too little of. They are concerned, for example, that there's only one remaining abortion clinic in Mississippi. But they're oblivious to the way that anti-woman politics is used to usher in an anti-civil rights agenda in Mississippi. Because this is the state that vote to maintain the Confederate flag, too. And so because of their failure to look at the intersection of racial and gender politics, they only address the gender side, without addressing the racial side, and they don't see how other conservatives in Mississippi mobilize their racist vote using gender issues, and they

mobilize the gender vote using racial issues, and it really works like Mississippi politics have always worked. But you have the women's movement only looking at the gender aspects, as if the racism is over. And it takes women of color to add that very special analysis to that situation.

Zakiya: Hm. So you've actually written on, you know, all the sort of topics that we've talked about thus far. And when people often sort of talk about scholar activists, they often mean people in the academy who sort of remain connected to organizations outside the academy. But you're...you've been very involved outside the academy and you've also begun to publish though, and you've been writing consistently things that are read outside and inside the academy. So it just...sort of talking, thinking about sort of your relationship between activism and publishing, sort of how you see yourself as sort of scholar-activist/activist-scholar, sort of how that works for you.

Loretta: If anything, I am certainly an accidental writer. I did not plan on being a writer. But what I've found in organizing communities of color, particularly Black women, is that we didn't know our own history. I mean, when I had to mobilize Black women for the marches in the '80s I mean, the first thing would come out of our mouths is, "We don't care about that stuff, that's White women's issues." You know. And I was like wait a moment. You know, far as I know, Black women have always cared about our fertility. We were forced breeders under slavery. I mean, how can we not care about this stuff? It didn't make sense to me. And so I started doing research to bolster my arguments and I started talking about, you know, how slaves refused to have babies, for whole plantations, as a way of resisting slavery and, you know, what happened after slavery was that the Black birth rate was cut in half, and I started talking about what happened when the Black women's newspapers of the time were talking about motherhood at our own discretion versus forced breeding and all of that. And once I started bringing in that historical data, I found it wasn't compiled anywhere. It wasn't put together. I was having to, you know, do some very primitive historical research to find this stuff, because I didn't know anything about primary, secondary, sources. I didn't know any of that stuff. I still don't actually know. I fake it. Um, and so it eventually ended up being a manuscript called "African American women and Abortion" that I wrote in '92, you know, after about five or six years of research. And that was because of partnership with those women in the academy. I have to pay particular tribute to woman named Stanlie James who's at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, because Stanlie brought me up there to give a lecture on Black women's activism, and then she was the one that just hounded me till I wrote it down, just hounded me till I wrote it down. And eventually, I published it in her and Abena Busia's anthology— "African American Women and Abortion". So then partnership with my girlfriends in the academy that kind of forced me to keep writing more so than me feeling like I'm a writer. I mean, I always cringe when someone calls me a writer, and I'm like, I don't think so. I actually did my best writing of proposals, trying to keep my organizations afloat. But I'm slowly beginning to accept that I can, you know, at least do historical research and put it together in a narrative that convinces us that we have a history of organizing and stuff like that. I mean, I would never qualify I think as a legitimate historian, but I certainly can qualify as

a, like you say, scholar-activist – emphasis on activist less on the scholar. But I am in college getting a degree in Women’s Studies trying to add some theory to my 35 years of practice. So eventually when I emerge from this process with a Ph.D. in Women’s Studies then I’ll have more emphasis on the scholar than the activist part.

Zakiya: **Wow. So I really just have one more question, which is kind of a big one, but maybe you can just say a couple words on it, which is sort of, what do you think will be the role of sort of young people, particularly women in like, developing the path of like women’s organizing and particularly around reproductive rights organizing?**

Loretta: What will be the role of young women, and young people?

Zakiya: **Particularly of color obviously, but...**

Loretta: Well, one thing I’ve learned from a woman back when I was 21 years old and mouthy and thought that I knew everything, I met this woman named Ruth—I’ve forgotten her last name. But she had known Mary McCleod Bethune³⁴. So that’s how old she was. And she had this, you know, blue hair that older Black women, you know, favored at one time and the tight girdles and stuff. And Ruth and I were both on the Commission for Women, the DC Commission for Women. And Ruth one time gently explained to me when I was talking about their timidity. I was actually, you know, mouthy, and “Why don’t we go to the mayor’s office and tell him off,” and, you know we were under Marion Barry, so we had a whole lot to tell him. But anyway, and she was like “Loretta, you know, chill.” She didn’t use this word, but basically said “Shut up,” you know, but...And she said our job was to open the door so that women like you could get in. But if you think a woman like you with that hair sticking out all over your head – because these are in the baby dread days – you know [laughs], and, you know, your lack of polish, your lack of tact...I mean, she didn’t say it in this many words, but this is what she was able to...would have gotten in the door, it wouldn’t have happened. And so our job was to open the door, your job is to kick it open. And if you really know your job, you won’t be a gatekeeper keeping other people out. You know? And so that’s what I got when I was in my twenties. So I think every generation has the right to define the struggle on their own terms. And it’s not our right to look back or forward, to tell people what they should or should not be doing. If you are doing your job, you’re trying to figure out how to best play the hand you’ve been dealt. And if you preoccupy yourself with that, the rest will take care of itself. I’m not a believer in second...in third wave feminism, no. That, I get in a lot of trouble for saying that. Because frankly, I don’t think the second wave is over. And I’m not hearing anything third wave feminists are saying that is that original from what women of color have said all along. Until you make a sharply revolutionary take. Now if the third wave feminists wanted to do something really original, I think it would be to build a human rights movement that hasn’t happened yet

³⁴ *Mary McCleod Bethune* (1875-1955) grew up in poverty in South Carolina but due to her scholastic ability was able to receive scholarships. She organized local voting rights campaigns, stood up against the Ku Klux Klan and became a sought-after speaker. She was appointed to various government posts, often as the first African American.

in this country. But continuing to argue identity politics endlessly is scarcely not original enough for me to consider it a whole new wave [laughs]. Um...but that's, you know, Loretta's personal critique. I also don't think we're going to build successfully the women's movement if we don't spend a lot of time talking about the role of men. Because we're not going to make this revolution by ourselves. Just like Black folks could not end racism without the participation of White folks. You know, we've got to figure out how to build movement in which everybody's included and nobody's left out. And so I think we've got to go beyond identity politics and really focus on our commonality as human beings. But not as a little namby-pamby, color-blind way. I like you to notice that I'm Black and I think you're crazy if you don't. But at the same time, you know, I am not defined by my oppressions so nobody should be.

Zakiya: **Oh, I think that's a great place for us to stop. I'd like to thank you for joining us today for this interview.**

Loretta: Well, thank you. Thanks for having me.

Zakiya: **No problem. Thank you.**

The End