



FEMINIST LEGAL COALITIONS AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS: INTERSECTIONAL RESISTANCE IN CONTEMPORARY LEGAL BATTLES

BY GRACE LAW WOODHOUSE

UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

This paper aims to examine the evolution and efficacy of feminist legal coalitions within reproductive rights advocacy through an intersectional lens. Drawing on critical legal theory and reproductive justice frameworks, it analyses how contemporary coalitions navigate the complexities of inclusive representation while mounting legal challenges to restrictive legislation. By examining case studies of successful intersectional advocacy groups, the research demonstrates how coalition-building strategies that centre marginalised voices strengthen both legal intervention and community mobilisation efforts. The analysis particularly focuses on how these coalitions interrupt oppressive legal frameworks whilst building sustainable, intersectional movements for reproductive justice.

Keywords: feminist legal coalitions, reproductive rights, reproductive justice, legal advocacy, marginalised voices, legal intervention, community mobilisation

EDITED BY HELENA OSIE BISHOP, COPY EDITED BY EMMI WILKINSON,
REVIEWED BY ELISE CORRY, ART BY EMMI WILKINSON

The womb represents one of the most contested and politicised spaces in society, simultaneously subject to intense surveillance and control through criminalisation, legislation, and regulation. In response, feminists have had to fight continuously for what should be a guaranteed and basic set of human rights. Reproductive rights advocacy has evolved over time; gestating from a single-issue focus to an intersectional approach, representing a vital transformation in feminist legal action. Earlier movements centred around reproductive rights often only represented abortion access and primarily reflected the concerns of white women from a middle-class background. This framework was limiting, and failed to address how reproductive oppression intersects with multiple systems of oppression: racism, classism, ableism, and immigration status to name a few.

The reproductive justice movement, pioneered by women of colour in the 1990s (Ross, 2018), was birthed to challenge this narrow focus. A shift that demanded recognition of reproductive freedom encompassing more than the right to abortion, but also the right to have children, to parent with dignity, and to live in healthy, safe communities. This new framework was intersectional and now guides contemporary feminist legal coalitions in developing more inclusive and effective advocacy strategies.

Contemporary feminist legal coalitions are networks of organisations and practitioners that combine legal advocacy with intersectional feminist principles. They are typically comprised of feminist lawyers, civil rights organisations, grassroots activists, and academic institutions working together to advance gender justice through strategic litigation, policy form and community organising. Characterised by their commitment to addressing multiple, intersecting forms of oppression, they emphasise the importance of incorporating diverse voices and experiences in legal strategy development. These coalitions often employ participatory decision-making processes and prioritise leadership from marginalised communities to ensure their legal work remains grounded in lived experiences and community needs.

This paper argues that contemporary reproductive rights advocacy requires movement beyond the traditional

single-issue framework and the adoption of intersectional approaches that more aptly recognise and address how restrictive legislation disproportionality impacts marginalised communities. Without an intersectional lens to examine how systems of oppression intersect and compound, legal advocacy efforts will continue to fail those most vulnerable to reproductive oppression. Through analysis of successful coalition models that centre marginalised voices and employ multi-faceted advocacy strategies, this research demonstrates how intersectional frameworks empower both legal interventions and community mobilisation efforts, whilst continuing to develop sustainable movements for reproductive justice.

Spanning from early single-issue advocacy to contemporary intersectional movements, I will examine how feminist legal coalitions have evolved in their approach to reproductive rights, specifically within the United States, since this is the global eye tends to rest. I do however wish to stress the importance to the reader of looking also to countries not in the spotlight where similar fights for justice are ongoing. I will trace key transformations in coalition-building strategies, organisational structures, and advocacy frameworks, with a particular focus on how marginalised voices have shaped movement evolution. Specifically, I aim to focus on how contemporary coalitions work to interrupt oppressive legislation through multi-faceted strategies, combining litigation, grassroots organisation, and public education. The examination of successful case studies will additionally demonstrate how centring marginalised voices in both leadership and strategy development can lead to more effective legal interventions and sustainable movement building.

Section I: Historical Context

The early reproductive rights movement in the United States primarily centred on a narrow conception of abortion rights, reflecting a myopic focus on choice-based frameworks. This single-issue approach failed in recognising the multiple systems of oppression that are at play, creating distinct experiences of reproductive oppression (Crenshaw, 1991), and instead reflecting white women's reproductive liberation (Ross, 2018). Dominated by middle-class white feminists, the movement often overlooked the fact that access to

reproductive healthcare was fundamentally shaped by racial and economic inequality (Roberts, 1997).

Earlier feminist movements also exhibited significant blind spots, regarding class and racial dynamics. Mainstream reproductive rights organisations commonly marginalised the concerns of women of colour, who faced additional barriers such as voting rights, freedom of movement, and environmental racism that affected maternal health outcomes (Ross, 2018). These oversights were compounded by 'privileged tunnel vision' (Luna, 2020), the failure to recognise how poverty, lack of healthcare access, and systematic racism creates fundamentally different reproductive justice needs for marginalised communities.



The exclusion of immigrant and disabled women's perspectives further limited the movement's effectiveness. Immigration status creates unique, often invisible vulnerabilities in accessing reproductive healthcare (Spade, 2015), and disabled women faced both explicit discrimination and implicit bias in reproductive healthcare settings. Whilst early movement victories are still cause for celebration, they are an intersectional failure and thus cannot be remembered as championing the needs of those facing multiple, overlapping forms of oppression.

The transition towards more intersectional frameworks marked a critical evolution in the reproductive rights advocacy. Women-of-colour activists, frustrated with the limitations of mainstream reproductive rights discourse, then developed the reproductive justice framework in the 1990s (Ross, 2018). This new paradigm expanded far beyond initial narrow focuses, and began to address the complex interplay of racial, economic, and social factors that are affecting reproductive autonomy.

It directly challenged the choice-based rhetoric that had ran through earlier movements (Luna, 2020) and reflected a growing understanding that "choice" held little meaning if systematic barriers remained unaddressed. This theoretical evolution enabled more effective challenges to structural inequities but also represented a crucial development through the integration of economic justice concerns. Coalitions began to explicitly link reproductive rights to broader demands for healthcare access, living wages, and social support systems (Spade, 2015). This expansion allowed movements to further address the root causes of reproductive oppression, whilst still building stronger coalitions across social justice movements.

Section II: Contemporary Coalition Building

Contemporary reproductive justice coalitions have since developed more sophisticated organisational structures that are prioritising intersectional leadership and community accountability. SisterSong is one such organisation, a pioneering model for coalitions that explicitly centre the leadership of those who are most impacted by reproductive oppression. SisterSong's mission is to "strengthen and amplify the collective voices of indigenous women and women of colour to achieve reproductive justice by eradicating reproductive oppression and securing human rights" (SisterSong, 2025), a form of intentional inclusivity (Luna, 2020) that moves beyond token representation and assures meaningful decision-making power is available for those who have previously been silenced or ignored. Analysis of successful coalition models like SisterSong reveals several key characteristics: (i) funding structures that prioritise community control and reduce dependence on restrictive grant requirements; (ii) implementation of structural inclusion mechanisms (Crenshaw, 2019); and (iii) development of robust accountability frameworks. A deeper dive into these three characteristics reveals the success of these organisations, providing a platform for others to draw from in future efforts.

Firstly, financial autonomy. Traditional nonprofit funding is often attached to funders that may compromise movement objectives or shift priorities away from community needs. Successful coalitions have countered this by implementing diverse funding streams (i.e., membership dues, community-supported

fundraising events, and unrestricted donations). Such a successful model also requires careful vetting of potential external funders to ensure alignment with the movement values, and maintenance of clear boundaries around programmatic autonomy. This autonomy enables “movement-accountable organising” (Spade, 2015), advocacy that is directly responsive to community needs, rather than the priorities of the donors. When organisations aren’t restricted by the requirements of their funders, or deliverables of grants they have been rewarded, they can more quickly pivot strategies based on emerging community needs and take bolder political stances that could have alienated traditional donors. This independence is particularly valuable for providing rapid responses for community needs, removing the requirement for funder approval.

Secondly, the implementation of formal processes that ensures leadership reflects the constituencies of the movement – structural inclusion mechanisms (Crenshaw, 2019). These include specific quotas for board representation, leadership development programs targeting underrepresented communities, and mandatory inclusion of grassroots organisers in executive positions. A prime example of this is Collective Power’s comprehensive structural inclusion framework that has yielded measurable results in representative leadership. Their board composition requirements mandate that both co-president positions be held by women of colour, with 75% of board seats reserved for program alumni to ensure deep connection to community needs. The organisation has also successfully maintained over three-quarters of their partner organisations being BIPOC-led, demonstrating their commitment to centring marginalised voices. Moreso, their intern cohort demographics mirror the communities most impacted by reproductive justice issues: 44% identify as BIPOC, 56% as LGBTQIA+, and 38% are first-generation college students. Their systematic approach to leadership development has helped in the training of over 900 community and student activists spanning 99 organisations, creating a pipeline of representative leadership that spans the reproductive justice movement (Collective Power, 2024). An approach such as this acknowledges that rights of any kind cannot be understood through single-issue frameworks and instead require examination of how

multiple systems of oppression are at play (Collins, 2015). The work requires building coalitions across different communities and movements whilst centring the experience and leadership of those most impacted.



Finally, the most successful coalitions have developed and implemented robust accountability frameworks by drawing on participatory action research methodologies. Through this, these organisations regularly assess their alignment with desired community priorities through “continuous feedback loops” (Ross & Solinger, 2017). Having these in place ensures coalition strategies remain grounded in the lived experiences of those most impacted by reproductive oppression. Achieving meaningful accountability requires the breakdown and rebuilding of traditional hierarchies within such organisations (Luna, 2020), such as by implementing community advisory boards. These are to be composed primarily of individuals directly impacted by oppression, and hold significant power over organisational decision-making, like budget allocation and campaign priorities. Participatory decision-making processes are a further way of democratising strategic planning, thereby maintaining accountability within coalitions. Organisations have undergone a framework of transformative organisation (Spade, 2015), to create consensus-based models that prioritise the voices of marginalised community members. These processes often include regular community assemblies, participatory budgeting initiatives, and collective strategy development sessions. This approach has entirely re-shaped the landscape of reproductive rights advocacy (Roberts, 1997) by ensuring that strategies of change come from those who will most benefit from them, rather than being imposed by traditional power structures that are detached to the actual issue. This dynamic responsiveness has proven vital in navigating the complex relationship between legal advocacy and grassroots organising, ensuring that neither approach becomes disconnected from community priorities.

The complex landscape of reproductive rights expands far beyond the global north. The conceptualisation of

intersectionality as 'praxis' (Collins, 2015) offers valuable insights for understanding these global south movements, illustrating how theory and action interweave in reproductive justice work. Intersectionality functions not just as theory but also as a form of critical praxis that connects knowledge and action. This relationship manifests in how global south coalitions navigate complex cultural, economic, and political landscapes whilst continually addressing reproductive rights. Reproductive justice in India illustrates this critical challenge, demonstrated by research from Rajasthan where the absence of robust state mechanisms and legal frameworks for gender equity creates significant barriers to accessing reproductive care. Two notable coalitions in the area (legal aid interventions) have focused on addressing domestic violence and maternal mortality to bridge the gap between ineffective policies and reproductive rights rhetoric (Madhok et al., 2014). Both efforts reveal the same as all other contemporary coalitions: achieving reproductive justice requires more than isolated legal initiatives by individuals. It calls upon comprehensive policy reforms and coordinated partnerships between state institutions and progressive coalition groups.



Section III: Bridging Legal Advocacy and Organisation

The tension between legal advocacy, coalition and grassroots organising presents unique challenges for reproductive justice organisations that are committed to intersectional approaches. Legal strategies often need specialised expertise and can thereby end up pushing organisations towards professionalisation, which has the potential to create distance from community-based organising. Despite this, successful coalitions have been able to create innovative approaches that bridge this divide.

At the organisational level, top coalitions benefit from the aforementioned financial structures, inclusion networks, and accountability frameworks. Rather than simply treating legal advocacy and grassroots

mobilisation as separate tracks, these models ensure legal strategies emerge from, and remain accountable to, community organising efforts. So, legal teams may regularly participate in community meetings and organising sessions, whilst grassroots organisers contribute directly to legal strategy development. This integrated approach helps prevent the professionalisation trap (Spade, 2015), whereby organisations become overly focused on legal expertise at the expense of community power-building. Regular strategy sessions can bring together lawyers, organisers, and community members to collectively analyse how legal tools can best support broader movement objectives while avoiding approaches that might undermine grassroots power. The success of this model relies heavily on intentionally building legal and advocacy skills within affected communities, alongside ensuring legal professionals develop understanding community organisation principles, a symbiotic relationship of sorts. This bidirectional skill-sharing helps to bridge traditional divides between legal and organising work and still maintains a strong intersectional analysis through both approaches. Additionally, formal inclusion mechanisms ensure that leadership continues to reflect movement constituencies, including specific quotas for board representation and leadership development programs targeting underrepresented communities.

The success of these integrated advocacy models is particularly evident in recent efforts to challenge restrictive legislation. The combination of transformative leadership development, strong accountability mechanisms, and strategic coalition-building has created a strong foundation for organisations to effectively interrupt and challenge oppressive policies. By maintaining a bridge between legal advocacy and organisation, these coalitions are uniquely positioned to mount comprehensive challenges to restrictive legislation through multiple channels simultaneously. The following examines specifically how these organisational structures and principles translate into effective legal and advocacy strategies.

Section IV: Interrupting Restrictive Legislation

Recent legal challenges to restrictive reproductive legislation clearly demonstrate the effectiveness of

intersectional approaches in both litigation strategy and movement building. Successful challenges are increasingly reliant on multi-dimensional advocacy (Luna, 2020), coordinated efforts that combine traditional legal arguments with broader social justice frameworks, and community mobilisation. Analysis of recent cases reveal several key strategic innovations: Legal teams have successfully expanded standing arguments by demonstrating how restrictive policies more-often-than-not disproportionately impact marginalised communities. This approach moves far beyond traditional privacy-based arguments to centre the experiences of those facing multiple, intersecting barriers to care (Ross & Solinger, 2017). Cases increasingly incorporate expert testimony and empirical evidence that documents how restrictions compound existing healthcare disparities, particularly for low-income communities and communities of colour. In *Whole Woman's Health v. Hellerstedt* (2016), extensive evidence was presented to reveal how Texas's TRAP laws would force the closure of clinics that predominantly served low-income and rural communities, forcing patients to travel hundreds of miles for care, a burden that fell disproportionately on women of colour who often lack transportation and flexible work schedules that are more available to white women (Zeytinoglu & Muteshi, 2000).

Amicus brief strategies have evolved to amplify marginalised voices within formal legal proceedings. Drawing on a framework of structural inclusion (Crenshaw, 2019), coalitions have developed more sophisticated processes for gathering and presenting community testimony. These briefs often feature experiential evidence (Spade, 2015), a documentation of how policies impact specific communities, detailing those facing multiple forms of discrimination. An approach like this has proven effective in demonstrating the real-world implications of seemingly neutral regulations.

Public education campaigns have become increasingly sophisticated in their integration with litigation strategies. Successful coalitions have developed coordinated messaging that connects individual cases to broader systematic issues, explicitly addressing the interconnected nature of reproductive education

(Roberts, 1997) and helping both the courts and public understand how apparently discrete restrictions contribute to broader patterns of marginalisations.



The effectiveness of these integrated approaches is evident in several recent victories. For instance, challenges to targeted regulation of abortion providers (TRAP laws) have successfully incorporated evidence of their disparate impact on rural communities and communities of colour. This intersectional framework has been able to transform fundamentally the way courts understand the burden analysis (Luna, 2020) in reproductive rights cases. Similarly, challenges to insurance coverage restrictions have effectively demonstrated their interconnection with broader healthcare access issues, particularly for immigrant communities and low-income workers. These legal wins reflect a paradigm shift in reproductive rights advocacy – one that recognises legal strategy as a single component of broader movement building. Through maintenance of strong connections to grassroots organising and centring marginalised voices, these approaches have proven more effective at securing sustainable policy changes while continuing to build long-term movement power.

Coalition tactics for legislative intervention have likewise evolved significantly to incorporate multiple strategic approaches to challenge restrictive policies. Rapid response networks represent a critical infrastructure for effective legislative intervention, enabling organisations to mobilise quickly when threats emerge. These networks leverage the continuous feedback loops (Ross & Solinger, 2017) to maintain real-time communication between affected communities and legal advocates. Referring to *Whole Woman's Health v. Hellerstedt* (2016), a broad coalition of reproductive justice organisations demonstrated the power of rapid mobilisation by quickly assembling medical experts,

community advocates, and healthcare providers to challenger Texas's hospital admitting privileges requirement. The coalition's swift response included coordinating testimony from dozens of affected clinics, organising community impact documentation, and mobilising unprecedented numbers of amicus briefs from medical professionals (Sam & Harper, 2018). This cooperative effort successfully demonstrated how the admitting privileges requirement would create an 'undue burden' by forcing many clinics to close without any medical justification. The success of the coalition ultimately led to a landmark Supreme Court victory that strengthened the legal framework for challenging similar restrictions nationwide (Greenhouse & Siegel, 2016). This landmark decision not only set important legal precedent but also catalysed the development of more sophisticated intersectional messaging strategies.



These strategies reflect the interconnected nature of reproductive oppression, explicitly connecting individual cases to broader systemic issues, helping courts and public understand how apparently discrete restrictions contribute to larger patterns of marginalisation. The National Network of Abortion Funds' challenge to insurance coverage restrictions exemplifies this approach through their innovative coalition structure. Their consensus-based decision-making model prioritises marginalised voices in strategic planning and budgeting decisions, whilst still maintaining robust community feedback channels through regular surveys and focus groups (National Network of Abortion Funds, 2015). This coalition demonstrated effectively how insurance restrictions create compound barriers for specific communities, particularly immigrant families and low-income workers. Their legal strategy successfully integrated community testimony with empirical evidence, demonstrating how coverage restrictions intersect with broader healthcare access issues. These examples of intersectional coalition-building strategies can directly inform future advocacy approaches. The preceding analysis of rapid response networks and coordinated legal interventions demonstrates how organisations

have successfully leveraged intersectional frameworks to challenge restrictive legislation whilst building sustainable movement infrastructure.

Conclusions

The evolution of reproductive justice advocacy reveals the critical importance of intersectional approaches in strengthening both legal and grassroots efforts. Successful coalitions have managed to revise traditional models simply by centring marginalised voices and experiences. This transformation is evident in the sophisticated organisational structures that have emerged which place genuine community control at the forefront of their work, whilst still maintaining legal effectiveness. Integrated approaches such as these produce more sustainable and far-reaching victories (Ross & Salinger, 2017) than traditional single-issue advocacy.

Looking forward, several key recommendations emerge for future coalition-building efforts. Firstly, organisations must continue strengthening structural inclusion mechanisms to ensure that leadership authentically reflects movement constituencies (Crenshaw, 2019). Secondly, coalitions must further develop hybrid advocacy models that bridge the traditional divide between legal expertise and community organising (Spade, 2015). And finally, movements must expand into global solidarity networks to effectively address the increasingly transnational nature of reproductive oppression.

These findings suggest that the future of reproductive justice advocacy lies in deepening intersectional analysis alongside advancing and expanding transnational coalition-building. As reproductive rights face unprecedented and building challenges across the world, the sophisticated integration of legal advocacy and grassroots organising developed by these movements offers crucial lessons for advancing reproductive justice across borders and communities. As we continue to build intersectional coalitions and challenge oppressive systems, we must work to transform not just the womb, but also the woman, the community, and the wider world from a site of political contestation and control into a space of reproductive freedom, autonomy, and justice for all.

References:

Books:

Crenshaw, K. (2019). *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings*. The New Press.

Luna, Z. (2020). *Reproductive Rights as Human Rights: Women of Color and the Fight for Reproductive Justice*. NYU Press.

Roberts, D. (1997). *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*. Pantheon Books.

Ross, L., & Solinger, R. (2017).

Reproductive Justice: An Introduction. University of California Press.

Spade, D. (2015). *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. Duke University Press.

Journals and Key Cases:

Austin, N. and Harper, S. (2018). Assessing the impact of TRAP laws on abortion and women's health in the USA: a systematic review. *BMJ Sexual & Reproductive Health*, 44(2), pp.128–134. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjsrh-2017-101866>.

Collins, P.H. (2015). Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas. *Annual Review of Sociology*, [online] 41(1), pp.1–20. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112142>.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-1299.

Greenhouse, L. and Siegel, R. (2016). *The Difference a Whole Woman Makes: Protection for the Abortion Right After Whole Woman's Health*.

<https://ssrn.com/abstract=2838562>

Madhok, S., Unnithan, M. and Heitmeyer, C. (2014). On reproductive justice: 'domestic violence', rights and the law in India. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 16(9/10), pp.1231–1244. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/24741691>.

Ross, L. J. (2018) 'Reproductive Justice as Intersectional Feminist Activism', *Souls*, 19(3), pp. 286–314. doi: 10.1080/10999949.2017.1389634.

Whole Woman's Health v. Hellerstedt, 579 U.S. ____ (2016)

Zeytinoglu, I.U. & Muteshi, J.K. 2000, "A critical review of flexible labour: gender, race and class dimensions of economic restructuring", *Resources for Feminist Research*, vol. 27, no. 3, pp. 97-120.

Websites:

Collective Power. (2024). Impact Report FY24. Retrieved March 7, 2025, from https://collectivepowerrj.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Collective_Power_Impact_Report_FY24_digital_F1.pdf

National Network of Abortion Funds. (2025). What We Do. Retrieved March 7, 2025, from <https://abortionfunds.org/what-we-do/>

Sister Song. (2025). *Sister Song*. Retrieved March 2nd, 2025, from: <https://www.sistersong.net>.