

Book Review

Ross, L., & Solinger, R. (2017). *Reproductive justice: An introduction (Vol. 1)*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Reviewed by Rebecca J. McCloskey, MSW, LISW
Ohio State University

Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics, Volume 14, Number 2 (2017)
Copyright 2017, ASWB

This text may be freely shared among individuals, but it may not be republished in any medium without express written consent from the authors and advance notification of ASWB.

Loretta Ross is currently a visiting associate professor at Hampshire College. She is a cofounder of SisterSong, an organization focused on improving reproductive rights for marginalized women. Ross has a 40-year history as a human rights activist and played a key role in coining the term, “reproductive justice.” Rickie Solinger is a historian and curator who has 30 years of experience writing scholarly articles and books about reproductive and welfare politics. She is a founding member of Women United for Justice, Community and Family, a grassroots organization in Boulder, CO working to improve the welfare system for low-income women. *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* is the first book the pair has written together.

Ross and Solinger’s work should be a compulsory read for social workers and all people working to promote reproductive rights. The book details the troubled history of the movement for reproductive justice in America and ultimately reframes the argument for reproductive rights from one solely based on individual choice to one that considers broader, community implications. Powerful storytelling highlights the errors of the former myopic approach and the impact of neoliberalism and institutionalized racism on the movement. The authors’ clearly articulated perspective provides context and richness to the current, limited focus on abortion rights and outlines future directions for an all-inclusive reproductive justice activism that utilizes a human rights framework. The authors’ approach makes it manageable to see the

inseparability between the fight for reproductive justice and challenging mainstream ideologies and systems that serve to perpetuate all types of oppression. Social workers invested in reproductive justice for all will be compelled to recognize that their progress absolutely depends upon progress made in larger anti-neoliberalism and anti-racist movements like Black Lives Matter.

Chapter One, “A Reproductive Justice History,” starts with a comprehensive definition of reproductive justice created by a group of Black female activists that includes the right to not have children; the right to have children; and the right to parent children in a safe, supportive environment. In providing a detailed history of the rise of the reproductive justice movement, the authors emphasize the importance of context and resources in supporting these rights. The nation’s socio-political culture and dominant beliefs about class, disability, and race impact which groups of people benefit from reproductive rights’ protections and which groups are denied them.

The foundational chapter tells the story of division between races within the fight for reproductive rights; White women, particularly those of middle-and-upper-class, have not understood the unique struggles of Women of Color and instead capitalized on racism in attempts to get their own needs met. White activists initially defined reproductive rights as limited to birth control and abortion access. Ignoring the context in which the state views White reproduction as most valuable,

the resulting policies have harmed women from all races, but disproportionately affect women of color. Chapter One concludes by detailing the more inclusive definition of reproductive justice from the perspective of Women of Color advocates: It is a human right to have children as much as it is to prevent conception. Without a basic recognition of the human right of bodily self-determination, reproductive justice cannot be achieved. Equally important, however, is that basic human rights (e.g. right to health-care, right to education, right to a living wage, etc.) are pre-requisites for achieving reproductive justice.

Chapter Two, “Reproductive Justice in the Twenty-First Century” builds on the discourse for focusing efforts toward a human rights based movement which takes a more holistic approach to examining problems. This is informed by knowledge of intersectionality and its synergistic effects on the oppression of women:

For example, a Dominican homeless transwoman may be simultaneously affected by poverty, gentrification, transphobia, sexism, racism, xenophobia (that is, hatred of immigrants). These oppressive forces do not emerge or act independently of each other; they depend on each other and they gain strength from each other. . . a homeless woman’s problems will not be effectively addressed, for example, by giving her a bed in a temporary shelter or even permanent housing. If we use a holistic, intersectional approach, we ask, why is this woman homeless in the first place? We attempt to address the multiple root causes of her situation and not simply pay attention to the immediate, presenting symptoms. (Ross & Solinger, p. 75)

An understanding of intersectionality is required to appreciate the importance of securing all human rights because reproductive rights cannot stand alone. A realization of concrete basic human rights is required to achieve more abstract notions of social, economic, and reproductive justice.

Furthermore, the authors explain how America’s neoliberalism is in direct opposition to human rights culture. Neoliberalism is capitalistic and individualistic focused, and promotes racial, class, and gender division; whereas human rights requires attention to community and solidarity. Neoliberalism and White supremacy are two interwoven concepts that need increased consideration in the pursuit of a broader movement toward reproductive justice to bring people of various backgrounds together.

In chapters three and four, the authors proceed to highlight the need for individuals and groups to build coalitions to demand social change and human rights; these rights cannot be ensured via policy and federal and/or state laws alone. Today, women are often caught in a choice between human rights: “to pay for contraceptives [women] have to go hungry. . . Either they eat or buy birth control, but not both.” (p. 147). Neoliberalism asserts that each person, not the government, is responsible for its own reproductive health and economic well-being. However, a human rights framework cites that both health and financial security are entitlements to be protected, realized, and enforced by not only the government, but its people.

In conclusion, the authors convincingly assert that reproductive justice issues cannot be isolated from issues of social and economic justice. The text serves as an inspiring call for social workers to join a growing and more sustainable movement for true reproductive justice, which has gradually been taken on by larger organizations like the National Organization for Women (NOW). This approach requires the unification and inclusion of people of all races, classes, ages, and gender identities, to demand the realization of human rights and to honor their indivisibility and interconnectedness. Ross and Solinger provide much evidence and hope that political activism, informed by the inclusive definition of reproductive justice, will make the most significant and lasting impact in the demand for reproductive rights and equality.