

What is Birth Justice?

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· Birth Justice is a movement that is designed to respect the rights of all individuals who aspire to become birthing individuals and have a child in a supportive environment: one in which the birthing individual has autonomy over their body and the ability to choose the ways in which their birthing process flows, from the prenatal to the postpartum process. It means having access to evidence-based maternity care, accurate information about pregnancy, the risks and benefits of medical procedures, and the agency to choose whether or not to undergo those medical procedures. Birth Justice has also defined it as having the power to make those choices and give birth free from fear of intimidation or interference from the state due to “noncompliance” with medical advice, or because of poverty, race or ethnicity, or immigrant status. It is also having access to competent and culturally respectful labor support.

· Long before the term “birth justice” was coined, the ancestral black foremothers used their knowledge of childbearing, resistance to enslavement, oral tradition, human rights organizing and policy work to end inequities in maternal, infant, and child health. It has been emerging in the last two decades, with deep roots in black granny midwifery and the spirit of Black resistance in the United States.

· The birth justice movement is being led Black women and women of color, so the focus is on dismantling inequalities around race, class, citizenship, sexual orientation, and all of the intersecting oppressions that lead to negative birth outcomes, particularly for women of color, trans/gender non-conforming folks, low-income communities, and immigrant women. It works towards reclaiming the midwifery tradition, securing access to these alternative birthing practices, raising awareness and building grassroots power, as well as not only addressing the high maternal and infant mortality rates for women of color but also other issues that cause pain and trauma.

What *isn't* Birth Justice

· Though reasons reach back to the enslavement, two particular movements in the United States have propelled the contemporary birth justice movement into existence: the natural birth movement and reproductive justice.

o The natural (or alternative) birth movement began in the 1950's and 1960's when mostly college educated white women came across writing from Europe that inspired a desire in claiming their right to joyful and empowered birthing experiences. They challenged the medicalization of childbirth, the hegemony of male physicians and the medical technology while building alternative grassroots birthing communities across the country. While this movement has been successful in the incorporation of family members in the delivery room, reducing routine medical interventions, and the creation of birth centers, it has presented false narrative of white midwives and birth advocates following in the footsteps of vanishing black granny midwives.

o The political advances made by natural birth movement in legalizing midwifery, as well as the development of doulas, lactation consultants, childbirth education classes and other improvements for childbearing individuals, do not challenge the entrenched inequalities rooted in the commercialization of health care and the rise of the medical industrial complex. This movement was able to appeal to legislators by aligning itself with motherhood and consumerism rather than advocating for safe, empowering perinatal care as a human right for all regardless of pay. It mobilized popular ideologies about the rights of the consumer, shedding their more radical origins in favor of a focus on consumer rights to gain support of otherwise reluctant legislators.

§ Reducing birth justice to the right shop has negative consequences, particularly for poor women, women of color, women with disabilities, and trans/gender non-conforming people. These groups of people are currently more recipients and dependents rather than consumer-citizens the way white middle class women often are. It also ignores other vulnerable pregnant people, including but not limited to: incarcerated women, women in immigration detention centers, young women in juvenile halls who are subjected to practices that endanger their pregnancies including shackling, denial of prenatal care and inadequate nutrition, and stigmatizing birthing individuals, such as people living with mental or physical disability or drug addiction, who battle for the right to carry their pregnancies and to receive the support they need to raise their infants.

- Natural birth advocates portray medicalized birth as a patriarchal invention by male doctors. This ignores the racial origins of the field of obstetrics in the United States, and the fact that the advances made in the field of obstetrics and gynecology were made primarily by white male physicians to only benefit middle class and affluent white women. The natural birth movement lacks this knowledge that the privileges they have gained and those they have fought for have always come at the expense of Black people.

o The term “reproductive justice” was coined by a group of black women in 1994. From this group, a framework and Sister Song, a collective led by indigenous women and women of color, emerged. Reproductive justice organizations have been slow to confront the medical violence and coercion that women experience during pregnancy, labor and childbirth. National Advocates for Pregnant Women (NAPW) in 2001 made visible the inconsistency that arise when the human right to a safe, respectful birth experience is not seen as a central part of the reproductive justice agenda. While respecting the important work and strides of the reproductive justice movement, NAPW made the point that the movement seldom defended the right of birthing women to out of the hospital birth, vaginal birth after cesarean (VBAC) or midwifery care. It has said little about the epidemic rates of cesarean section and seldom comments on the media’s

depiction of homebirth and refusal of cesarean section as irresponsible. In addition, the notion that midwifery and doula care as a luxury remained unchallenged despite the fact that these services can make change to the experience of Black and marginalized individuals’ birthing experiences. At the SisterSong conference in 2011, 30 birth activists in the United States came to

discuss the need for birth oppression to be seen as a central concern and called for national movement led by women of color to challenge coercion and medical violence, reclaim midwifery traditions on communities of color, and raise awareness about strategies to overcome birth inequities.

Sources:

Birth Justice: Black Women, Pregnancy, and Childbirth edited by Julia Chinyere

Oparah and Alicia D. Bonaparte

NAPW Working Paper: Birth Justice as Reproductive Justice by Farah Diaz-Tello and Lynn M