

RSSH Podcast

A History and Geography of Reproductive Justice - Episode 2

Dr Anne-Mari Greenfield, Professor Maud Bracke and Dr Carolina Topini:

DR ANNE-MARI GREENFIELD: Welcome back to the second half of the Sex, Research & Resistance Podcast's episode on the history and geography of reproductive justice. In the second half of this episode, we're going to shift our focus away from the historical conferences from which reproductive justice emerged.

And we're going to look at the transnational reproductive rights networks and their role in the emergence and development of a global women's health and reproductive rights movement. I'm joined again by my two brilliant guests, Maud Bracke and Carolina Topini, who are going to talk to us about this subject. So Maud, if we can go first to you, can you briefly introduce the case study that we're going to discuss in this section?

PROF MAUD BRACKE: Yes, the case study we're going to talk about is the Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights. This was an-- or is, it still exists, is a globally spanning organization, advocacy, research, activism organization which was created in 1984 in the context of that conference in that Global Women's Health conference in Amsterdam, which we talked about in the previous episode.

So at the end of that conference in Amsterdam, it was decided to create the Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights. Initially, it had its seat in Amsterdam, but at a later stage, the seat moved to-- headquarters, moved to Manila in the Philippines. And as I mentioned, it's an organization that is still active today. You can look it up can look up their website. They are one of the key organizations globally producing knowledge and campaigning for women's reproductive health and rights around the world today.

DR ANNE-MARI GREENFIELD: Thanks, Maud. It's so interesting. That's an organization that has gone from such time ago and is still active now. Carolina, I wonder if you can tell us a little bit about what the activities of the organization were, and I'm assuming that there must have evolved over the time.

DR CAROLINA TOPINI: : So as Maud just said, so what is very distinctive about the history of the specific network is that it began as a very as a quite small European-led abortion rights network and then gradually transformed into a global organization with a very comprehensive rights and health agenda and also growing leadership from Global South women's group.

So this network originated in London in 1978 as the international abortion campaign ICAR funded by activists involved in abortion rights struggles across Western Europe mainly. From the very beginning, however, the conceptual question of abortion rights versus reproductive rights was very actively debated within ICAR steering group in London but also during its coordination meetings, which took place every four months in a different European city.

And key influences in these debates included us activist groups such as CARASA, the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse, which was the first network to mobilize and use the term "reproductive rights." But other sorts of influence came also from feminist movement, opposing population control policies in Latin America or master realization campaigns in India, and also, most importantly, the very vibrant Black and South Asian feminist activism emerging in those same years across Britain.

A very good example of this debates can be found in the International Day of Action organized by ICAR in London in '79 under the slogan Women Decide. The meeting brought together activists from different countries to exchange experiences and strategies as well. And one of the guest speakers was the Indian writer and activist Amrit Wilson, based in London and a founding member of the collective Awaz.

And during a workshop that Maud and I organized at University of Glasgow in 2025, so we invited Amrit Wilson, who presented a line, and she recalled how Black and South Asian women insisted during this day of action that the rallies demand more explicitly address and also include issues such as unsafe contraception, forced sterilization, racism and imperialism.

And they really challenged the reluctance of many white feminists to engage with this concept. So it was not so easy at the time to push for this kind of demands and adopt this kind of language as well. There were resistances also. So these multiple inferences and critique led ICAR to broaden its political agenda, and in 1980 also adopt a new name. So the new name was International Contraception, Abortion and Sterilization Campaign, ICASC.

And this shift to reflected a growing awareness that reproductive politics involved not only the rights not to have children, but also the right to have children free from coercion. And a crucial aspect of ICASC work was collecting and disseminating information through its newsletter, ICASC information, which mainly drew on material provided by the network's member, a member who were based across Europe but also across many Latin American countries, especially, and other Global South countries.

So the newsletter reprinted calls for solidarity with women who were prosecuted for having abortions or for helping other women accessing abortion services. But it also featured reports on abortion rights campaigns in Ireland, Italy, and in France, anti-abortion policies in Romania and Hungary, or the forced sterilization of Roma women in Czechoslovakia and Indigenous women in Puerto Rico, Guatemala, and Colombia.

And again, we find again this very important question of the targeting of racialized women with long-acting contraceptives, such as the injectable Depo-Provera and the Dalkon Shield IUD. So as we have discussed in the first part, the uncertain meeting marked a very important turning point in the network history.

At the end of the meeting, ICASC adopted a new name, the Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights, which better reflected the network's broader agenda and also growing global reach. And around the same time, so its coordination moved from London to Amsterdam, where it remained until 2007, before relocating, as most said, to Manila in the Philippines.

And I would add also that as part of its regionalisation agenda, the network also established a very important regional office in Tanzania in 2010 to strengthen sexual and reproductive health and rights movements across the African region was quite marginalized at that time still.

DR ANNE-MARI GREENFIELD: Thanks, Carolina. That feels like such a broad span of topics, which are all organized around this central right to have children to choose when you have children, and to have children free from coercion, but also across such a broad geography encompassing Asia and Africa and Europe as well. Maud, can I turn to you and ask how the network actually managed that? What did it do in terms of governance and organizational structure?

PROF MAUD BRACKE: Yes, this was a big challenge. This is one of the big questions that the activists and the people within the Women's Global Network were dealing with, we're contending with. And again, bear in mind the history, the history that precedes preceded the organization, as Catalina just talked about it and the context in which the organization was created in 1984 on the back of that conference in Amsterdam and on the back of-- as a result of those clashes, in some ways, clashes and critiques and challenges specifically articulated by women from Asia or Africa or Latin America vis-à-vis some of the Western organizers in terms of not sufficiently taking on board that great variety and diversity of experience that existed, but also the global inequality-- the global power inequalities in which women's lives are inscribed.

And so those questions around-- were really questions around universalism, around like-- to what extent are these issues and inequalities that women face are-- to what extent are these and in what ways are these universal, or are they really very locally specific? So these were

really-- this was really this very difficult, complex question about universalism and universalism or not of women's rights and women's claims to rights.

And so these questions were reflected in the organizational structure and in the ways in which these organizations started to operate, in the sense that very early on-- early on, it was decided to have an-- and Catalina already pointed out that quite early on, it was decided to have regional centers, to have regional offices.

The overarching structure, as mentioned, which was first based in Amsterdam and then in Manila, the overarching structure really did not see itself as a kind of committee that should outline a general direction. That was not the idea. The idea was really to devolve a lot of initiative, a lot of input, and a lot of activism and knowledge onto that regional and onto local levels. And so these regional centers were created in a number of different places, Tanzania, for example.

So there was regional centers in Latin America and the Caribbean and Asia and so on. So that was very important, that kind of devolved regional structure. So what was crucial or the way in which the kind of central headquarters saw its role was in terms of exchange of communication, as I said, rather than outlining a direction for the organization. It was really like-- the overarching structure was meant to really facilitate communication and exchange of research, for example, or exchange of debates and knowledge between these different regional centers and also to organize meetings at a global level every couple of years.

There's a really interesting quote, I think, from Zelda Soriano, who was one of the activists for the organization in the Philippines, who was interviewed at some point in the early 2000s about the history of the organization and the way in which it operated. And I'm going to quote her because she said-- at some point, she said, "We had--" we by which she meant we in the central office-- "had no intention to universalize sex and reproductive health matters around the world. We did adopt common denominators patriarchy, imperialism and women's control." So there were-- end quote.

So there were these-- again, thinking about this difficult question of universalism, there were a set of common denominators, of course, there were common shared categories, mental categories that women use across different parts of the world or with different social positionalities.

And despite all these differences, there were shared mental categories and concepts that women use. Patriarchy, for example, is a term that comes up a lot in the documents, and it was felt to be applicable to all these different contexts, which is interesting. Women's control, bodily autonomy, these were key core concepts that did kind of-- were used, keep things together.

But really beyond that, there was not very much that was universally applicable or universally shared beyond those core concepts. And so I find that interesting. I think one would have to do more oral history interviews to really get to the daily operation and the also the conflicts and the discussions and also the hierarchies, perhaps, that existed, or relationships of power that existed within this organization and all the difficult issues around the question of universalism. So we would have to-- one would have to really get to the bottom of this. But my impression from reading the documents is that there was not-- it was an original approach. It was really, I think, original and productive and fruitful approach. But there was also really ongoing uncertainty around this, I think.

DR ANNE-MARI GREENFIELD: Thanks, Maud. That's a really fascinating idea to have these really strong central common denominators and then to have such a dispersal of, it sounds like, power really to decide campaigning, to decide what are the issues that are for your particular geographical and therefore also social and political context. Carolina, can I ask you about how the network managed that then in terms of thinking about transnational advocacy campaigns? What were the main ones that they dealt with?

DR CAROLINA TOPINI: : So I will say that the outcome of this willingness to engage with so many in different, very different, women's health organization was the fact that the network over

its many years of activity because we are really speaking about a very long trajectory. So the network really campaign on a very wide range of issues, including safe legal abortion, maternal mortality and morbidity. Contraceptive safety was another major topic, but also sexual and reproductive health and rights as well.

And over time, its agenda really expanded to include also struggles against the privatization of health care systems. It was a very important major topic and but also HIV/AIDS and also environmental justice issues. In the '90s, the network coordinated to major transnational advocacy campaigns. The first was the International Campaign to Prevent Maternal Mortality and Morbidity coordinated in collaboration with Latin American Caribbean Women's Health Network.

We also spoke about this network before, and the second campaign was the International Campaign against population control and abusive hazardous contraceptives, which mobilized, really hundreds of women's health groups around the world in a position to coercive safe population policy and the deployment of poorly tested and safe contraceptive technologies in the framework of these policies.

The campaign to prevent maternal mortality was launched officially at the end of the fifth International Women and Health Meeting, organized in Costa Rica in 1987. Let's also remember that it was the very first meeting of the series to take place in a Global South country. So it was the meeting that followed the Amsterdam, the famous Amsterdam meeting we were referring to with Maud.

During the Costa Rica meeting, abortion emerged as a major concern, especially for Latin American women who made up the majority of the participants, of course. And many came from countries where abortion remained illegal and were where clandestine abortion was a leading cause of maternal mortality, especially among low-income women unable to afford private clinic services.

So the campaign was coordinated originally by the Latin American Caribbean Women's Health Network and internationally by the WGNRR. Latin American feminists, it's really interesting to note how Latin American feminists articulated maternal mortality as a strategic framework through which to advance reproductive rights claims in a context of strong opposition to abortion, particularly from the Catholic Church, was very strong in many of these countries, focusing on maternal mortality allowed activists in a way to shift the public attention from the decriminalization of abortion to the prevention of unwanted pregnancies.

So this strategic reframing created a new important, very important opportunities to advance feminist demands, especially greater access to sex education or to contraception as a way-- as an effective way of reducing deaths caused by unsafe abortion. And for more than a decade, the struggle became a central focus of feminist activism in Latin America, opening really new avenues for collaboration with international organizations and public health institutions.

As Marge Berer, one of the coordinator of this campaign for the WGNRR recalled in a archival document I found. I quote her, "This was the first work that got us invited to sit at the tables of those in control of policies and services in the field." Let's also remember that at the very same time, maternal mortality was becoming a very important concern for International Organizations.

And for instance, in 1978, the UN, the World Bank, the population council and the International Planned Parenthood Federation launched the Safe Motherhood Initiative in Nairobi, which was a global campaign to reduce maternal mortality and a campaign in which several feminist activists also became later involved.

So during the same period, while WGNRR activists were campaigning for the prevention of maternal mortality, they also launched their second campaign, the campaign against hazardous contraceptives. And this campaign focused on a very specific category of contraceptives, long-acting reversible contraceptives, also called LARCs, with risks, were insufficiently researched

under the specific social and medical context in which they were promoted, according to campaigners, of course.

And these concerns built on critique that women's health activists across both the Global North and the Global South had been rising since the late '70s. So this wasn't something new. But let's say that while often promoted as methods that gave women greater choice and control over their own fertility, activists pointed out that the specific contraceptive were also deeply embedded in coercive population control programs that disproportionately targeted poor, racialized, and marginalized women, very often without providing adequate information to the participants.

And they also emphasized that in the context of weakened health systems following structural adjustment policies during the '80s, the medical follow-up required for the safe use of this contraceptive was very often unavailable. More broadly, activists criticized these technologies for their side effects, their lack of protection against sexually transmitted infection, but most importantly, for the way they transferred reproductive control from women themselves to medical providers, and so from women themselves to population institutions.

And unlike other methods, such as the pill, they did not require women to remember to take them or insert them themselves. So this logic clearly perpetuated racialized construction of poor and marginalized women from the Global South as inherently lacking the capacity to act responsibly or regulate their own reproductive lives.

And against this backdrop, so this campaign sought really to place the experiences, the voices, and the perspective of contraceptive users at the center of policy debates and also, at the same time, to reorient priorities in women's health research conducted by these international population institutions.

DR ANNE-MARI GREENFIELD: Thanks, Carolina. It's fascinating to hear of the organization, the network took those common denominators and then translated them into these different geographical contexts. I'm curious about how successful those were. I'm curious about what the network did with those. So Maud, I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about how they translated those campaigns, particularly in terms of going back to those roots of being an organization that came from a UN history and also critiqued the UN.

PROF MAUD BRACKE: Yes, thank you. So it's very interesting to look at organizations such as the Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights in relation to UN history because histories are very entangled with one another. And it's worth pointing out, though, that the organization that we've talked about today formed at the time in the late '70s, early '80s, formed part of a much wider landscape of rapidly growing and thriving global feminist or global women's activists organizations.

And so the network that we've talked about is one of them. But there are others, which were equally important, or in some ways more influential. One of them was dawn, for example, again, an organization that still exists today. DAWN stands for Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era, also created in 1984.

So very much at the same time, it's a very vibrant moment as of early '80s. It's a very vibrant moment for Global feminist networks, and particularly those that are focused on reproductive health and rights. There was also women living under Muslim law, which has already been mentioned by Carolina. Again, active in that period periods. And also, again, Catalina already mentioned a number of the organizations, transnational women's organizations and feminist organizations around Latin America and the Caribbean, also really very much thriving in the early 1980s.

And so what's interesting is that-- so a number of these organizations were really almost strategically created in the early '80s, during the UN decade of women, to respond to what was happening in the UN, again, in a kind of double sense, on the one hand, really benefiting from the New found interest for women's rights at the UN, but on the other hand, also critiquing some of these UN approaches and agendas.

DAWN, for example, the organization I mentioned earlier, DAWN, was created in 1984 in Bangalore and very specifically, very strategically on the eve of the third UN global women's conference that was held in 1985 in Nairobi. And so you get-- in 1985, in Nairobi, you get this third really big UN women's conference. And it's really at that point that those debates really explode.

And it's at that point where we see that those transnational, if you like, networks specifically on reproductive health and rights, it becomes very clear and very visible at that point in the world how significant these organizations are and how well connected some of these women are around the world. And so it's quite clear, I think, although there's still a lot of research that needs to be done on this.

But a number of people are looking into this, but I think it is quite clear that for instance, at the UN Nairobi conference, the agenda is to a significant extent. Shaped by these organizations, some of these organizations have meanwhile, as you mentioned earlier, coming out of in many cases, really quite a grassroots perspective, but have meanwhile really evolved into NGOs with a much more institutional outlook and institutional way of operation of operating.

But becoming NGOs, of course, allow them to acquire, in some cases, a specific status Vis-à-vis the UN. So there's a whole process in some of these organizations, including the one that we've been talking about, the Global Network. There's a whole process throughout the 1980s of what sometimes is called NGOization or institutionalization and professionalization also of these organizations. And it's very much entangled, as I said, with what's happening in the UN and shifting agendas in the UN.

So the UN at this point is very much talking about women's rights but often very much in the context of a very strong discourse that existed in the UN at the time around women in development and the role of women specifically in development, socioeconomic development in the Global South.

In some ways, some of these organizations, including the network that we've talked about, were critical of that framework because it was almost-- in the way in which this was debated, that the UN was almost sometimes as it was women's duties and women's roles to play a role in the development of their communities that that women's rights were almost instrumental to that.

So there was a critique of that approach, but at the same time, these organizations tended to-- and I think certainly the Global network that we talked about tended to find it really quite fruitful to engage with these concepts and these frameworks and got all sorts of benefits out of becoming an official UN advisor, as it did at some point in the 1990s, it became an official UN advisor, which allowed it to attend UN committee meetings, to attend the meetings of some UN agencies, WHO, the Commission on the Status of Women, and so on and so forth.

So at that point, some of these organizations become really the knowledge producers for some of these UN structures. How did-- I mean, there's a lot that could be said also about the ways, more concretely, the ways in which these women in these organizations try and make an impact in the UN.

A lot of it was coalition building. I think it was this constant coalition building, constantly reaching out to each other, trying to find women in other organizations or from other parts of the world who had a similar position to your own and trying to build those coalitions. A lot of it was by producing knowledge, by often being the best experts on women on ordinary women's everyday lives in their own countries. Often, they were really the experts more than anyone else. And so the UN would draw on their expertise increasingly.

So knowledge production, coalition building, there's a number of these strategies that these women were able to adopt, allowing them to have an impact-- to make an impact. A lot of this really needs to be still entangled in terms of the research of exactly what their impact was but also exactly where it was limited because in some form, of course, we've already talked about this in some form or in some ways.

A lot of what these organizations wanted to achieve was far too radical for the United Nations. There was a radicalism that did not find its place there in a institutional UN context. So again, a lot of tension around this, I think. But I think a lot of really quite clever strategizing and often quite pragmatic strategizing, I think, among these women.

DR ANNE-MARI GREENFIELD: Thank you. And I think that something specifically happened in the Cairo Conference. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

PROF MAUD BRACKE: Yes, so in 1994, there was an international UN conference on development and population held in Cairo in Egypt. And the Cairo Conference of 1994 is usually seen as a landmark and was landmark moment at which the UN for the first time in an encompassing way, defined reproductive health and rights.

It's interesting also. This is kind of an aspect we haven't really explicitly talked about, but it's kind of implicit in what we've talked about. It's interesting to note that also at the UN level, the discourse shifts from reproductive rights towards reproductive health and rights.

So the health really comes in the access to health and health as a right. And access to health services really becomes central to the conversations at the UN. But that's one aspect of it. But more generally, 1994 was this really key pivotal moment in which the UN decided or articulated a definition of reproductive health and rights.

And again, what's interesting to see, one would have to do more interviews with protagonists and more research, more primary research on this. But what's interesting to see is that some of these organizations that we've mentioned, so the Women's Global Network, but also some of the other ones that we've briefly talked about dawn, for example, were absolutely-- were really important, were really significant in providing their input again on the basis of all the research they were doing on the basis of the activism, they were doing on the basis of their knowledge of what was actually going on the ground and how women experienced reproductive justice and injustice.

And so these organizations were able to articulate a lot of that. And again, thanks to their advisory status and the fact that they did have a seat at the table this point. So I think that is very significant. I mean, it's also-- I think it continues-- it's also important to be really to be critical about it as well, of course.

Now, we've talked a lot about these organizations and the different perspectives within them and even the conflicts within them and so on and so forth and where they come from. But I think it's important also to note that, of course, there's always groups of women whose voices are not represented at the table, very clear.

That's very clear as well. So I also I would also introduce an element of caution there when I say that these organizations did make an impact. By the mid 1990s, that was clear. They did make an impact on the UN, and therefore, on global norms and standards. But again, we still need to ask critical questions, I think, about what kind-- whose perspectives were really taken on board in this context.

DR CAROLINA TOPINI: : I would like, perhaps before concluding our conversation, to circle back, come back to what you just said about what perspective were really taken on board, what perspective were voices, and what perspective were less taken into account and why. I think that this question is really connected to the question of also the availability of archives.

So what kind of archives we can access to write this history? What voices were the best represented? And what voices were not? And I think that if we look at the Archives, of course, the archives of transnational women's networks are not all equally accessible. And there are even preservation and visibility reflect, as Maud said, broader inequalities among organizations and networks themselves with some of them better positioned institutionally, financially, geographically to safeguard and transmit their histories, these archives, and so their political work.

And others have seen their records dispersed across countries or partially lost or destroyed due to limited resources, storage constraints, or the relocation of their headquarters and different regions of the world. So I think that's maybe-- the question is perhaps to just to rephrase what Maud said, is-- we need more histories. We need more feminist history that recover the work, the very important political work that this organization, this network did.

Maybe they had a different kind of impact we are not really able right now to see. That's why we need more research, more archival research around it. And just to give you an example, very quickly, the archives of the International Women's Health Coalition, along with the personal collection of many of its members, are very much better preserved and easier to access than the archives of the WGNRR, and the records, as we said, are dispersed across multiple countries and multiple archival collection.

So it's really interesting to reflect on these issues as mothers of archival justice, archival injustice, so not just reproductive justice but also archival justice, especially from the perspective of a historian, a feminist historian also interested in public history approaches. So yes, I will conclude on this final reflections. But again, thank you very much.

DR ANNE-MARI GREENFIELD: What a note to end on not just the history of reproductive injustice and justice but also archival injustice there. Thanks to both Maud and Carolina for telling us about the fascinating history from which reproductive justice grew, and one of the ways that this movement spread geographically and how it changed as a result of the different geographical, and therefore, social and political contexts.

I'd like to also thank OpenLearn for supporting the production of this episode of the podcast, and particularly to give a shout out to Claudia for her production and technical help with this. Thank you for joining us and for listening to the history and geography of reproductive justice on the Sex, Research & Resistance Podcast.

If you're interested in learning more about the topic, please do visit our resources on OpenLearn. There's a link to those in the description box for this episode. We'd also really love to hear what you thought about the episodes. Please do share your thoughts and views in the comments section below. That's all from me, Carolina and Maud.

DR CAROLINA TOPINI: : Thank you very much for this very rich and meaningful conversation.
PROF MAUD BRACKE: Bye, and thank you everyone for listening.

DR ANNE-MARI GREENFIELD: Thank you for listening and please join us next time on the Sex, Research & Resistance Podcast. Bye.

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