

A New Agenda for the Progressive Women's Movement

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As a young leader and a woman of color in the women's and reproductive rights movement, I was asked by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy to comment on the state of the progressive women's movement. Given my unique role as one of few young national leaders and women of color leaders heading a national women of color organization, I hope I can offer some helpful advice on how we can build a more vibrant and inclusive women's movement: a movement with adequate resources for our work, especially advocacy by and for underrepresented women in the movement (women of color, immigrant women, young women, queers, and disabled women); a movement that is embraced by the larger progressive movement and not sidelined; a movement that



Participants of the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum's 2006 conference held in September 2006 at the Loyola Marymount University in California.

develops a strong commitment to building new and young leadership; a movement committed to social justice feminism; and a movement that harnesses the energy and excitement of the March for Women's Lives.¹ *(continued on page 11)*

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Building new Strategies for the Women's Movement

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For the past three years, I have been the executive director of the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum (NAPAWF). Founded in 1996 by 157 Asian Pacific American (APA) female activists, NAPAWF is the only national, multi-issue advocacy organization for APA women and girls. Our staff is

women's movement. A recent report by the Center for the Advancement of Women, *Progress and Perils: A New Agenda for Women*, noted that few women belong to women's organizations and that minority women—specifically African American (63 percent) and Hispanics (68 percent)] had a stronger desire for a

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women's movement than Caucasian women (41 percent).³ These statistics highlight the awkward juxtaposition of a sputtering women's movement and a growing, potent constituency who crave a movement that puts them at the center.

small, all under the age of 35, and all new to the women's movement. Our membership and chapters are growing, with women mostly under the age of 30 and new to the women's movement as well. Our mission is to elevate the voices of APA women and girls and develop young and new leadership within and outside our organization. Because we are young and seek to include APA women in the movement, we believe our work and that of our allies are crucial to the progressive women's movement.²

The lack of diverse leadership in the movement lies partly with the absence of strong and well-resourced women of color organizations. Though NAPAWF was founded in 1996, following the United Nation's World Conference on Women in 1995 in Beijing, we functioned basically as an all-volunteer organization until 2003. As the number of women of color program officers and leadership increase at foundations and as foundations see the merit of supporting women of color organizations, the rise of women of color and young women of color leadership will be increasingly evident.

Valuing and Developing Young, Diverse Leadership

In meetings I attend, seasoned women leaders often emphasize how many years they have been "in the movement." As a rite of passage or precursor to an important statement or opinion, time served has become a badge of honor in the movement. Indeed, as a young leader I understand that length of time stands for depth of conviction, expertise, commitment and, hopefully, even wisdom.

Indeed, with the rise of women of color organizations, an interesting phenomenon is taking place. Several of the newer organizations are led by young women, including NAPAWF, National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, Refugee Women's Network and Sisters on the Rise. In NAPAWF's case, though our founding sisters are now in their 40s and 50s, they consciously stepped back and created space that allowed for young leadership within the national office and among our chapters' leadership. Because APA women were simply fighting for space and voice within the women's movement, there was little fighting among ourselves for position, power, and recognition. The founding sisters guide with a light hand, stepping in when their influence and experience are needed and making themselves available as friends and mentors, but most importantly, deferring leadership to younger NAPAWF sisters. Policy and advocacy initiatives at the NAPAWF chapter level inform and influence our national policy agenda.

At 35, I cannot claim to be a young leader. I am positive my more youthful sisters would balk at the idea of a 35-year-old being called "young," but that is a statement alone about the progressive women's movement: The movement and our ideas are maturing. That I am one of the youngest leaders in the national women's movement is telling and highlights a serious challenge for the movement—where and when do we make room for new, young and diverse leaders, and when do we see that the inclusion of them determines the success of our movement?

Developing young and diverse leadership remains one of the foremost challenges for the progressive

But starting new organizations should not be the only way to build young and diverse leadership. We

have to look within our organizations to see how and whether we are genuinely cultivating leadership. What training do young people in our organizations receive? Are they allowed to present and speak for the organization? Are they given substantive work and meaningful mentorship? And now the more difficult question: Does an executive director or top leadership have a succession plan to allow for new and young leadership? There are mantras in the movement that ask, where are all the young people, and how do we sustain a movement without “fresh blood?” My question is, where are all the young and new leaders? Young people relate to leaders from *their* generation and *their* background and if we want to engage young and diverse women, then we need to have their faces in leadership positions. All too often organizations become identified by the executive director and not the contributions of the organization or members. A movement loses steam if leaders become entrenched in their organizations and their positions, and if an organization becomes synonymous with the same leaders for long periods of time.

Organizations and leaders are taking other approaches to develop young and diverse leadership beyond their own organizations. The Young Women’s Collaborative (YWC) — composed of organizations run by young leaders—has created a unique leadership development program.⁴ Young leaders from ages 18 to 35 are provided with skills and issues trainings, support to develop or maintain regional campaigns, a broad framework to engage in reproductive rights/health/justice issues, and a diverse community of leaders from which to learn and share. The first cohort of leaders is from the Southwest, and YWC hopes to expand the leadership program to other regions of the country.⁵ Because the March for Women’s Lives proved that broadening the language around reproductive choice/rights can engage hundreds of thousands of young people and people of color, the Young Women’s Collaborative promotes a vision of reproductive justice (a broad, comprehensive framework) with a commitment to leadership development and movement-building strategies.

Defining a Bold and Visionary Agenda

On every front we feel under attack as women’s organizations scramble to maintain the gains we achieved in prior decades. Republicans seek to erode this country’s social safety net with attacks on Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Social Security. Our lawmakers pass tax cuts for the wealthy, starve the government of resources, expand our military budget to justify cuts to essential programs for the poor; they provide lukewarm support for the historic Violence Against Women Act, which has always garnered tremendous bi-partisan support, and engage in downright deceit and unethical political maneuvering to keep Plan B off pharmacy shelves. And the conservative forces make immigrants their enemies by passing a bill that would criminalize undocumented immigrants and anyone who assists them.

A number of progressive advocates and leaders have realized that rather than working in a climate hostile to core progressive values, and rather than fighting for piecemeal victories in Washington, D.C., that hardly improve the lives of our communities, we must step back and set forth a bold and visionary agenda to effect the kind of positive change we believe is necessary to uplift every individual in this country. In *Losing Well*,

We want women to be healthy, valued and free to make decisions that impact their bodies and lives. For the women’s movement, it is about reclaiming the value in *valuing* women.

Rachel Gragg and Deepak Bhargava of the Center for Community Change encourage progressives to give up the futile fight in Washington (at this point in our political history), take a chance that there will be major losses before tide-changing victories, and spend time articulating a world we envision rather than one we oppose, so our fight is universal, bold, inspiring, and principled. Our renewed vision would give us direction, strength and purpose; make us proactive versus reactive; and galvanize our constituencies.

We also realize that in order to galvanize our constituents we must set forth a renewed vision for the

progressive movement. As *Losing Well* prescribes, we must set forth a bold vision for the movement and be relentless in our efforts to achieve it. We desire universal health care; humane immigration policies that move toward family unification and permanent residency, safety, fair treatment of migrants and an honest

string budgets but accomplish a great deal. Imagine if they had more than one or two staff to build their base, to better influence policymakers, and to preserve or increase protections and opportunities for women and girls.

It became apparent that without movement building strategies to connect to those most oppressed and impoverished, our movement will sputter out again.

A New Women's Movement

Developing young and new leadership, articulating a bold vision for a new women's movement, and prioritizing movement building strategies, were key issues in a series of

assessment of the benefits immigrants bring to our country; better work/family laws and policies; fair, decent and *living* wages; a social safety net for the economically impoverished; protected rights and fair treatment of gays; and progressive environmental laws that foresee harms of over-consumption and place high value and priority on the earth and its inhabitants not the companies that run it. And we want women to be healthy, valued and free to make decisions that impact their bodies and lives. For the women's movement, it is about reclaiming the value in *valuing women*.

Some national women's and reproductive rights organizations are looking beyond the fruitless policy struggles in Washington, D.C., and are realizing the value of victories outside Washington, D.C. They have chosen to prioritize efforts around galvanizing their constituency to prepare for future battles. Indeed, these organizations realize the importance of not only building their base within the women's movement, but expanding it; that our ultimate power as a movement is based on our ability to reach new and emerging communities and inspiring them with a bold, progressive vision. Though these organizations continue to engage with policymakers, they are equally committed to training a new generation of advocates.

As well, there are numerous statewide and local coalitions and organizations in the women's movement that are under-resourced but are critical, long-term investments for the progressive movement. We should not continue to disproportionately support national women's and reproductive rights organizations at the expense of building infrastructure in various states around the country. There are committed women leaders across the country who work on shoe-

meetings by the New Women's Movement (NWM) Initiative. Barbara Phillips, former program officer at the Ford Foundation; Faye Wattleton, president of the Center for the Advancement of Women (Center); Sara Gould, president of the Ms. Foundation; Katherine Acey, president of the Astraea Foundation; and Monique Mehta, executive director of the Third Wave Foundation brought women leaders together from around the country for three retreats to gauge where we are in the movement, what our challenges are, and how we should do things differently and better. The Center's *Progress and Perils* served as the impetus: It reported that women are less engaged in women's issues and that reproductive health/abortion is not a top priority issue for women. The report led us to ask the following questions: What is the state of the progressive women's movement? Why are women not engaged in the issues we as leaders care about? Are we ignoring issues important to them? Do we need different strategies to engage them and revitalize our work?

Like most movements in this country, major foundations have sustained the organizations and leaders that followed. The women's movement is no different. Over the years, as organizations receive significant funding, the landscape changes. We care about the work, but we care more about the sustainability of our organizations. The NWM meetings were designed to challenge women leaders to think about the state of the movement, not their organization, and to think creatively about the best strategies, collaborations, and issues to galvanize women and men around the country.

The meetings also pose very real and crucial challenges to funders. First, women's funding takes up a

small slice of the philanthropic pie, and in most cases, this has already been carved out for more established, national women's organizations. Does investing in only these organizations sustain a healthy movement? What about organizations (new voices) that represent communities of color, immigrants, indigenous women, and regions and communities outside major urban centers? During these meetings, women leaders discussed their challenges with current funding strategies: support for programs rather than organizations; the need for grants geared toward sustainability; and the hope of funding new and local organizations. The NWM meetings also challenged funders to think about the work itself and what strategies will revitalize a new women's movement. It became apparent that without movement building strategies to connect to those most oppressed and impoverished, our movement will sputter out again.

The NWM meetings took place over two years, with more than 60 progressive leaders and funders (the third and final retreat was held in March 2006). We unpacked some of the history of the women's movement and the scars that went along with it—the lack of inclusion of women of color, indigenous women, lesbians, and young women. We challenged ourselves to think differently about what issues should be core issues of the women's movement such as health, education, security and religion. We noted that values have shifted from an emphasis on individual liberation in the 1970s to a decade where women focus on their families as well. We also talked strategy, particularly the importance of movement building, collaborations and renewed resources for the movement. Finally, these series of meetings culminated in a profound realization that our movement has shifted from a movement based solely on women's equality to a movement grounded in social justice—a term we coined "social justice feminism." Now, a small group of individuals from the NWM Initiative will synthesize all of the great ideas and hard work of these women leaders to begin to articulate our bold vision for a new women's movement and how we plan to support it, each other, and new and young voices in the movement.

Our Challenge

We face challenging times, but it is an opportune moment in history to reevaluate our work, our movement, our values, and how we choose to work with one another. The NWM meetings forced us to look not only at the state of the movement but to look inward to the kinds of values and principles that developed within our organizations, and whether those values build or burden the movement.

Similar to our work with funders within the NWM Initiative, I ask foundations that fund women's and reproductive rights organizations to seriously consider whether their support truly sustains organizations for the long haul and whether their support reaches new voices and communities. As important as it may be to show projected outcomes, we know that building relationships in emerging communities takes time, and that tangible results are not always readily apparent. Does your funding prioritize movement building strategies and expanding the base of participation

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within the women's movement? It is natural for foundations to feel comfortable supporting older and more seasoned leaders and organizations, but to build a stronger, sustainable movement, foundations have to be willing to take chances on smaller organizations. To counter the growth of the conservative right, we have to rethink our strategy regarding the imbalance of funding for national organizations versus local/state organizations. Finally, there is still a need for national women of color organizations. Do we see their voices on the national level?

If we can move outside our organizations and foundations to think critically about how to resurrect the progressive women's movement, we will be able reap tremendous benefits for years to come. I realize that it is a fearful process to be critical of our movement, to make fundamental changes to our organizations, and to re-direct resources, but we must if our goal is to change the tides of events and policies that have devastated communities across this country. I often

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remind myself when I worry about funding for NAPAWF that it is not about me, it is not about the organization, it is about my community and so many other communities who struggle everyday. I believe we all feel the same way. Will you join me in this effort to achieve our ultimate dream of opportunity and prosperity for *all* women and girls?

Kiran Ahuja is the national director of NAPAWF.

NOTES

1. On April 25, 2004, the March for Women's Lives became the largest March in the history of Washington, DC. Organized by national women leaders, including several women of color leaders, the March name was changed from the March for Freedom of Choice to the March for Women's Lives to suggest a shift in thinking in the women's movement: that to be more inclusive of women and allies who have often felt removed from the national women's movement, the movement must embrace the multitude of health and social justice issues that impact women and their families.
2. We have faced similar challenges as other young organizations in building our infrastructure and programs. In addition, we face a more difficult challenge of dispelling the model minority myth of the APA community, that similar to other minority communities, there are unique challenges and needs in our community. Only recently, our community received its largest grant ever to a single organization committed to social justice. Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy heads the National Gender and Equity Campaign, a campaign to build the capacity, infrastructure and skills of community-based APA organizations. They are supported by the Ford Foundation and seek to leverage the Ford grant to raise an unprecedented amount of philanthropic capital in our community's history.
3. APA women were polled in the general survey, but a sample was not large enough to make statistical interpretations of the group.
4. NAPAWF is a part of the Young Women's Collaborative, as are Choice USA, the Third Wave Foundation, and the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health. The YWC was a specific strategy developed following the March for Women's Lives.
5. The Southwest was chosen as our first region because of the tremendous growth among minority communities, particularly the Latino community, the rising wave of anti-immigrant sentiment and increased border security, and a region of the country often overlooked by the women's movement that can provide valuable lessons regarding tactics of the conservative right and creative mobilizing efforts among the immigrant and Native American communities.