



# **Reproductive Justice: Community and Academic Engagement in Rhode Island and at Brown University**

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# Goal:

Exploring the reproductive justice landscape in Rhode Island, Providence, and Brown University in order to better support ethical community engagement and productive collaboration among individuals, community organizations, and student groups.





# Methodology



## Qualitative data collection

Given that the focus of this project was relationship-building and creating connections, it made sense to utilize a qualitative approach.




## Key informant interviews

To gain an in depth understanding of the RJ landscape in RI, we conducted 29 hour-long key informant interviews using a standard set of questions that we customized for each interviewee.



## Recruitment using snowball sampling

We started by interviewing members of the RJC and utilized “snowball sampling” where we asked our interviewees to connect us with leaders in the local reproductive justice research, service, and advocacy communities.





# Interview participants

## Community Organizations

- Day One
- Planned Parenthood Southern New England
- Providence Student Union
- Rhode Island Abortion Fund
- Rhode Island Healthy Schools Coalition
- Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence
- Rhode Island Coalition for Reproductive Freedom
- Rhode Island Department of Health
- Sexual Assault Forensic Examiner Program
- Sojourner House
- Women's Fund of Rhode Island
- The Womxn Project

## Alumnae

- Two recent Brown alumnae

## Brown University Groups

- BWell Health Promotion (staff-run)
- Period Equity (student)
- Planned Parenthood Advocacy (student)
- Reproductive Justice at Brown (student)
- Sex Ed by Brown Med (grad student)
- Sexual Health Advocacy Group (student)
- Sexual Assault Prevention Education (student)
- Women's Health Advocacy Group (student)

## RJC-affiliated staff and faculty

- Madina Agénor
- Ben Brown
- Maayan Leroy-Malamed
- Jai-Me Potter-Rutledge
- Jack Rusley
- Maria Steenland
- Liz Tobin-Tyler



# Findings



**Potential of RI to lead**



**Structural limitations on research**



**Student engagement with RJ role-dependent**



**Siloing**



**Brown's impact on local community**



**Small state problems**



# **Politics, Policy, and Advocacy in Rhode Island**





# Findings: Politics, Policy, Advocacy in RI




## **Relative progressivism is a source of optimism:**

RI has had some big wins

- Reproductive Privacy Act (2019)
- Doula Bill (2022)
- Equality in Abortion Coverage Act (2023)
- Health Care Provider Shield Act (2024)

*"In our state we are fortunate generally... to be more poised to create protections and supports in this area than other states that are more conservative." – Community Org.*






# Findings: Politics, Policy, Advocacy in RI



*"If the care that I provide didn't feel contested...I think that would be a sign that we are living in a world where bodily autonomy is broadly supported. But...I've come to terms with the fact that **it's contested... because it's really important.**" – Clinical Faculty Member*

*"You know there is always more to be done but I think **RI is pretty far ahead** in key sorts of legislation." – Faculty Member*







# Findings: Future Areas for Advocacy




## Areas of concern/future action

- Impact of national political climate
- Implementation of educational policy re: sexual health/relationships education in RI
- Access to gender affirming care
- Access to Plan B
- No cost birth control bill
- Judicial bypass/parental consent requirement for under 18 access to abortion
- Preventative care
- Educating parents

*"We also have a **growing pushback in this country with, at schools around I'd say it's a lot of it that I've seen is around gender expression and sexual orientation....**I think it's a minority, but it's a very vocal minority of individuals that will come out and question, you know, what's being taught in school." – Community Org.*

*"It will be easier [to get sex ed in schools] once it's like pervasive knowledge that **sexual health education is like literally for the safety and survival of students....** it's not just even about like relationships, or like having a good time, or whatever it's literally survival. It's...very, very necessary." – Local High School Student at Community Org*





# Findings: Future Areas for Advocacy




*If I could wave a magic wand I would love if we could actually **somehow get women to visit their doctor at the postpartum visit.** – Community Org*

*So on days when patients are coming in to get their abortion care the welcome crew will like help them come inside, a lot of times we'll have like protesters and anti abortion folks standing outside the clinic and **it can just be really helpful to have some support as you're getting from your car to inside the health center.** – Community Org*

***"Top surgery is basically impossible to get** under the age of 18 at this point, even where it's legal, a lot of the surgeons have been harassed out of doing it." – Faculty Member*

*"Another big one in Rhode Island that we haven't talked about is **removing parental consent for, for young people to get access to abortion.** So if folks are under the age of 18, they still need parental consent, or every, or like a judge's approval.... And so that's the big fight.... That's like the next, like 5, 10 year fight, because I think that one's gonna be a little bit trickier.... it's one of the big barriers that are still in place in Rhode Island." – Community Org.*





# RJ-Related Research



# Findings: Research in Reproductive Justice at Brown and in RI




## Current research areas

- Access to abortion, contraception, STI care
- Health impacts of legislation and policy
- Experiences/impact of discrimination, particularly racial disparities
- Economic impact of reproductive care access
- Experiences of women who use drugs
- Interaction of reproductive care access and domestic violence
- Medical coercion
- Reproductive/sexual health and disability

*"We also do one off research reports.... We produced a report that talked about the economic impact that not having access to abortion care in Rhode Island was having on women." – Community Org*

*"I also have some work that tries to look at the structural context, through looking at state laws and policies." – Faculty Member*





# Findings: Research in Reproductive Justice at Brown and in RI



*"Can we **learn things that are then useful for developing better policy**?....I'm building a diverse network of people who come at the policy questions from a variety of perspectives. And then, talking about what the unintended consequences are." – Faculty Member*

*"**There's not at this time a massive pot of money to do really community-based participatory research** that is grounded in communities, priorities and needs. And that's necessary to really get at reproductive justice. So a lot of us are just kind of doing the health and the rights. And we're, you know, aware of and concerned about the community and justice piece, but don't necessarily have the resources or infrastructure to really bring that piece in as fully as we would like and know we should be." – Faculty Member*





# Findings: Research in Reproductive Justice



## Structural limitations

- Research in reproductive health or rights is funded more than RJ or community-engaged research
- Brown faculty are incentivized to go for NIH grants, but these are not RJ/community driven
- Globally, more focus on rights/access, LARCs, and HIV

## Lack of visible RJ research community at Brown


- Both for faculty and students

## Community often ahead of research

- How community members see and engage with their own health is not how research is structured

*“But, given...what is happening in the world, I **am a little surprised there aren't more people at Brown** [doing this work].” – Faculty Member*

*“We haven't seen an increase in [LARC use], but we have seen a decrease in unintended pregnancies in our state. I was thinking that was connected to some of the other options, like a plan B, and you know, other options of birth control that aren't necessarily considered by grants as you know, the most highly effective methods....**I don't think that [the research] has caught up yet to what people are actually utilizing.**” – Community Org*







# **Brown University Student Engagement**




# Findings: Undergraduate Student Engagement



## Undergraduates

- Many undergrad groups are doing sexual health education in local schools (ex. SHAPE)
- Several groups have long standing, positive relationships with community orgs/schools
- Undergraduate student groups are more connected to each other than to graduate students groups, community organizations, or faculty projects
- Researchers generally feel positive about working with undergraduates, but are not familiar with what undergraduate student groups are doing

*"[I'm] definitely aware of SHAPE [Sexual Health Advocacy Through Peer Education] because we're at the Met [School] a lot....We're doing a lot of one to one work. So I know that they have SHAPE there. – Community Org.*






# Findings: Graduate Student Engagement



## Graduate students

- Graduate students tend to have very specific career needs or course requirements; this works better for community orgs
- Sex Ed by Brown Med is the only graduate student group providing sexual health education in local schools

*"For [graduate scholarship program] we ask all of our students to complete an RA-ship [with a local org]. So a 20 hour a week job, and we actually pay them... So it's been nice for us to be able to alleviate some of the financial burden that some of the community organizations....would have to endure. So we pay the student, and they then provide a service." – RJC/Staff Member*





# Findings: Student Engagement

## Overall

- Student engagement with local orgs works best when there is a course requirement component and/or structure provided by Brown
- Doula training has been both a productive site of community-student collaboration, and a source of tension
- Sexual health education, including menstrual education, is one of the most consistently successful ways students engage with RJ work in community
- There are distinct ways that undergrads, grads, and medical students engage with this work and they do not overlap much

*"Some of [our] students...are from the medical school, so we have a built-in supervisor with that... that has been helpful." – Community Org.*

*We work in "a community where we want to make sure that people feel like healthcare is on their side because it historically has not [been]. And you know, ...saying you have the right to ask your doctor these questions. We echo that for students when they're making decisions about their sexual health." – Graduate Student*





# Engaging with the Mission of Reproductive Justice



# Findings: Engagement with RJ



## Clarification about RJ vs health/rights

- Many faculty are aware that the institutional/structural limitations keep them from doing “true” RJ work
- Most interviewees aware of the history and founders of RJ and are reluctant to “claim” RJ as their work
- Some students might be less aware of full RJ history and context

*“[Our organization is] a reproductive health and rights organization. We play within, you know the whole ecosystem of, of the reproductive freedom and justice ecosystem, but **we are very clear we're not a repro justice org.** That was and and you know, a movement started by Black women in the 1990s that were focused on intersectional work.” – Community Org.*

*“Honestly **[I] don't think that a lot of [undergrads] know the difference between reproductive health and reproductive justice** on campus, like, I would say very few do, and very few understand it as like an economic, social, systemic health care, racial like whole gamut thing. So I would say definitely, there's a heavy skew towards reproductive health on campus.” – Student*







# Findings: Engagement with RJ



## The broad mission of RJ

- Most interviewees had a strong sense of the broad mission of RJ
- Many Brown faculty/students less aware of local orgs doing RJ work that isn't obviously centered on reproductive health
- Several interviewees mentioned keeping families together/raising kids in safe environment, but less focus overall on this
- Interpersonal violence and structural violence both mentioned frequently

*"Ultimately, **reproductive justice is ...not separate from broader issues of how we build a just society.** And so I think different groups are taking on different pieces of that puzzle individually, and then collectively." – Faculty Member*





# **Brown University Faculty Engagement**



# Findings: Faculty

## Faculty's role in community engagement

- Faculty creating and structuring opportunities for students is welcomed more than student “cold calling”
- Most productive partnerships often around data analysis/processing

*“There's an epidemiology course that uses our [redacted] data and uses the [redacted] survey and meets with staff here... and then talks about research questions and ideas. And you know, they can work on all the epidemiology, you know, calculations that they're needing to do. But then, also...it's a value add to [our organization] to have that kind of resource.” – Community Org.*






# Findings: Faculty

## Some faculty feel disconnected

- Several faculty mentioned feeling disconnected from undergraduates, from other researchers at Brown, and from the broader RJ movement in RI
- Undergraduate students feel that they do not know about opportunities to work with faculty on RJ, or that faculty do not welcome their inquiries

*"The faculty are completely disconnected, he said. When he got his job they showed him his office. They showed him the classroom he'd be teaching in, and that was it." – Student, speaking about a conversation with a new faculty member*

*"I feel like I am not that knowledgeable of undergrad student groups." – Faculty Member*





# Silos






# Findings: Silos

## Between roles on campus

- Undergraduate and graduate students
- Faculty and students
- Departments/fields
- Clinical/non-clinical

*“Having taught a class that was both undergrads and grad students, the grad students would be like, ‘I had no idea this was happening.’ I **don't think there's much conversation among undergrad efforts and grad student efforts**. You know, most grad students don't walk up the hill very often. I mean, it's a pretty brutal hill, and then, if you don't have a reason to go up there, you won't. So, I think there might be room for making connections.” – Faculty Member*

*“While I have a Brown appointment, my biggest involvement with the Brown community has been through medical students rotating with us. But that's very isolated. Otherwise, it's been with the RJC. I **hadn't even really been on campus until we had our meetings**. And I don't really visit the undergrad campus at all otherwise.” – Faculty Member*







# Findings: Silos

## Brown and local community

- Silos are result in part of institutional barriers, town/gown relationship, history
- Partnerships with Brown tend to be based on individual relationships and often fade when a specific project fades
- Lack of institutional memory

***“So many student groups are dedicated to the cause but our campus doesn't seem to give that message.” -- Student Org.***

***“Well, we we did a a workshop [for] graduate students in education, about how to treat students like people and foster a good environment in the classroom. I wrote an article for the [journal based at Brown] through their high school program. **That was cool. I think there's been other stuff in the past.**” -- Student at Community Org***





# Findings: Silos







## Impact of a small state

- Collaboration and coalition work is possible, yet often not maximized – informal due to small size
- Collaborations are often based on personal/individual connections
- Territorialism and personal history can also negatively impact collaboration

*“We're such a small state. And yet **many of us can be working on the same issues and not... collaborating.** And maybe sometimes we're duplicating efforts. Or there's things we could just be aligning on to have more impact.” – Community Org.*

*“People like to throw the terminology at me that I'm doing ‘mission creep’. They'll be like, ‘oh, that's so, mission creep of you.’ And **the more that people use that kind of terminology, and they remind you that you're not in your space, or you're not in your silo, the more I feel like we're just upholding the patriarchy.**” – Community Org.*





# **Rhode Island/ Brown Community Engagement**



# Findings: RI/Brown Community Engagement

## Most commonly engaged community orgs


- RIDOH
- Planned Parenthood of Southern New England/PVD

## Orgs engaged in RJ have least capacity for partnership

- Many interviewees mentioned small non-profits doing the most community-centered work have the least amount of resources to engage with potential volunteers/partners

*“So if there are researchers who are willing to provide their services pro-bono with some insight from [our organization] on topics that we're interested in, we'd love to talk, but **often the time and the money resource is an issue for us.**” – Community Org.*

*“What we found out was actually in Rhode Island, they have to be teaching about menstruation in their public schools. That is part of ...the law. When we spoke with [the public school], we're like, oh, can we see, what your existing...education looks like, and they're like, we haven't had the capacity to do that. **So it's interesting that it was actually passed in a law .... but understandably they don't have the resources to do it.**” – Student Org.*






# Findings: RI/Brown Community Engagement

## Brown's institutional presence is a barrier to community engagement

- There is an imbalance of resources between the university and local organizations and communities that can create resentment
- Brown has often had an extractive, non-collaborative relationship with the local community

*"I think there's also this assumption that because we're Brown students or professors, that we shouldn't be doing the grunt work, or we shouldn't be entering the space in the same way that a community member who's not a Brown student or who isn't college educated would. So **there's a certain entitlement...even if you don't personally feel it, that is kind of embodied by Brown students going to local organizations.**" – Student*

*Communities often **"really view Brown as being an institution that takes more than it gives to the local community....** They think that we take up a lot of space like, just physically.... They think that we take a lot from their communities as far as the research that we do, and then we don't necessarily pour back into the communities in a way that feels meaningful." – Staff Member*





# Challenges and limitations

## Timing

- The time frame of the project (8-10 weeks in summer) limited our ability to interview everyone we contacted
- We had to extend the project into the 2024-25 academic year in order to finish interviews and analyze data

## Trust

- Many community organizers, activists, and others in the local RJ community have a mixed or negative experience with or perception of Brown and did not wish to engage or spend their limited resources engaging with us







# Closing Thoughts

*"Ultimately, **reproductive justice** is ...not separate from broader issues of how we build a just society." – Faculty Member*

*"I guess my only request is that y'all as like a huge institution **use the power that you have to to help students when you can.**" – Local High School Student at a Community Org.*





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- The founders of the RJ movement, Loretta Ross and the Sister Song Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective





# For more information:

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