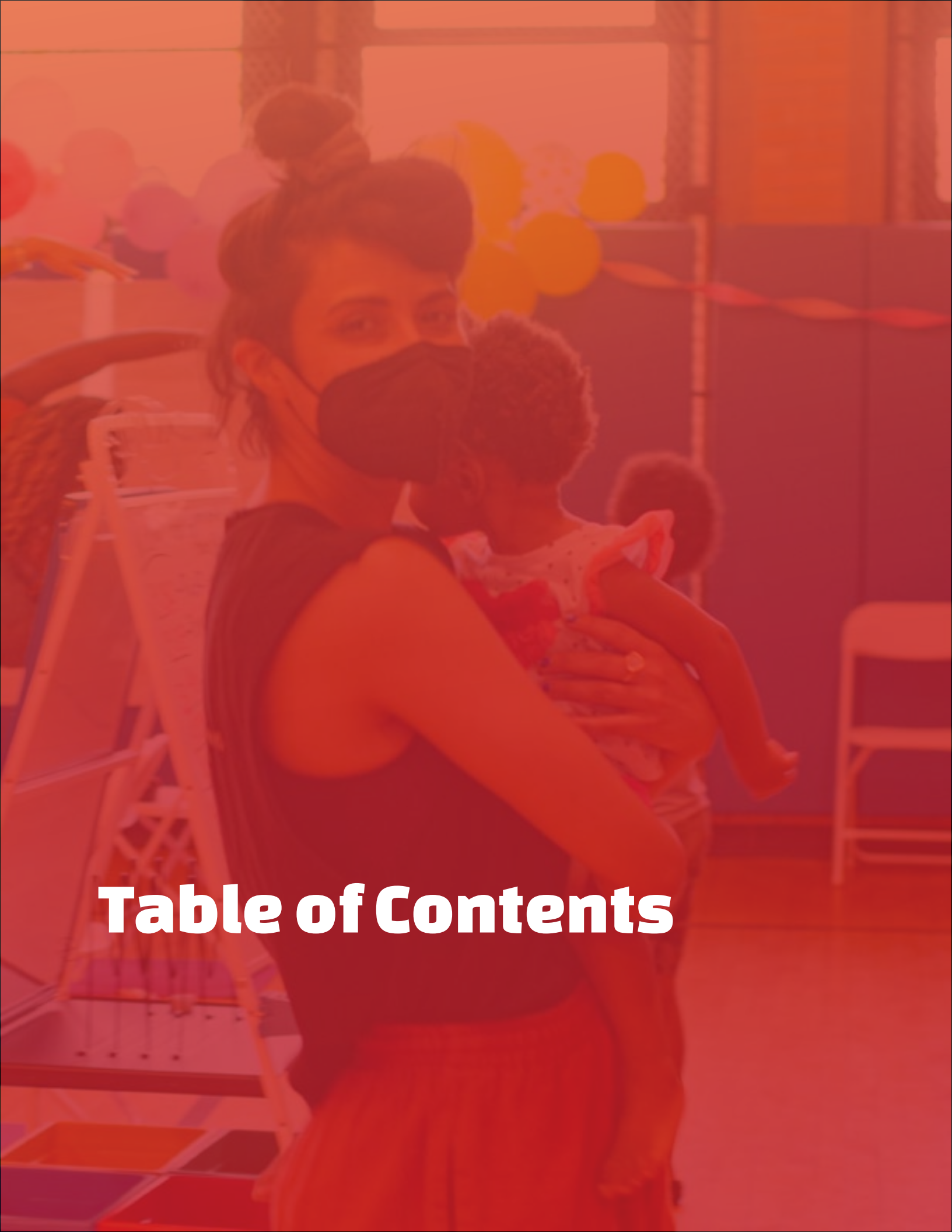




# **WE BUILD THIS BRIDGE TOGETHER**

*A STORY OF SISTA FIRE*





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# Introduction

***“I believe that all organizing is science fiction - that we are shaping the future we long for and have not yet experienced.”***

-adrienne maree brown

SISTA Fire’s co-founders, a Black woman and a Khmer woman, set out to build a future they had not yet experienced: a future where women of color in Providence were in deep community and solidarity, building power together, and transforming their community. This is a story about how it began and the many fellow travelers that are working to bring this future into reality.

There is something within us that knows that we are our best selves in community; that we survive and even thrive more fully together. Yet, creating vibrant spaces of multiracial, multicultural community means battling multiple systems of oppression – some internalized and others deeply woven into society. This is the hard, beautiful, heartbreaking work to which SISTA Fire is dedicated.

SISTA Fire is an explicitly political organization that draws its foundational analysis from Black Queer Feminism, including the works of Audre Lorde and The Combahee River Collective, as well as other radical feminists of color in the “Third World” feminist tradition. Although these ideological moorings are important, SISTA Fire’s political formation is in the service of its *practice* – building power and deep solidarity among women and nonbinary people of color. Theirs is an emergent organizing model that puts race, class, gender – and love – at the center of the work.

A Brief Note on Methodology. This is a story of a “moment” in the organization’s history, beginning with its origins. Like just about everything that happens at SISTA Fire, this documentation project began with listening. We conducted interviews with staff and members and poured through materials and media coverage to weave this narrative from all its various sources. However, as we found early on, SISTA Fire is deeply personal to all who are part of it. Its story is more of a mosaic than a simple linear telling of the facts. We tried to reflect the common themes, with the caveat that this piece does not begin to do justice in conveying the diverse array of experiences that have made SISTA Fire what it is today. It is also true that this story is still unfolding.

As the nation faces a second Trump Administration and progressive movements are working to fight the deluge of attacks on our communities, SISTA Fire will write bold new chapters. For now, we begin in the place where SISTA Fire has rooted: in the unique city that is Providence.

**Providence is a storied and complex city located in Rhode Island, the country’s smallest state.** The state was colonized as a haven for religious tolerance for settlers. This story of haven and tolerance for settlers is juxtaposed with the state’s violent history of broken treaties, bloody massacres of indigenous people, and an early economy that depended heavily on the trade of enslaved Africans. According to [state archives](#), there were more than 1,000 slave ships trafficking more than 100,000 African people through Rhode Island ports between 1700 and 1800. Stolen labor and stolen land are the foundation of the state’s wealth and the roots of its inequities.

As a port city, Providence has always drawn a multi-cultural array of immigrants. In its early days, it was primarily Portuguese, Italian, and Irish migrants. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the city saw a growing number of migrants from Cabo Verde, Dominican Republic, and throughout South and Central America. Today, Latin residents comprise more than 40 percent of the city’s population and nearly one in four households speak a

language other than English as their primary language. About a third of Providence residents are born outside of the US.

For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Providence had a somewhat gritty reputation as a hub for organized crime. Today, the city is forging a new, more polished image that centers its institutions of higher education, health care industry, and diversity. Providence Mayor Brett Smiley, the city’s second openly gay mayor, often refers to diversity as part of the city’s assets.

Yet, for many residents of color, Providence is not a place where they feel celebrated or valued. It is a place where they fight to be heard; where they navigate many of the same issues that plague communities of color nationwide – i.e., inequitable wages and overrepresentation in the carceral system. Many of these struggles go unseen, especially at the national level, as people outside of the area find it hard to believe that racism happens in such a “progressive” northern city. However, the data contradicts perception. Young men of color are harassed by the police and disproportionately convicted and sentenced to long prison terms under RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act). Rhode Island women of color are overrepresented in low wage jobs and are more likely to be frontline workers. They are also more likely to receive poor healthcare and die prematurely as a result.

SISTA Fire was founded to shine a light on these realities by centering the voice and experience of women and nonbinary people of color. To center these voices and, more importantly, build power in these communities, SISTA Fire has had to engage at the intersections of race, gender, and class. This has meant not only addressing how these forms of identity and oppression shape their communities’ experiences but also how they inform their needs, dreams, and strategies for change. This story is about how SISTA Fire is co-creating this special organizing and power building space in Providence; a space that is rooted in love and Black feminist values.

# SISTA Fire Origins: Bringing The Work Home

The organization officially launched in 2017, though its story begins much earlier. For its co-founder, Ditra Edwards, SISTA Fire is the culmination of decades of national and regional work. Ditra was always drawn to work with young people, even as a young person herself. This work took various forms. She started with direct service and youth development, including camp and programming at a local children's museum. She eventually moved into youth organizing and advocacy, including time heading a national youth leadership and organizing initiative LISTEN, Inc., (Local Initiative Support, Training and Education Network) based in Washington, DC. Although Ditra returned to Providence frequently to spend time with her close-knit family, the DC area had become her political home and national work her primary focus.

When her mother's health took a turn, Ditra moved back to Providence to help her sister care for her. It was her mother who urged her to use her skills and experience in her own hometown. She would ask Ditra, "Why can't you do what you do *here*?"

After her mother passed, Ditra was at a crossroads. As she stepped back from national work to grieve this huge loss, she started to ponder her mother's question: why can't she do what she does in Providence?

"I started having coffee or checking in once a week with Chanravy Proeung," said Ditra. "Just talking about Rhode Island and what was happening in Rhode Island.

I was really wanting to understand and think more, after I had some space to heal, about *what am I doing next?* I started doing one-on-ones specifically with women of color, trying to explore the landscape of Rhode Island and what was happening here with women. I think women were mostly on my heart because of the loss of my mom, but also because of how I was getting through that loss and that transition. I had a core set of women in my life that were always supporting me. And that has always been true for me."

Chanravy had been an organizer and executive director at PrYSM (Providence Youth Student Movement), an organization building power and community with Southeast Asian (SEA) youth (and eventually multiracially) across gender and sexuality. She was steeped in local organizing and politics, and a recent veteran of the struggle to build a nonprofit movement space in Providence.

Her experience as a first-generation Khmer woman growing up in Providence gave her a strong sense of the connections between imperialism, racism,



neocolonialism, and patriarchy and how it played out across communities. Her family navigated the complex maze of structural oppression and grief that is part and parcel of their refugee experience. She was just learning about the Asian American Movement and through her work with PRYSM, started connecting with the growing AAPI organizing network, Grassroots Asians Rising (GAR). Inspired by these efforts, Chanravy started organizing Southeast Asian folk to engage in Pan-Asian solidarity spaces, which led to the formation of the Southeast Asian Freedom Network (SEAFN). She served as SEAFN’s National Organizer prior to coming to SISTA Fire. Multiracial organizing was what she knew. She had come up as an organizer under Black leadership. She also held the tenets of the Asian American Movement, including its commitment to multiracial organizing and solidarity.

She and Ditra already had a strong relationship rooted in trust and mutual respect. “We both really supported each other. Ditra had lost her mom. I had transitioned out

of the Southeast Asian Freedom Network and the Soros Justice Fellowship. And I was pretty burnt out because my daughter had brain surgery and I was going through rehab with her,” said Chanravy. “So, we were really depending on each other a lot, emotionally. I think that gave way to a lot of discussion around what support systems do women of color have in Rhode Island. And a lot of deep discussion about movement building and organizing; the landscape of organizing in a small state such as Rhode Island.”

These conversations were happening amidst the backdrop of escalating violence targeting Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, as well as growing mobilizations against state violence in Black communities nationwide. Community tensions were running high.

Chanravy and Ditra decided to expand the conversation, conducting a series of one on ones with organizers – in Providence and beyond – to gather insights into what would make the most sense to build in Providence. Ditra found herself closing in on two possible options: develop a capacity building and training institution or found an organizing space to build power with women of color in Providence. “Folk were clear,” Ditra remembered. “They were like, ‘Forget about that capacity building thing. But that organizing women of color, power building thing? That’s the one.’”

One reason why so many of the people they interviewed wanted a dedicated space for organizing women of color was because they believed that most ‘movement’ spaces in Providence were racially segmented and, too often, male dominated. People expressed genuine excitement about having more spaces committed to building multiracial solidarity that centered women of color and the challenges they faced. It was an opportunity to build greater unity and power among Providence’s diverse, largely immigrant (and often fragmented) working class community. The fact that Chanravy, a Khmer American, and Ditra, an African American, were building this work together had already set the groundwork for a multiracial project. As Chanravy put it, “It was baked into our DNA.”

# Lineages

Although SISTA Fire was created out of years of listening and engagement with people in Providence and around the country, many of its foundational ideas are rooted in political lineages that date back more than 50 years. These lineages are evident when you first walk into their space. Pictures and quotes by Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa and other feminist luminaries adorn the walls. Its lineage is also rooted in the stories of its members.

Here are a few of the major influences that shape SISTA Fire's politics and way in the world.



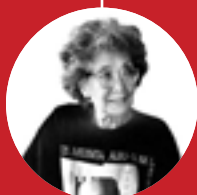
**Ella Baker** and **Audre Lorde** are in many ways ancestral guides for SISTA Fire. Ella Baker was known for her strategic mind and commitment to organizing and mentoring young people. She preferred working powerfully behind the scenes to public accolades, a trait she and SISTA Fire share. Audre Lorde was an outspoken writer and clarion voice who lifted up the connections between myriad issues and how they shaped us, including patriarchy, racism, heterosexism, ableism, and the policing and restricting of pleasure. Her work has been an inspiration and a source of deep study for the SFRI community.



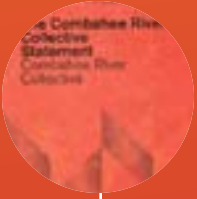
**'Women of Color' as a political designation, not biology.** Black feminist writer, human rights activist and reproductive justice pioneer Loretta Ross describes the genesis of the term "women of color" as a political designation; "a solidarity definition, a commitment to work in collaboration with other oppressed women of color who have been minoritized." This analysis is at the heart of SISTA Fire's multiracial organizing approach.



**Grace Lee Boggs** was an influential Chinese American organizer, theorist, author, and strategist from Providence known best for her longtime organizing work in Detroit with her late husband James Boggs. The work and writings of Grace Lee Boggs are an important part of SISTA Fire's political framework as is the breakthrough movement work that James and Grace Lee Boggs helped to build in Detroit. SISTA Fire has taken staff and members to Detroit as part of peer learning circles. They have also attended Allied Media Conferences, the US Social Forum, and visited the James and Grace Lee Boggs Center, which is a movement hub in Detroit.



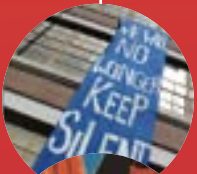
Another inspiration related to Grace Lee Boggs is the **New Asian American Movement** or Asian American Movement which centers around building power and solidarity across Asian nationalities and between Asian Americans and other oppressed communities of the global south (often referred to as Third World Peoples or People of the Global Majority (PGM)). This movement surged in the 1960s and 70s rooted in an analysis that rejected the western imposed "Oriental" identity of passive servitude and asserted an insurgent framework that centered AAPI connection to the global south. It also centered building solidarity and power – both among various Asian communities and across the global south – as necessary to confront racism, imperialism, neocolonialism and other structural oppressions. This movement advanced Pan Asian identity (in addition to national identity) as a political designation, much like the analysis undergirding the frame Women of Color. This movement – in its various forms (cultural, scholarly, organizing, etc.) – drew inspiration from Black Power movements, anti-imperial struggles in the global south, and key actors like Paul Takagi, Yuri Kochiyama, Emma Gee, Yuji Ichioka, Fred Ho, and Warren Furutani.



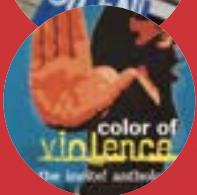
Another one of SISTA Fire’s foundational influences is the **Combahee River Collective**. The Collective published a seminal treatise known as the *Combahee River Collective Statement* which laid out the framework for what is now known as intersectionality; the “manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face” (i.e., race, gender, ableism, class, nation status, etc.). The Statement not only brings attention to intersecting oppressions, it is also an invitation. It is a call to bring our whole selves to movement - our gender expression, cultures, who we are as caretakers, etc. – *all* of who we are and what we face in the world. Perhaps as importantly, the Statement articulates the importance of Black women fighting for their liberation grounded in love: “Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work.”



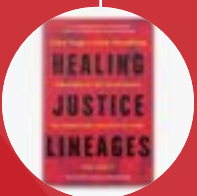
**Black Queer Feminism**, another SISTA Fire foundational framework, mostly grew out of the work and analysis of the Combahee River Collective. Co-authors of the Combahee River Collective Statement, including Barbara Smith, Demita Frazier and Beverly Smith, are some of the leading proponents and architects of Black Queer Feminism. Black Queer Feminism, simply put, centers the experience of our Black queer and LGBTQIA siblings as a way of centering the intersecting oppressions of patriarchy, racism, and heterosexism in our analysis and work we do. SISTA Fire has integrated this analysis into its work because of Black Queer Feminism’s more nuanced and expansive understanding of gender and its intersectional lens.



There are also a number of organizations whose politics and practice inspired SISTA Fire deeply. Two among them: **Sista Il Sista**, a collective of working class Black and Latinx women based in Brooklyn, NY founded in 1995, who developed an organizing model grounded in “love and liberation.” They ran several breakthrough initiatives including a Freedom School for Young Women of Color and Sista Liberated Ground – an abolitionist community action project to fight violence against women of color. And **INCITE!** which “organizes from the framework that locates women of color as living in the dangerous intersections of sexism and racism, as well as other oppressions.” Their grassroots organizing work focuses on the ways sexual and domestic violence connects with state violence. SISTA Fire was especially inspired by their participatory action research approach.



**Healing Justice** is another fundamental tenet of SISTA Fire’s work. SISTA Fire has been deeply inspired by the work of Cara Page and Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective. Cara Page writes that “Healing justice...identifies how we can holistically respond to and intervene on generational trauma and violence, and to bring collective practices that can impact and transform the consequences of oppression on our bodies, hearts and minds.” This work and the work of other leading thinkers in this area like Prentiss Hemphill are an important part of the foundation on which SISTA Fire is building its healing justice framework.



**From its inception, SISTA Fire has been intentional in creating a space where people can bring their whole selves and do the work of transformative change rooted in love. The name SISTA Fire is a nod to the groups and ideas that inspired their work – fierce women of color who brought the fire of their brilliance and built power at the intersections of the many “isms” our communities face. We say “sista” to convey love, connection and endearment. Fire is a transformative, elemental force. All of these ideas and inspirations helped make SISTA Fire the movement organization it is today.**

# Opportunity Knocks Knocks: Innovation Fellowship Funds the Dream

There is an old adage credited to the Roman philosopher Seneca, “Luck is what happens when opportunity meets preparation.” Many of our grandmothers put it another way, “If you stay ready you don’t have to get ready.” When a colleague sent Ditra an application for the Rhode Island Foundation’s Innovation Fellowships, she was hesitant at first. She did not expect an institution like that to understand what they were trying to do. On the other hand, if she won, the \$300,000 fellowship would be a game changer. It would go a long way in making this emerging dream a reality.

Ditra decided to step out of her comfort zone and go for it, submitting the application and hoped for the best. “Lo and behold, my application made it through the first round. Then my application made it through the second round. And I got an interview. And so, I was the first woman of color to win the innovation fellowship. I think it kind of surprised me.”

With new resources in hand, it was time to get the party started.

Ditra went back to Chanravy, who was pursuing other work at the time, to explore what they might build now that there were funds. Although the two had more than a decade gap in age between them, they were very aligned along values and principles. And they were excited to see what they would build together, despite how daunted they felt by the work ahead. It was, after all, the summer of 2017, year one of the Trump Administration. A lot was in flux. And frontline communities, as usual, were feeling the brunt.

# Trusting Women

Ditra and Chanravy's vision was to create a space that centered building the power and agency of young working-class women of color; a space that was grounded in love, care, and solidarity. They knew that listening was going to be critical to building that kind of space, even though most of their folk had never experienced what SISTA Fire hoped to co-create. Despite the changing conditions and the newness of their ideas, the team leaned into trust that there was wisdom and knowledge in community and set out to hear what people had to say.

That summer, the organization hired five women of color to build on the series of one-on-ones that Ditra and Chanravy had been conducting over the last two years. There was also an informal group of member/advisors that eventually formed the Organizing Committee (OC) in 2019, comprised of leadership and close allies, to help guide and hold the work with staff. The OC supported much of the early outreach and engagement efforts.

Staff and leaders were literally out in the streets, at grocery stores, salons, and in conversation with women of color at other organizations. Interest in SISTA Fire was growing. It was time to bring people together and start building the community they were dreaming.

For Lucy Rios, one of SISTA Fire's early OC members, this was an opportunity to help build the kind of space she wished she had as a younger woman.

"I was definitely one of the people that was like, when I heard the age group... Yes, do it for the young women. But I knew there were a lot of people like me, even though my work is around gender justice, who would love to be in more relationship with other women of color that are doing other types of work. I just had a real longing for it.

I remember sharing that, and I know she must've heard it from a lot of other people too."

Ditra and Chanravy most certainly heard from a lot of the women over 35 that they wanted to be a part of what SISTA Fire was building. When SISTA Fire decided to expand into an intergenerational space, Lucy was thrilled. "I was like, yes, I want to be a part of that! I think it might've been one of the first times I was in a room like that. And it just felt right."





# Holding Brave Space

*“I remember my first Justice Circle. I had a hard time talking to anyone but as I kept showing up, it just got a lot easier. I feel like it helped break isolation for me with all the things that were being talked about in the space. Every justice circle looked really different, but it felt super relevant to what was happening in the world, and in a way that was very specific to the lived experiences of people around me. I also love how Rhode Island centered SISTA Fire is. I feel like that’s a big thing that kept me coming around – and the focus on Black women, also being inclusive, and talking about non-binary people. I have a lot of queer and non-binary people in my life, so it just seemed like the correct place to be.”*

-Valerie Santil, SISTA Fire member and organizer



SISTA Fire started hosting its monthly Justice Circles in November 2017. Many of the folk who came to the Justice Circles were, like Lucy, inspired by this unique space. It was one of the few multiracial, intergenerational, and explicitly political spaces in Rhode Island and one of an even fewer number of spaces where women felt heard and held. However, it wasn't just diversity, or even the politics that made the space so powerful. It was the mix of practices that make up SISTA Fire's intentional approach to creating *brave space*; a space where folk felt they could take risks and say and hear the hard things from one another.

### **SISTA Fire's Approach to Brave Spaces: Key Components**

Everything at SISTA Fire begins with deep listening. Every campaign, its choice of methodologies, even its structure are all developed based on what they hear from community. Justice Circles were informed by team interviews and one-on-ones as they sought to design a space that would hold what they knew would be hard conversations ahead. After all, they needed a container that supported folk in navigating the various forms of difference (i.e., race, gender, culture, generation, language, etc.). They also wanted a process that would not only help people see what they had in common but would also facilitate the kind of collaborative learning and trust building needed for doing principled work together.

#### **Preparing a space where people are seen and held.**

A big part of the process is creating a space where folk have what they need to feel fully supported in their participation; a space of genuine care. Care is a central tenet of the work at SISTA Fire as a significant part of its base are caretakers, people who often come to Circles after a full day of work and/or school. Everyone needs care but perhaps caretakers especially. This is why the team, many of whom are caretakers themselves, believe it is critically important for SISTA Fire to provide a range of care at every event they host. This care comes in the form of "material" support like meals and childcare, as well as emotional support like space to be heard, affirmed, and engage their creativity. The group is also working to build its language justice and interpretation capacity – for members and as an internal practice with staff.

**Altar building and ritual practice.** At SISTA Fire, culture is not something performative as part of an event, it is woven throughout its practice. Meeting spaces feature altars and other rituals that honor the ancestors and hold space for memories and expressions of grief as part of SISTA Fire's commitment to welcoming each participant's whole self.

**Radical welcoming.** Radical welcoming is the practice of authentically “seeing” and engaging with people to make sure that whoever comes into their space has received personal attention and caring engagement with members of the team (staff and members). This means everything from a one-on-one conversation to learn more about the person and their passions, to making sure they are settled in and have gotten fed.

SISTA Fire’s model also includes **deep relationship and community building.** Both Ditra and Chanravy bring a strong sense of family to their work at SISTA Fire. Many members think of themselves as part of the SISTA Fire family. Alexa Barriga joined SISTA Fire in 2018 in large part because they saw their own love for family reflected in the way Ditra and Chanravy held the work.

“I just felt very held by the depth of love that they had for their family and a sense of vision, like such strong vision, for what’s possible. I felt held by the depth of relationships that people have, like to me, but also to each other.”

**Designing for Learning and Collective Growth.** All of the preparation and care sets the foundation for the Circle conversation itself. There are community agreements for how participants show up in the space; encouragement to set personal boundaries as needed, but also the ask that participants be willing to extend themselves, listen actively, and stay curious even when they feel like shutting down.

SISTA Fire recognized that Circle conversations do not happen in a vacuum. So much of what people think and believe are shaped by their socialization living under these intersecting systems of oppression. Justice Circles are an intentional space in which folk are supported in unpacking some of these assumptions and how they may shape their analysis. The team facilitates conversations to help break down these notions and encourage participants to explore more liberatory ideas – all with the goal of growing the Circle’s collective analysis.

**Popular education and capacity building.** Popular education is a set of practices designed to encourage collective inquiry and exploration where everyone is a learner and a teacher. These methods center making accessible content (what is taught) and process (how and *with* whom teaching happens) to everyone in the Circle regardless of role or experience. SISTA Fire leadership leaned into popular education early on, incorporating it into its 12-week SISTA Circle Transformative Leadership Training (SCTLT) during its first year of operation. In 2024, staff and leaders received training from long-time collaborator Francisco “Pancho” Arguelles, a leading practitioner in the field. Some of the ways SISTA Fire incorporates popular education into the Circles include co-designing Circle content and structure with members and employing a variety of methods for engagement including video, song, and participatory art making. Much of this work happens through its Justice Circles, an intergenerational space with a focus on building deep relationships between women and gender nonconforming people of color.

SISTA Fire also facilitated a series of trainings as part of its overall education and capacity building efforts. Unlike the Circles, trainings primarily focused on skills and capacity building in specific areas like fundraising, organizing, and expanding knowledge around key campaign issues. Some of these trainings were conducted by aligned organizations like SisterSONG, who did a workshop on reproductive justice led by its Executive Director Monica Simpson.

Trainings and circle gatherings are just two components of SISTA Fire’s approach to leadership development. Perhaps the most important part of its leadership development approach is moving members to *practice*. Members are encouraged to join working groups where much of SISTA Fire’s organizing and community building work takes place. Working groups are where the rubber meets the road; where learning is tested in “real world” situations and refined by experience and reflection.

## SISTA Fire’s Approach to Brave Spaces: Key Components



# The Bumpy Road to Solidarity

*“But why are you reducing a political designation to a biological destiny? That’s what white supremacy wants you to do... I think it’s a setback when we disintegrate as people of color around primitive ethnic claiming.*

*Yes, we are Asian American, Native American, whatever. But the point is when you choose to work with other people who are minoritized by oppression, you have lifted yourself out of that basic identity into another political being, another political space... This is a term that has a lot of power for us. But we’ve done a poor-ass job of communicating that history so that people understand that power.”*

-Loretta Ross, author, scholar, activist and pioneer in reproductive justice and human rights on the origin of the term, “women of color.”

At the center of SISTA Fire's power building strategy is the development of a powerful, multi-racial alliance of working-class women of color. They knew there were not many people in their community with experience working across race and culture, but they were hopeful that the people they were organizing would share their vision and be willing to try. The team soon learned that not everyone was as ready as they hoped.

Chanravy was leading a lot of these discussions and remembers the emerging tensions, some of which were directed at her and her leadership.

"A lot of the women we were able to bring in were of different ethnic backgrounds. We had a lot of African American young women, Dominican, Cambodian young women. We had all sorts of folks coming in who identified as women of color. They were all younger as well."

SISTA Fire shared a video of human rights activist and scholar Loretta Ross explaining the origins of the term "women of color." They did readings and a deep dive into what this idea meant for building power in Providence.

"So, there was this learning, particularly around what women of color meant, that term, and how that was a political, like a solidarity, call to action. I think that was clear for us and clear for many people who were part of SISTA Fire but there are some people from the outside that don't identify as a woman of color. And we came to this challenge... because folks identify with their ethnicity, their nationality of origin for folks who are migrants. And so, we started to build folk's analysis around what it meant to be women of color, exploring different histories and things like that."

It was not a smooth process as Chanravy started to get push back from some participants about her role.

"I think as a Cambodian American woman doing this work, my ally work is to support the building of [solidarity] infrastructure. A lot of the times when I was working with younger African American women, they would be like, well, Chanravy, you're not Black. I was like, yes, I understand I'm not Black, but this is solidarity work. That was some of the tension that grew, too. And I had to have these

conversations with Ditra that I'm getting a lot of pushback from people, especially younger folks who feel like they can say [messed up] things to me. And I think that was the second tension that arose because I've never felt that in movement spaces. There was always this racial solidarity conversation. That's when it first started to feel like there's no solidarity here."

So Chanravy, Ditra and the team dug into these hard conversations to interrogate what it means to show up for each other and explore what they might gain, versus lose, from building solidarity. It was important to address these issues head on if they were going to build the kind of trust and community necessary for organizing and taking risks together. Trumpism was not helping as it appeared to be reinforcing negative, divisive practices in communities.

Chanravy: "I think that people became more vocal about their hate and being boldly offensive to people. And I think that time was just like, whoa, this is too much. It was getting to be a highly pressurized political state."

The team developed a program that combined facilitated conversations with study and guided inquiry. Some of the questions they explored: What did people need to learn about each other and their histories? What has solidarity among women of color looked like over time? How do we understand the ways that different kinds of oppressions intersect for women of color? How does anti-Blackness, ableism, xenophobia, etc., shape our thinking? And how might we imagine solidarity as a tool for building community and building power?

SISTA Fire launched Sister Circles in 2018 to support leadership and capacity building for young women of color. The 13-week training and support program was designed to help build skills but also cultivate a more radical analysis among cohort members. It was a critical step toward building the trust and organizational "muscle" for multiracial organizing. The cohort went to Detroit as part of their study, attending the Allied Media Conference and spending time with other organizers. Sister Circles have also been an important vehicle for expanding the organization's base. Each session has produced a cohort of capable leaders committed to SISTA Fire's work and values. More than half of those attending Sister Circles are still active in SISTA Fire leadership.

# Taking it to the Streets: Participatory Action Research the SISTA Fire Way

Ditra and Chanravy had become strong proponents of participatory action research (PAR) methods prior to co-founding SISTA Fire and were inspired in large part by the work of author, attorney and organizer Andrea Ritchie. The two attended her workshop at an Allied Media Conference based on her book, *Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color*, where they shared PAR strategies and findings. In PAR, those directly affected by the research issue, shape the questions and methods, actively participate in the research process, and participate in the data analysis and knowledge generation.

This approach was in alignment with SISTA Fire's practice of deep listening and community leadership. The Sister Circles and Justice Circles only reinforced the importance of listening to and lifting up the life experiences of Providence women of color. Both Circles were informed by listening and research. In true PAR fashion, they tested questions in various Circles and Sister Circle participants helped shape the project and collect data.

Ditra: "We had people think about a timeline on women in their lives. Who were the people that impacted them? We could really see who the folk were they felt had provided political development or political direction in their life. And so, we started to hear these stories, these really powerful stories. People talked about organizers they knew in their community. We had elders in the room talking about their time coming up and the politics in their work.

And so early on, we were able to have these conversations and start to collect information from folks that really helped us begin to make some decisions about how we did our thing. We knew this Justice Circle felt like a great entry point. But we also knew we wanted to be out in the community and continue to build with people."

Ditra trained a team led by Chanravy with Kia Smith, Abeer Khatana, and Jade Lopez. This group became the first survey implementation team. Alexa Barriga (a founding member), Abeer Khatana and Srav Puranam, (a former colleague of Ditra's during her tenure at The Praxis Project) led the data-cleaning process. The team co-designed the PAR project, developing questions, drafting surveys, and creating an outreach strategy to engage their diverse base. Each member of the multicultural team brought a set of skills, energy, and experience to the project. Ditra's movement facilitation experience was an important asset to the process.

Chanravy: "Ditra brought her brilliance and was using her facilitation skills to have these conversations. [She was] asking questions so that folks would get engaged off the bat. So, those are the kind of conversations that started organically through strategic facilitation."

Sister Circle cohort members helped SISTA Fire hold their monthly Justice Circles and hit the streets to collect surveys and conduct interviews with women of color throughout the city. They also helped revise and "tighten up" the surveys, drawing on what they were learning from their interactions in real time.

Ditra: "We were talking to women out on the streets, in neighborhoods, hair salons, laundromats, wherever we thought women would be, that's where we tried to go." They were able to reach more than 200 women of color in the area, the largest survey of its kind in the state.

**Reporting back in community.** A critical part of PAR is knowledge sharing – making sure that the information gathered is shared with community so that community can access it and help interpret what it means. The team was excited to bring the data back and hear community insights about what they found. The core team that led the research and listening process became the group that helped design the report back space. They tapped Design Studio for Social Intervention (ds4si), a group known for its innovative group processes, to help make sure that the report back was interactive and engaging. ds4si staged a Creativity Lab to hold the process that brought together

more than 100 women. Participants were greeted with large, colorful posters with opportunities to make comments, raise questions, creatively dig into the data, and discuss what they saw.

Once the community input was gathered and integrated, SISTA Fire went on to share their findings with policymakers and other organizations in the RI nonprofit advocacy ecosystem. When Providence City Council invited them to make a presentation for an International Women's Day event, members felt like perhaps their work was breaking through. There were leaders and organizations who stepped up to work with SISTA Fire to address the issues the data revealed. Unfortunately, there were others that just wanted access to the data for their own purposes.

The organization garnered some important lessons about the local political landscape and what it means to stand in their values and purpose amidst politics as usual. Ditra was often tasked with representing SISTA Fire in agency spaces and became known as an uncompromising voice for working class women who will, as colleagues shared, 'say the thing that needs to be said.' The experience only reinforced the importance of building directly with grassroots leaders of color around the research and its implications for organizing in Providence.

Ditra: "We invited grassroots leaders of color who were working on different things to come and talk about their work, and how their work intersected with the data that we had collected. Coming out of that space, we had this core leadership crew that really helped us think about what else we have learned from this data. This is where we started to build our analysis and build a landscape frame around what's happening in Rhode Island. And by that time, we had developed two teams: one that we called our organizing team, and another our data team."

# Evolving the Structure

SISTA Fire's organizational structure was expanding.

There were monthly Justice Circles, a monthly general membership meeting, and a smaller Organizing Committee that helped prepare for these more public facing gatherings and community trainings. The committee structure expanded from the Organizing Committee to include a Fundraising Committee (focused on grassroots fundraising and individual donors), and a Mutual Aid Committee.

Ditra: "Over the years, when we felt like there was an emergence of new work, we would start a new committee to help hold it. That way, we had a space for members to make decisions and help guide what we were doing."

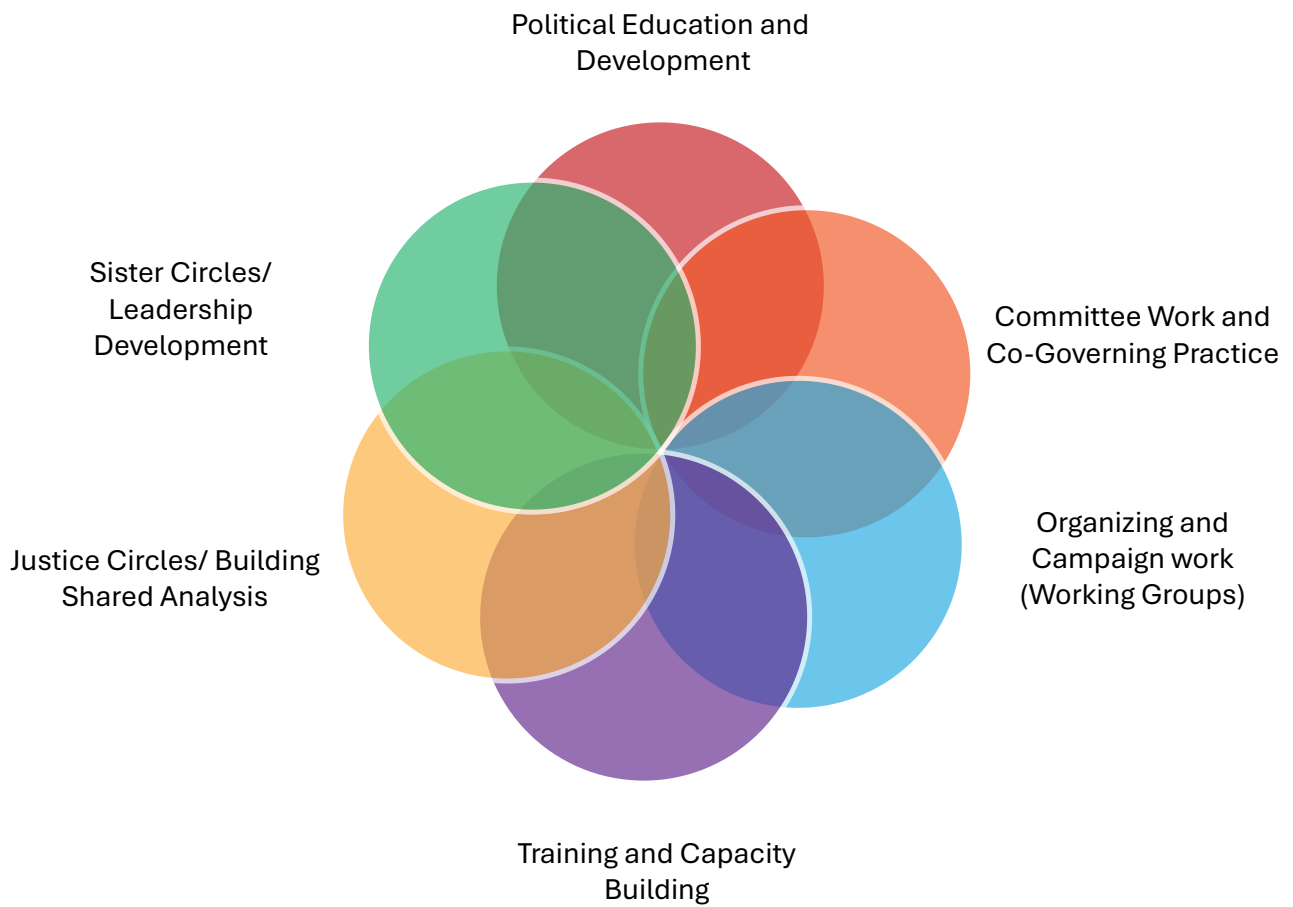
The Organizing Committee (OC) was the locus of much of the decisionmaking, including how the organization would structure itself so that members could play a leading role. The OC often brought decision items to general membership meetings, organized trainings, and worked closely with staff to support the steady build out of SISTA Fire into a member-led organization. The committee structure has also become a leadership pipeline for the organization. Everyone on staff right now either came out of leadership, membership or previous partnership with SISTA Fire.

Ditra: "We are always trying to create pathways for our members to be able to lead the organization. We learned a lot over the last couple of years about the fact that when folks have no movement context, it is really hard for them to come into SISTA Fire. It's because they haven't fully developed their process or understanding of how power plays out. As much as they might want to be in a space that was all folks of color, they really need more development as individuals and in collective before they can lead. Some folks have not let go of the traditional patriarchal frameworks for how decisions get made."

SISTA Fire recognized that they would have to grow the kind of leaders they needed if they were to build the kind of organization they envisioned. So, they developed several pathways to leadership, all of which emphasize their ideological grounding and approach to building power, community, and care.

With an expanding base and clear data in hand, the team was ready to identify its first major campaign. Unfortunately, a set of tragic events brought the campaign to them.

# SISTA Fire Pathways to Leadership



A woman is shown in profile, writing on a chalkboard. The words "WHICH ARE YOU" are visible on the board. The image has a warm, orange-red tint.

# **#SheShouldBeHere: Tragedy Sparks Movement for Birth Justice**

On January 7, 2019, 27-year-old LaShonda Hazard and her unborn child died at Women and Infants Hospital (WIH), the place where 80 percent of the state's births take place. Before she died, she was sent home by her doctor, even though she told them that she was in excruciating pain, posting on Facebook that she felt like she was dying.

A number of SISTA Fire members were following Lashonda's posts and growing increasingly concerned. When news spread that she and her unborn baby had passed, grief and rage pulsed through the community. There was an outpouring of stories from other women of color about the racist and traumatic treatment they received at WIH, making it clear that LaShonda and her child's death was not some rare exception.

Members pushed for SISTA Fire to take on the issue and confront WIH about what happened to LaShonda and her baby, as well as WIH's years of racist treatment of women of color. Members believed that working together, they could win concrete demands that would prevent other mothers from going through what LaShonda did.

In SISTA Fire fashion, they collected birth stories from local women of color, many of whom experienced disrespect and poor treatment as part of their Rhode Island birthing experience. The team conducted focus groups, one-on-one interviews and gathered stories on social media. They were in the streets, in libraries – just about anywhere they could connect with women of color.

Their research and listening uncovered that there were many women of color who had suffered some level of violence and poor treatment at WIH and other area hospitals. There were clear patterns of racism and sexism “baked in” to the state’s healthcare system. These issues went beyond a few bad actors. It was clearly a structural problem. Yet, even with overwhelming evidence and national attention focused on the hospital, the team knew that moving WIH to make substantive structural changes would require a hard push from its community.

SISTA Fire reached out to grassroots organizations of color, local organizing groups, and health groups to organize an alliance that worked alongside their members and other concerned residents. The campaign held meetings twice a month and provided regular updates on its progress at in-person and virtual meetings, and via its social media platforms. The group developed a [community list of demands](#) for structural changes throughout WIH. There was also a social media campaign to elevate the public conversation on birth justice and provide opportunities for folk to support the campaign online.

About a month after LaShonda and her baby’s passing, SISTA Fire issued an open letter calling for accountability and issuing a set of demands to address the Black Maternal Health crisis in Rhode Island. The demands were developed out of the listening process SISTA Fire had launched.

There was so much pain, grief, and trauma revealed in the listenings that it was not going to be enough to simply announce the findings and try to move the demands in a traditional advocacy manner. Members believed that there needed to be a conversation in community to collectively hold and acknowledge the grief and begin a journey toward healing.

This “conversation” was *Speaking Our Truths: We Believe Black Women*. The session drew more than 90 Black and Indigenous women and nonbinary people on a Sunday in February. In Rhode Island. It was an intimate conversation where folk could be tender, bear witness to one another, and be reminded of the power of community to heal and to change things.

**“They didn’t listen to this Black mother when she cried out for help. WIH ignored her pleas and sent her home without care.”**

Participants left with a renewed commitment to continue the work of documenting the experiences of women of color at WIH. They could see the impact these stories were having and the power of their truth telling in making the case for change.

The open letter caught the attention of their City Council and WIH. The hospital agreed to a set of community accountability sessions – the first in which they ever participated. Steady progress is being made toward winning their demands. SISTA Fire was part of Protect Our Health Care, a statewide coalition that pressured the State Attorney General to stop a merger between WIH’s parent entity Care New England and Lifespan to ensure that WIH stays accountable to the change process.

City Council worked with SISTA Fire to get an International Women’s Day Resolution passed that specifically names Lashonda Hazard, Women and Infants Hospital, and the Black Maternal Health crisis. The resolution also recognizes the systemic and intersectional oppression that disproportionately impacts women of color.

## Open Letter to the Community: We Believe Black Women

In a state that does not put Black women or women of color first, we believe and trust Black women.

We stand in solidarity with Lashonda Hazard's family. We believe that she was the most knowledgeable person when it came to her body and what she needed. Her requests for help should not have been ignored.

On January 7th, 2019, Lashonda Hazard, age 27, unexpectedly passed away at Women and Infants Hospital along with her unborn child. She was treated poorly when she came there for help, and she was turned away. When she returned, she was made to wait and she died. The loss of her life and her child's life is a serious tragedy.

THIS IS NOT THE ONLY SUCH TRAGIC CASE. In the United States, the infant mortality rate for Black babies is the highest in premature births, and Black women are at high risk for maternal death. In fact, in the United States, Black women are 243% more likely to die from pregnancy or childbirth-related causes. Walking into a hospital or doctor's office and not being listened to in a moment of stress is dehumanizing. In the wealthiest nation in the world, Black women are dying in childbirth at the same rates of women from poorer, colonized nations. This is a form of racialized gender violence at the hands of our medical systems.

In a world that does not believe or trust Black women, the level of risk has immeasurable consequences and the implications for quality of care and quality of life are urgent. Women and Infants Hospital must be accountable and recognize these patterns upfront. They must recognize that Black women need to be heard, to be seen, to be honored for the knowledge they have of their bodies. The leadership of Women and Infants Hospital must be accountable for ensuring that the institution's practices value Black women.

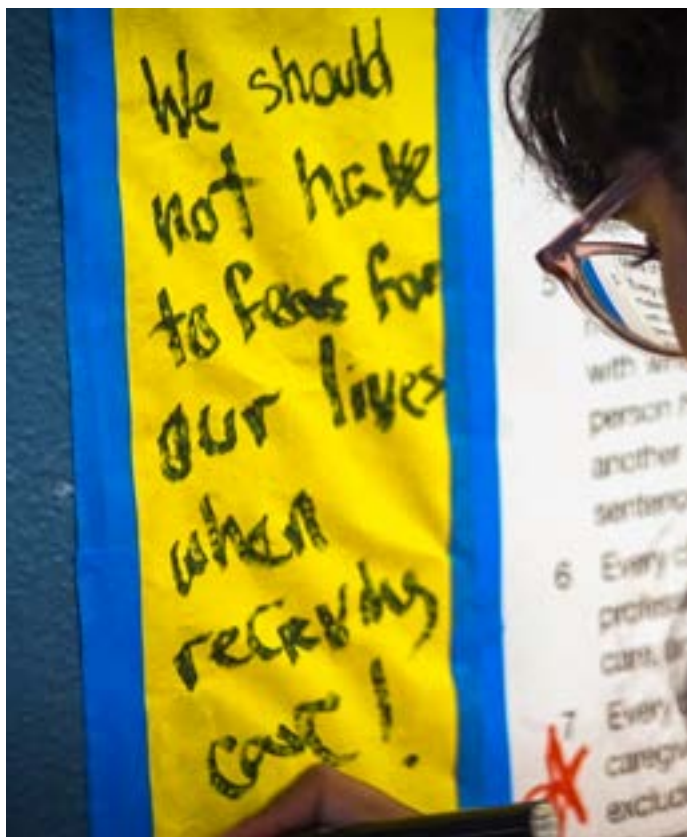
We must change these conditions. To do that, we have to work together to:

1. Ensure that the leadership, knowledge, and lived experiences of Black women and women of color is at the center of any efforts to make or change policies and practices that impact our quality of life and quality of care
2. Advocate for public funding at both the city and state levels to resource community-based programs that can help remedy social inequities broadly, with a particular emphasis on Black Maternal Child Health
3. Invest in the leadership of Black maternal health providers and providers of color (doulas, labor nurses, lactation consultants, midwives, obstetricians, and gynecologists).

For its part, Women and Infants Hospital must address the systemic racism in its institutional policies and practices. One minimal step toward that would be to participate in anti-oppression cultural and historical training that shifts their practices from the individualistic nature of "cultural competency" to the systemic and institutional analysis of "structural competency" or "equity competency" that is needed to ensure the health and safety of Black women.

In Struggle and Justice,

SISTA Fire Membership



## Forging a Vision of Birth Justice: The Importance of Doula Leadership

Doulas and other birthworkers have been a part of SISTA Fire since its beginning. It was their leadership and participation that helped ground the campaign in a broader vision, beyond holding WIH accountable, to one of birth justice – for mothers and the birthworkers who support them. As a result, the campaign provided an opportunity to build with birthworkers in a deeper way. Umoja Nia, a Black doula collective, facilitated a focus group so SISTA Fire could hear directly from doulas about their experiences in the system as well as their visions and needs. SISTA Fire was already building with two veteran Black women doulas - Quatia “Q” Osorio and Shay Costa. Q was helping to lead a team that was drafting legislation to improve access to doula services.

A broader coalition was organized around the doula bill, which helped move the Department of Health to invest directly in maternal health in communities of color. This more extensive initiative evolved into the Black Maternal Health Campaign which, among other things, helped establish a doulas of color network.

Preetilata Hashemi, a doula/birth worker and SISTA Fire member, notes that the legislation was important in moving the campaign beyond accountability to advancing and institutionalizing community vision. “One thing I’ve learned from SISTA Fire is that, yes, we can push for accountability, but it’s really important for us to also have solutions that are outside of systems; that are tied to our visions and are also owned by us. And so, birth workers, who are rooted in ancestral practices and are committed to folks birthing and being cared for with dignity, had a lot of expertise and vision to offer to the campaign.”

SISTA Fire served as a strategy lead, as part of Friends of the Doulas Reimbursement Act, to help flank the legislative process. This was especially important as more mainstream groups tried to water down the bill. Fortunately, the Rhode Island Doula Reimbursement Act was signed into law in August 2021 and went into effect in July the next year. Thanks to efforts by SISTA Fire and others to hold the line, the law gives Rhode Island doulas the highest insurance reimbursement rate in the country.

Preetilata is now a co-facilitator of the Doulas of Color Network, an advocacy and support network of aspiring or practicing doulas and birthworkers of color. Years later, the network still meets monthly and hosts an annual Community Baby Shower, which supports new parents with needed supplies and equipment and connects them to care resources.

SISTA Fire was featured in the documentary *The Risk of Giving Birth* that aired on PBS in January 2024. More on this campaign can be found in the detailed report *Birthing a New World*.



# Adaptation in the Age of Pandemic

After carefully developing a deep culture of in-person care and community building, SISTA Fire found the world was shutting down. The pandemic brought new challenges to organizing and community building. And the team was learning what it meant to build together virtually and the implications of this shift for their working-class base.

There was also the “hot summer” of 2020 with all the protests and actions in response to the murder of George Floyd and other incidents of state violence in Black communities. SISTA Fire was supporting a number of young organizers who were new to movement and mobilizing large numbers of their peers. Politics as usual were being upended.

People were suffering from loss of wages, loss of loved ones, isolation, and disease. It was clear that communities of color were even harder hit. Women of color are disproportionately overrepresented among frontline workers in Rhode Island, which means that many had to work at their job sites despite the risks to their health or their families. This, along with the ways that state violence was compounding in people’s lives and on their screens, all contributed to a sense of rage, isolation and despair.

As usual, SISTA Fire organized community spaces for collective expression and care by facilitating healing rituals that included building community altars. Working with artists, healers and an intergenerational crew of members, and their families, SISTA Fire curated vibrant outdoor spaces designed to spark participant creativity and expression. During this time, they issued another open letter titled, *Our Mask Covers Our Mouths but Not Our Eyes: An open letter to women in Rhode Island*. It was a love letter to women of color letting them know that they were seen and loved amidst the racism and other attacks against their dignity and humanity they bear on the daily.

Justice Gaines, SISTA Fire’s Political Education Coordinator, remembers the event as transformative. “It was in the middle of the height of the pandemic. And for this space to be built in a public park, for so many people to show up, for us to be in community together, for us to also be able to name so many Black women and women of color and trans women of color together in that space really just stayed with me deeply. And so, I’ve always held that in terms of just feeling SISTA Fire as a space.”

**Moving into mutual aid.** SISTA Fire knew that there were many community members that needed material support – cash, food, connections to healthcare, etc. There was not much infrastructure, especially with regard to staffing, to move resources to where they were needed. Yet, there were service agencies looking to SISTA Fire for leadership. The organization’s recent Black Maternal Health Campaign demonstrated their deep relationships and community trust.

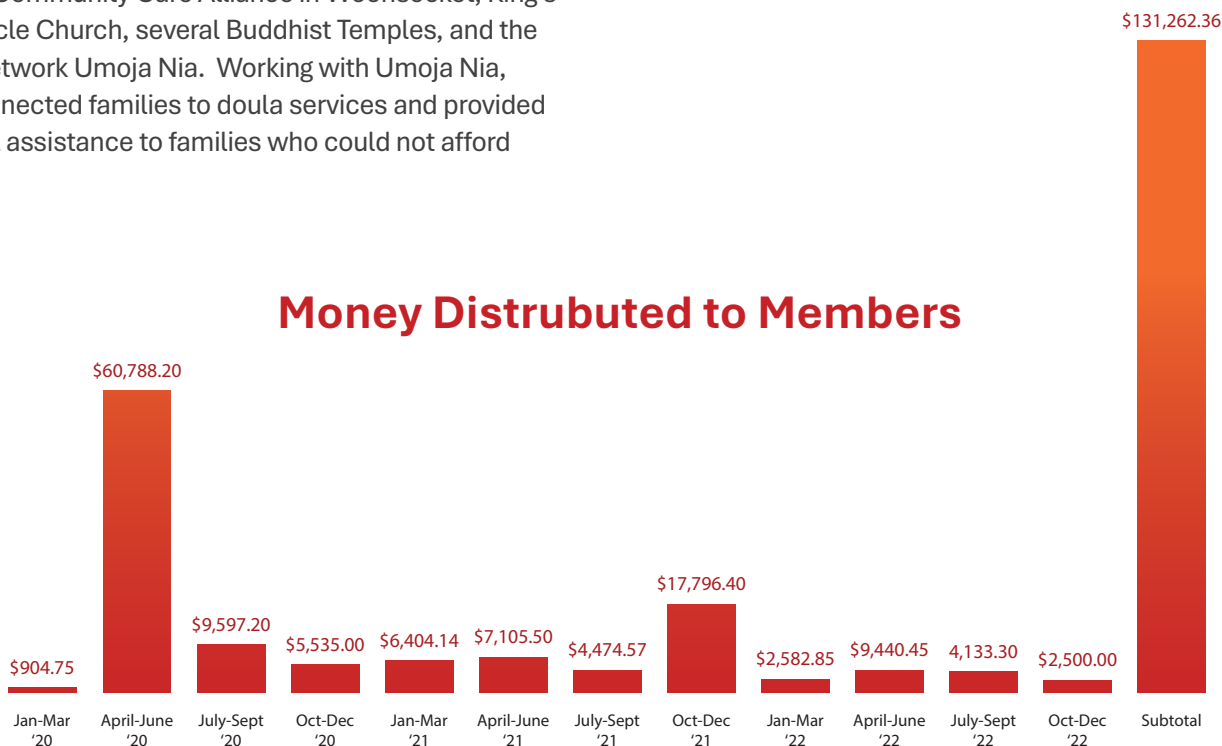
Given the organization’s emphasis on care, it wasn’t a huge ideological leap for SISTA Fire to organize mutual aid for its base. However, much of this work was rapid response – not the kind of community building and engagement over time that is SISTA Fire’s hallmark. They knew that, at its best, this would be an entry point for reaching new people. At the more challenging end of the spectrum, it would mean responding to calls from people with whom they had no relationship and perhaps were not aligned. Another consideration: how to protect team members as they made deliveries and conducted other services in the high-risk environment that was the pandemic in its early stages.

SISTA Fire began its mutual aid in earnest in March 2020. They partnered with a range of organizations including PrYSM, Community Care Alliance in Woonsocket, King’s Tabernacle Church, several Buddhist Temples, and the doula network Umoja Nia. Working with Umoja Nia, they connected families to doula services and provided financial assistance to families who could not afford them.

Ditra: “I think that, for our members, [mutual aid] was critical to our evolution. We had to look at what does it mean to really stand with your community? What does it mean to be in relationship with your community? And that continued for us throughout the pandemic. Then we had institutions with million-dollar budgets calling us talking about, ‘Can you bring this to this person? If we give you this, can you do it?’ We were like, we don’t have capacity for all of that. It was really frustrating because we didn’t understand why their staff couldn’t do the same thing we were doing.”

SISTA Fire’s decision to engage with mutual aid had its benefits. It allowed the organization to help their base in hard times, connect with new people, and organize interested folk into membership. In fact, there are several members who began their SISTA Fire journey as recipients of mutual aid. What was not so great: team members sometimes having to face racist remarks and a general lack of appreciation of their work when requests took them outside of community.

In total, a little more than \$130,000 was distributed between 2020 and when the program sunset in December 2022 as shown in the chart below. [More on SISTA Fire’s Mutual Aid work is detailed in this report.](#)



# Living Into Inclusive Space

When Ditra and Chanravy co-founded SISTA Fire, they envisioned a space that supported young women of color in their leadership as part of a broader approach to local power building and transformative change. As the organization grew to welcome more nonbinary people, SISTA Fire's original notions about base and focus were challenged. Among the questions it had to confront: What would it mean to be more gender inclusive? Is SISTA as a term considered exclusionary to some? What will be the impact of becoming more gender inclusive on the organization's practice and politic?

Chanravy: "Non-binary folks wanted to talk about SISTA Fire being more femme of center. There were conversations about trans men in the space and a number of members were indicating a need to be more explicit around non-binary individuals being involved and naming that explicitly... It's an evolving space right now."

Member feedback, by way of SISTA Fire's member impact survey, was clear. The organization needed to develop an explicit framework around being more gender inclusive. There were questions and some learning to do together to build this framework. And there was work to create the policies and practice that would ensure its integration into the organization. There was never any question about whether to include nonbinary people in SISTA Fire. Nonbinary people were already a part of the organization's membership and staff. In fact, it was their engagement and advocacy that helped raise these questions and set the organization on a transformative journey to "decolonize gender."

What Ditra knew off the bat was that they needed someone with deep knowledge and expertise to hold SISTA Fire in this process of exploration and shift. She tapped Justice Gaines who was serving as a consultant before they eventually joined the SISTA Fire team as Political Education Coordinator. She also connected with Malcolm Shanks who was the co-creator of the zine, *Decolonizing Gender: The Curriculum*, who was doing workshops for organizations on these issues. Working together with Justice and a group of staff and members, they developed an approach to supporting SISTA Fire in this work.

Their work began with facilitating a conversation with the organizing committee about trans and nonbinary inclusion. This was followed by a workshop on trans inclusion within reproductive justice, which informed the work of the Black Maternal Health Campaign.



Justice and Malcolm developed resources to support the team in learning more about what it means to be fully inclusive for trans and nonbinary people. They walked them through a series of conversations and activities that had them explore more inclusive language, policy, and practice. Concrete changes coming out of this process include:

- In the Black Maternal Health Campaign, SISTA Fire amended their demands to WIH to be more gender inclusive;
- SISTA Fire has taken on leadership of Providence's annual Dyke and Trans People of Color (DTPOC) March. This work is led by the organization's trans and nonbinary staff;
- Changes in language, policy and protocol to be more inclusive across the gender spectrum.

Justice and Ditra continued to talk about how SISTA Fire might become more inclusive and what they were observing in the process with the team. Ditra really liked Justice's strong analytical connections between their gender analysis, abolition and bodily autonomy. She ended up offering them the position of Political Education Coordinator as a way of rooting this work in the organization and pulling someone in who has been a great asset and strong partner.

This work did not stop at gender. "Folk took leadership around the disability justice issues because disability justice is the other thread for us. We have a lot of neurodivergency and people with physical challenges because of our being intergenerational – and for other reasons. We want to get all of these things right," said Ditra. "The other pieces are around language justice. We have been working with The People's Hub training as we start to integrate what we're learning. We don't have a language justice cooperative in Rhode Island. We just started building with one in Massachusetts."

Today, SISTA Fire continues to grow and evolve in these areas as the team commits to staying curious about what is needed on this journey toward building community and collective power.



# Changing Shape Of Leadership

SISTA Fire has had a member driven model from its inception. However, the day-to-day work was managed by a small leadership team working with its member-led Organizing Committee. Like most things, the work was transformed by the pandemic. The intense pace of mutual aid, personal crises, and economic shifts were taking its toll. More and more of the management work was falling on lead staff. Chanravy was experiencing burnout and Ditra found herself facing health challenges of her own.

Chanravy understood it was less about individuals and more about the patterns of underinvestment. “I think that’s always the tough part: having an organization that fulfills a lot of need but it’s always under capacity. It’s kind of like the life we live in the non-profit world in Rhode Island. We’re completely underfunded and under capacity, but there’s high need.”

Chanravy officially left the organization in November 2020 to pursue a career in clinical nursing, though still attending circles and supporting when time allows. Ditra knew that it was not sustainable for her to hold the work at the pace and in the ways SISTA Fire had been moving. In response, she has been building out the leadership team, drawing from the organization’s increasingly experienced staff, most of whom started out as members.

“I’m excited to see how folk are growing their leadership. I’m excited to see the ways we are creating the future together. There are so many projects that staff and members are now leading, that they dreamt up based on what we are learning together.”

**“I think the challenge - which is part of our mission, really - is to provide a space of healing, of care, of love. And healing sometimes hurts. So, how do we challenge our folks to get into the discomfort of building power? Because it is an uncomfortable process. It requires you to push your boundaries, to push your anxiety, to learn how to disagree, to put yourself out there in spaces where maybe you wouldn’t otherwise.”**

-Justice Gaines



# **Looking Ahead: Economic Justice Work As ‘World Building’**



Centering women and nonbinary people has necessarily grounded SISTA Fire’s work in economic justice. It is the “bread and butter” issues – like wages, food, health care, affordable housing, quality childcare and elder care – that determine so much of the quality of our lives. It is the hard, well-known reality that women in this society tend to be caretakers, often holding multiple jobs and roles with little support. Yet, as has been documented above, building the kind of solidarity and power necessary to advance an economic justice agenda takes time. There is trust and shared analysis to build, history and context to understand, so that the visions and plans that emerge reflect the collective’s best thinking.

SISTA Fire has a head start in this regard as it has been sowing seeds of political education and solidarity over the years. And this work has made an impact. A recent membership impact survey shows that 84.6 percent of members surveyed say that SISTA Fire’s political education has shaped their understanding and analysis. Now, as its members’ analysis and understanding deepens, SISTA Fire is ready to focus more on economic justice – in a transformative way.

This year’s Liberated Circles will kick off political education and practice around building economic power as solidarity. There are many cultural traditions rooted in solidarity economy practices. Informal loan clubs like *sousous*, bartering, and cooperatives are long held tradi-

tions in many communities of color. SISTA Fire is building out this work by rooting in culture *and* encouraging collective visioning around a future where economies are just and communities are thriving.

Although Justice Gaines is co-leading this work, staff and members are engaged throughout the process. “We’re starting to really think about... and imagine what does it mean to build solidarity economies? What does it mean to imagine change, not only within the context of the institutions that we are already dealing with, but in terms of actually building some of our own communal institutions and sharing some of our own collective resources as it is,” says Justice.

“We have a ton of data. We could put together an agenda just off that. But that’s not how we work. It’s about how do we share that so that our folks can also dream and imagine and build together? And so really ... centering our folks’ solutions and directly impacted folks’ solutions and visions and imaginations in the process of change.”

That is the SISTA Fire way.

# Acknowledgments

We are grateful for the generosity and passion of staff and members who participated in hours of interviews: Ditra Edwards, Chanravy Proeung, Alexa Barriga, Justice Gaines, Charmaine Porter, Keyanna Benton, Preetilata Hashemi, Adria Marchetti, Lucy Rios, Valerie Santil, Terri Wright, and Latisha Michel.

We are also grateful to the many members who responded to SISTA Fire’s Member Impact Survey. Their input was important in shaping this project.

This project was funded by the Groundswell Foundation and Marian Urquilla. SISTA Fire remains grateful for their support and partnership.

This is a relatively brief telling of a story that is still unfolding. When SISTA Fire contracted with Makani Themba at Higher Ground Change Strategies to “document” its journey - and in twenty-five pages or less – we knew that it was no easy task. We appreciate the care that Makani took in moving this project from idea to implementation.

Thanks also to Selene Means for his evocative cover art and to DLG Arts for the beautiful graphic design.

There was more than 20 hours of video when interviews were completed. As a result, so many treasures did not make it into this document, but we hope that the video will somehow be repurposed to share even more of the powerful lessons SISTA Fire has to offer.

# Appendices

**Key Principles of Radical Transformation**

**Reproductive Justice: The Larger Framework**

**Our Emergent Healing Justice Framework**

**How does SISTA Fire address systemic violence?**

## Key Principles of Radical Transformation

The core of our approach is based on **transformative education**, which engages in a constant process of building critical consciousness through a cycle of reflection and practice. In this cycle of reflection and action in which a group is constantly celebrating their successes and critically analyzing the causes of mistakes and failures, they can become more and more capable of effectively transforming their daily lives. Our ability to move from individuals to collective action for community change moves us closer to our vision.

- **DIALOGUE:** Dialogue is crucial in transformative education. Dialogue requires patience, humility, and a genuine belief that there is something that one can learn from the other participants. It requires an openness to new information, a willingness to be challenged, and a deep hope that change is possible.
  - **PROBLEM POSING & THE SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS:** After finding a generative issue, posing and presenting familiar experiences to the core group opens up the space to a shared living experience.
  - **REFLECTION & ACTION:** The personal practice of reflection and action is the core to the transformative process - both personally and systemically.
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### POLITICAL EDUCATION

Our challenge is to carve out political education and space that deepens the understanding of the *impacts of white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism on the quality of life for women of color* or those who identify as women of color with an intersectional approach.

#### Questions To Consider:

1. What type of political analysis do we want to develop and focus on during our time with SISTA Circle?
2. What practical skills do we want to work on or help foster during the training?
3. What personal practices do we want to see individuals in the group develop?
4. What is the shared living experience of women of color in Rhode Island?

**During the training, I would like for the participants to build on:**

- *Critical analysis* of the impacts of gender and capitalism on women of color in Rhode Island.
  - What about gender and capitalism do you want the participants to understand?
  - I think we start by breaking down the impact of capitalism because it's concrete and will have more commonality with the group of young women.
  - Identifies, analyzes, and interprets significant problems, questions, and issues with a gender and economic lens that directly impacts themselves.
  - Value the labor of women of color and their labor in family, community, and workplace.
- *Multiracial solidarity* deepens the understanding of race and culture in society.
  - Building and sharing safe space across racial and ethnic differences.
  - Building trust and deepening relationships to create openness and understanding that stigmas and cultural practices impact how we treat one another.
  - Creating a dialogue of strength around differences that lead to expanding narratives of women of color in Rhode Island.
  - Embracing concepts of growth and evolution in building solidarity, we are moving at the pace of trust.
- *Developing collective healing practices* that can be shared and that participants can take home for personal use.
  - The practice of self-reflection, bodywork, and mental health breaks.

# Reproductive Justice: The Larger Framework

SISTA Fire

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*“You choose to be a woman of color, when you choose to work in solidarity with other oppressed women. It is not a biological destiny; it is a political designation.” – Loretta Ross*

**SisterSong** defines Reproductive Justice as, *“the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities”*.

## Basic Principles of Reproductive Justice

- The merge of Reproductive Rights + Social Justice – more than just abortion;
- Centers the leadership of the most vulnerable or those most impacted by systems of oppression;
- Deconstructing and decolonizing our lived experiences;
- Building towards a collective liberation – Building and working across identities and issues;
- Analyzing power systems and the connection to patriarchy;
- Autonomy over your body, my body, trans bodies, and birthing people;

## Intersectional Analysis; Gender-Based Violence

Examining the relationship and multi-layers of people's identities of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and the impacts of structural oppression on women, immigrants, trans, non-binary, and gender fluid peoples.

### INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

Structural and institutional racism is a form of **racism** expressed in the practice and implementation of systemic policies social, economic, and political practices in creating structures that place a perceived minority racial and ethnic groups at a disadvantage in relation to a perceived racial or ethnic majority.

### SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Refers to any act perpetrated against a person's will based on gender norms and unequal power relationships. It encompasses threats of violence and coercion. It can be physical, emotional, psychological, or sexual in nature, and can take the form of a denial of resources or access to services. The United Nations defines this as "physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the state, wherever it occurs." (*violence at the hands of the state\**)

### HETEROPATRIARCHY AND DOMINANT CULTURE

Heteronormativity is the belief that people fall into distinct and complementary genders (*male and female*) with specific assigned gender roles in life. It assumes that heterosexuality is the norm or default sexual orientation and that sexual and marital relations are most (*or only*) fitting between people of opposite sex. Heteronormativity is correlated with patriarchy, as it is a default practice that men have more power in society. **Patriarchy is a social system in which men hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property.**

### HUMAN BODIES AS COMMODITY

**Capitalism** is an economic system in which the **means** of production and distribution are privately or corporately owned and the operations are funded by profits. Overwhelmingly, the privatization of medicine and prisons has led to inhumane practices toward communities of color and low-income communities. In turn, the pervasive existence of **classism**, which is differential treatment based on social class or perceived social class. **Classism** is the systematic oppression of subordinated class groups to advantage and strengthen the dominant class groups. It's the systematic assignment of characteristics of worth and ability based on social class.

## Our Emergent Healing Justice Framework

*“Healing justice...identifies how we can holistically respond to and intervene on generational trauma and violence, and to bring collective practices that can impact and transform the consequences of oppression on our bodies, hearts and minds.”*

-Cara Page

*“We heal so that we can act and organize.”*

*“A broad and intersectional vision of liberation work requires that we continue to recall this vision of healing and healing justice into the center of our organizing.”*

-Prentiss Hemphill

Cara Page and Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective have shared so much learning over the years and have defined healing justice as an imperative for transformative, liberatory change. Prentiss Hemphill, building on this work, has also deeply inspired us at SISTA Fire. Their work is an important part of the foundation on which we are building our healing justice framework.

SISTA Fire is integrating healing, wellness and holistic practices through personal, political and collective means.

- Deep intention toward building community together
- Grounding ourselves in the history of place and building with indigenous communities
- Connecting to land through our practice and work
- Engaging our traditions that connect us to the earth and to each other

### A few key areas:

**Body work:** including workshops on yoga, breathing, mindfulness, meditation, labyrinths, self-defense, drumming and other practices

**Cultural work:** including performances (dance, spoken word, drumming, singing) as well as workshops like interactive storytelling, sound circles, dance, and drumming circles

**Spiritual work:** Including an interfaith space and practice, where spiritual alignment will help sustain our connections to who we are beyond all day-to-day distractions

**Healing spaces:** Creating spaces for participants to take time out, regroup, learn new practices and access our healing library of resources

**Communing with Nature:** Hiking, walking, gardening, etc.

**Somatic Practices:** This work is still in development but we hope to integrate somatic practice and awareness in how we hold space together

*“Healing Justice as used within our movement refers to an evolving political framework shaped by economic, racial, and disability justice that re-centers the role of healing inside of liberation; that seeks to transform, intervene and respond to generational trauma and violence in our movements, communities and lives; and to regenerate our traditions of liberatory and resiliency practices that have been lost or stolen.”*

From *Healing Justice Practice Spaces: A How-To Guide* by Autumn Brown and Maryse Mitchell Broday

## What We Collectively Practiced

Collective grounding and centering during our justice circles

During the pandemic, we hosted zoom sessions for people to connect and check in, we hired a yoga teacher to teach sessions and a session on supporting your child’s education

Hiking together lead by Movement Outdoors

Staycation- A Day of joy with dancing, collective art making, yoga, etc.

Creating altars with members and Community Altar

### A Soft Fire

SISTA Fire welcomed artist Shey Rivera Ríos into our circle to collaborate with members on a creative process called “A Soft Fire”. This takes the shape of monthly working sessions on how art can be used as a vessel for healing and community organizing. The creative process will include a curatorial framework for stories and prompts for members to create and extend their creative wings over the summer. A Soft Fire will culminate as a collaborative, community art project with and by SISTA Fire members in the fall.

Rivera Ríos (they/them) is an interdisciplinary artist with 12 years of experience in the arts sector with a strong focus on community development and racial and gender justice. They believe art and culture can be catalysts for social change and collective healing by using many forms of storytelling to imagine and realize more just and equitable futures.

**A Soft Fire 2.0 is a series of workshops rooted in the practices of Theatre of the Oppressed**, to explore embodiment and performance as tools for healing justice and activism. These sessions will combine various frameworks/practices: art/cultural practice, data analysis and synthesis, ecosystem assessment, scenario creation, somatic practice, and reflection.

This collective learning and practice journey is anchored in the specific lineages of political elders, liberators, and artists/poets, like Assata Shakur, Toni Cade Bambara, Marsha P. Johnson, Rigoberta Menchú, Gloria Anzaldúa, and others who led the way in how art, culture, and healing are nourishment and fuel for political movements for liberation.

Participants practice forms of healing justice for community organizing and learn when and how to use them. We pulled in practice methods from Theatre of the Oppressed to understand the impact of systemic oppression and build collective agency. We embodied community stories, reflected on our responsibility of carrying the stories of the people, and how to share them in ways that create action, power, and healing. The group developed a performance and held a pop-up community event to engage community members in SISTA Fire campaigns and to organize alongside Rhode Island residents impacted by systems of oppression.

**Goal:** To deepen SISTA Fire members' understanding of Healing Justice Lineages and healing practices rooted in political organizing as a resource for building collective power.

Healing & Culture Committee members:

- Meet at least twice a month
- Learn and grow knowledge of Healing Justice
- Craft healing spaces for SISTA Fire members
- Utilize Theater of the Oppressed techniques to engage community

**SISTA Fire recently hired Alexa Barriga (who is also a member) to pull together all the work we have done over the years to document and increase our practice of healing justice.**

## How Does SISTA Fire Address Systemic Violence?

### Women of Color Underrepresented and Underserved by the Current System

For women of color, there is a particular malevolent spirit when it comes to access, opportunities, and growth. This reflects the systemic violence that women of color experience across Rhode Island, the feelings of isolation, lack of access to higher paying jobs, and the growing housing crisis impacting families of color and single mothers.

We are looking at the intersectionality of systemic violence through a gender-based violence lens. Examining the relationship and multi-layers of people's identities of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and the impacts of structural oppression on women, immigrants, trans, non-binary, and gender fluid peoples. Through a gender based violence lens, we can deconstruct patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism to understand the holistic needs of women of color including trans women.

The lack of access to grassroots feminist education = systemic gendered violence.

Patriarchy is a [social system](#) in which [men](#) hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, [moral authority, social privilege](#) and control of property.

Examining the relationship and multi-layers of people's identities of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and the impacts of structural oppression on women, immigrants, trans, non-binary, and gender fluid peoples.

- What is the population of women of color according to the last census?
  - Providence is significantly more diverse than Rhode Island as a whole. In Providence, **35%** of residents identify as white compared to **81%** statewide.
  - In Providence, **42%** of residents identify as Hispanic or Latino, while **13%** identify as black or African American, **6%** as Asian, and **3%** as two or more races.
- What does our data tell us about the current state of women of color in Rhode Island?

## HOW IS THIS CONNECTED TO SYSTEMIC VIOLENCE?

- SISTA Fire approaches our work from a Transformative Justice Framework, which means we are working towards collective liberation by centering the leadership of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian American, women of color including trans-women, immigrant women, and birthing people.
  
- What is our Transformative Justice Framework?
  - Decolonizing Our History
  - Decolonizing Our Lived Experience
  - Organizing as Healing
  - Healing and Spiritual Practices
  - Reflection
  
- Shifting Our Culture and Narrative
  - Building on Reproductive Justice
  - Living Intersectional Lives
  - Fighting for Our Bodies and Our Lives



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*"Another world is not only possible;  
she is on her way. On a quiet day,  
I can hear her breathing."*

~ Arundhati Roy