

Black economic development conference and Triple Jeopardy

Within the political unrest surrounding 1970's Philadelphia, black grassroots organizations grew in number and political strength. The National Black Economic Development Conference (BEDC) was one example. Constructed as a movement to bring reparations to the black community for the alleged participation or complicity of groups in institutional arrangements that had disadvantaged African-Americans over the years, BEDC also held an office in Philadelphia. Cynthia Waters, current Director of Program Operations and Community Development of the MCC, was a member of the Philadelphia chapter of BEDC (C. Waters, oral history interview, September 2012).

Waters went on to form Triple Jeopardy as a coalition within the local BEDC. Waters came from several generations of black feminist thought and social activism. Triple Jeopardy was representative of rising black women's feminist ideologies during the 1970s. As such, it was an example of one of many organized collectives by minority women that resulted from the oversight by the national women's movement to address poor and minority women's concerns and issues. Initiated in 1972, Triple Jeopardy became one of Philadelphia's first organized black feminist support coalitions. Triple Jeopardy was inspired by the Relf Sisters' sterilization abuse case in Alabama in which the US Office of Economic Opportunity's family planning program in Montgomery, Alabama, conducted unethical medical experimentation on sisters Mary Alice and Minnie Relf.⁵

Waters explained that in Philadelphia, low-income minority women were enduring discriminatory treatment during various women's health-related medical visits and procedures. She and her coalition realized the need to address the disparities faced by marginalized groups of women as a result of the "Triple Jeopardy" of race, class, and gender. In light of the larger national women's health movement and its primary focus on middle and upper class women's concerns, Triple Jeopardy became both a social support and political platform for minority women in Philadelphia (C. Waters, oral history interview, September 2012).

Activists from Philadelphia's Triple Jeopardy modeled their women's health activism in a parallel fashion to many of the Black Panthers' health activism strategies. The activists not only supported women's health in the minority community, they also supported many Black Nationalist causes as well as involvement in the African liberation movements. Triple Jeopardy also worked with other groups for social change and liberation such as the Asian community's Yellow Seeds activist group in Philadelphia.

Considered an important precursor to progressive Asian American political activism in Philadelphia, Yellow Seeds was an Asian American anti-imperialist organization established in 1971 that focused on the local Chinatown as well as city, national, and world affairs. Modeled after the Black Panther Party, Yellow Seeds also published their own article, *Yellow Seeds* (1972–1977).⁶ They also involved the Puerto Rican Young Lords and their families in their outreach. Founded in 1968, The Young Lords Organization built itself upon the platform of independence for Puerto Rico as well as the improvement and empowerment of poor Puerto Ricans in the barrios of Chicago and New York City.

Walters explained that initially Triple Jeopardy was primarily concerned with guaranteeing the reproductive rights of socioeconomically disadvantaged women of color. Unlike the larger

national women's reproductive rights movement that focused largely on abortion access, minority women also faced many cases of forced sterilization. Yet, in Philadelphia, the leadership of BEDC, the majority of which was men, was not supportive of the Triple Jeopardy activists' reproductive rights agenda. Philadelphia's BEDC ideologically supported national claims by the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party that any contraceptive use among blacks would inevitably lead to the genocide of the population.² This ideological divide over birth control and reproductive rights led to the threat of a lawsuit and Triple Jeopardy's eventual split from the BEDC (C. Waters, oral history interview, September 2012).

Triple Jeopardy activists recognized the prevalence of sexist attitudes from among African Americans as well as other groups. Paternalistic attitudes also prevailed among many Philadelphia health practitioners as witnessed by Triple Jeopardy activists who chaperoned women to their providers' appointments. These activists would accompany women to doctors' appointments to lend quiet support or assist women in effectively vocalizing their concerns to providers.

As an example, Waters recounted the story of a young black woman who wanted to stop taking birth control pills and try another form of pregnancy prevention. Her provider would not listen to the young woman, each time attempting a different dose or variety of the birth control pill. Waters accompanied this young woman to her next appointment and challenged the doctor's rationale for continuing the birth control pills when the patient was experiencing numerous, consistent negative side effects. The doctor finally conceded and worked with the young woman to change the birth control plan (C. Waters, oral history interview, September 2012).

Triple Jeopardy activists also accompanied women who were in labor to their hospitals to provide support and also to ensure "... their rights were not being trampled on..." (C. Waters, oral history interview, September 2012). At the time, there were growing accounts of Philadelphia hospitals' differential treatment of minority and welfare recipients. The support that Triple Jeopardy activists lent to laboring minority women differed greatly from the growing labor support and birth movement of the 1970s. The birth movement of the 1970s was a primarily white, middle, and upper class movement, similar to the national women's health movement. Concerned with giving the laboring woman a respected and decisive voice in her labor and birth, the national birth movement fostered a new sense of empowerment with the birth process that advocates argued produced a healthier mother-baby couplet.

For most poor, minority women, however, the birth experience was often removed from their control because of their assigned status as a welfare recipient and the racialization of birth. Indeed, as Dorothy Roberts argues, white childbearing was generally thought to be a beneficial activity because it brought personal joy and allowed the nation to flourish. Black reproduction, on the contrary, was perceived many as a form of degeneracy, with black mothers seen as corrupting the reproduction process at every stage. According to these perceptions, they damaged their babies in the womb through their bad habits during pregnancy, and then imparted a deviant lifestyle to their children through their example. These representations of black women's bodies thus warranted strict measures to control their childbearing rather than wasting resources on useless social programs.⁵

In this social environment, Triple Jeopardy activists counseled women to think carefully over any medical suggestions as to permanent sterilization procedures. In the oral history interview

with Cynthia Waters, she shared that many minority women from Philadelphia found themselves convinced by medical practitioners to undergo hysterectomies during periods of the year when medical residents needed the surgical experience. Waters and the other activists in Triple Jeopardy sought to make sure their contingency of minority women were made aware of other pregnancy prevention measures in addition to the permanent sterilization measures (C. Waters, oral history interview, September 2012).

Race and health disparities

Therapeutic pain management in African Americans with sickle cell disease was another issue identified nationally in the 1970s related to race and medicine. As Keith Wiloo argues, the early 1970s witnessed a growing recognition of the pain and suffering endured by sickle cell anemia patients. As the decade progressed, however, the authenticity of pain experienced by the disease's victims fell under widespread societal scrutiny. Some viewed the pain relief sickle cell anemia victims sought as "drug-seeking" thereby casting the disease's victims as suspicious and worthy of intense scrutiny.⁸ This societal shift in recognizing pain authenticity also affected women in Philadelphia who were going through the birth and postpartum phases of motherhood.

For example, Waters shared the account of a young woman who had been treated at a local hospital for a severe Infection of the breast after delivering her infant a few days prior. The young woman was in acute pain from the infection and told the Triple Jeopardy activists that not only were the nurses withholding pain medication from her, one nurse in particular told her that because she was on public assistance, she should limit her requests for pain medication. The Triple Jeopardy activists organized a march outside of the hospital with several Black Panther Party members to protest this woman's treatment. Waters recalls how, despite being one of the most vocal organizers and protesters at the event as well as the person holding the bullhorn, she was not arrested. Instead, the Black Panther men, who were there only as a supportive presence, were taken into police headquarters and charged with civil disobedience (C. Waters, oral history interview, September 2012). Their arrest was the result of the contentious history between Philadelphia police and the Black Panther men. In the midst of these injustices, the women's health movement was bringing its agenda into urban cities and intersecting with minority-based movements.