

Episode 169 - Kathrine Bisanz: Social Workers for Reproductive Justice

[00:00:08] Welcome to in social work the podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at www.insocialwork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of in social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice research. We educate we connect. We care. We are in social work. Hello I'm Charles Syms and I am your host for this episode of in social work. So what does reproductive justice mean to you. For most this would mean pro-choice and that would be correct partially. The notion of choice would be included in the idea of reproductive justice. However the concept is significantly more expensive. Reproductive justice is grounded in international human rights framework which seeks to increase social political and economic power and resources so that people can make healthy decisions about gender sexuality and families for themselves and their communities. Our guest for this podcast is the co-founder of Social Workers for Reproductive Justice a national organization whose mission is to quote educate social workers to advocate for reproductive justice and promote client self-determination in reproductive health care options in quote Katherine Bisanz received her masters of social work degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 2012. She has worked as a domestic violence counselor in Philadelphia's Latino community conducted research on motherhood and birth in Guatemala and worked for all Reproductive Freedom Project of the ACLU of Pennsylvania. That project seeks to modify the reproductive health care policies in Pennsylvania county jails. Ms.

[00:02:13] Bisanz has been involved with organizing voting constituencies around the issue of access to safe and legal reproductive health care services. She has coordinated and managed patient care at Philadelphia's Women's Center which offers safe and accessible reproductive health care services. Currently she acts as the program director for the Sexual Violence Center in Minneapolis Minnesota as well as a co-founder of Social Workers for reproductive justice in this podcast. Ms. Bisanz will examine how the organization was formed as well as its mission. She examines the concept of reproductive justice and how it is directly tied to social works code of ethics. Additionally she makes the case that because social work is already working with marginalized and oppressed people it is in a unique position to explore options emanating from this model. Ms. Bisanz also provides ideas for what reproductive justice work would look like in social work practice. She ends her conversation by identifying ways that social workers at any level can get involved with the work of the organization. Ms Bisanz was interviewed February 2015 by Dr. Gretchen Ely Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Buffalo hello. I'd like to welcome everyone. Today we're talking with Catherine Bisanz from the social workers for reproductive justice organization like to welcome Catherine. Thank you so much for being with us today. Thank you. So we're just going to talk a little bit with you if you don't mind about your organization and how it came to be and what inspired the inception of the group which again is the organizations social workers for reproductive justice. If you could just tell us a little bit about that.

[00:04:09] They'll be great alertly so social workers for reproductive justice sort of was spun from my co-founder Maggie Rosenblum. She sort of had an idea for a project she was doing for her social work masters at Howard University. And it was just sort of an idea she knew that Medical Students for Choice Law Students for Reproductive Justice nursing students virtually think this and she said why isn't there an organization like this through social workers it's so relevant to the work that we do. And so she's sort of kind of started the idea and then we kind of knew that and just started to continue to really think about the ways in which we could make this sustainable group. And I mean really this came out of the idea that there's sort of a lack of knowledge and understanding of the important role that social workers can play in this discussion about reproductive health options for their clients and things like that we really recognize that some

agencies that employ large numbers of social workers will prohibit discussion about abortion safer sex LGBTQ issues relationships and issues resulting in this really for us felt like it resulted in a conflict between social work practice and any of of ethics. So this is really where we felt like we really had a case that we really had an issue. And so we're really talking about client self-determination in that part of the code of ethics as being like a really really big part of what we talk about and how can we uphold that principle if we aren't giving referrals and resources that really support people's self-determination to make informed decisions about when whether or how to have a family.

[00:06:03] I think what you say is really interesting because once the social worker Speaks which is our policy statements has a particular chapter on reproductive health where they talk about access to all forms of family planning including abortion is like a stance of the profession. And so the fact that we kind of look at law nursing and see that we didn't have this type of organization is a little bit shocking I think. So you all are certainly have stepped up to the plate and are filling a role when did the organization get started. Yes. So it's the I think Meghan's project was 2000 and 11 or 12. On this day it was 2011 and then we really started to kind of pick up like going to a really networking asking different organizations for support and suggestion in kind of I want to see early 2012. OK. And what were the steps that you took to get the group started. Yes. So a lot of it was networking really making the meaningful connections gauging interest really asking people Do you think this is something people would go for. Do you think people would be interested. And I will say that we got sort of this resounding yes from people like this is really something that needs to and there needs to be a group that talks about these issues. So we felt really validated in that we feel that you know organizations like Nursing Students for Choice who are actually based here in Minneapolis where I am they were instrumental in helping us to just learn about.

[00:07:34] How did you get off the ground how did you write your stategic plan how did you really do all of those things that you have to do to be in the beginning stages of an organization. Law Students for Reproductive Justice Sabrina Andress was really really instrumental in helping us former strategic plan and work plan and things like that. So just I feel like it was really just reaching out to folks and asking for advice and support. And you know I'm just kind of got a lot of really interested folks that were willing to help. And a lot of that was you know going to conferences using social media to create those relationships with folks back. And so it sounds like you did a lot of outreach before you got going and helped to kind of solidify your plan even before you started making wine which is great. And I wonder if she could just talk a little bit more about what the group's focus is kind of expand that for us please. Thank you. Yes. So we're a nationwide organization and currently we have folks from across the nation that are an advisory committee and we work to promote basically reproductive justice and the social work profession through what we do advocacy activism. Lots of education and training in order to really meet the reproductive health care needs of say all people in their families. So education and training is really what we're focused on right now. We have lots of places we want to go but I think that's sort of where we're starting because we've really noticed that there is a lack of that training and education present both in social work education and also in even continuing education stuff. So that's where our focus is currently. But we definitely you know have ideas for moving forward as well. Great.

[00:09:18] And I wonder as you're moving forward and thinking about how you're going to take this on who is currently involved in this effort. We have a really wonderful group of people we are representing I think Currently eight states. People are coming from all different professions. We have folks working in child welfare we folks working in abortion care HIV AIDS work. We have several professors of social work. Many of these folks have been doing social work or social work related work for decades and some people are just burning. And the study is we've got let's here the states represented that we have are Baltimore South Carolina. Couple people from the state of New York Boston North Carolina North Dakota D.C. California Minnesota. So we have lots of different

areas represented and really just lots of different parts of the social work profession. So I kind of love that about it too is that we're also expanding the bounds of what is social work. You know what can social work be so. I love that we just have people doing all sorts of different work and identifying as social workers. And I do like that because I think there is sort of a common misconception about all the different things that social workers can do and are you know are capable of doing so. Well it sounds like a great group of people and it also sounds like a great time to get involved with the group. Absolutely. And we welcome new members thinking about the term reproductive justice and that being the main focus given that you've chosen to include that in the title of the group.

[00:10:47] What does reproductive justice mean to this group and what is origin of that term. Yeah absolutely. Reproductive Justice was founded by Loretta Ross from the sister son organization. And it's sort of the black women's health movement. Kind of comes out of that movement and also really comes out of the international human rights framework when people really said you know this feminist movement is not accessible to everybody. You know it's accessible to a very small group of folks. And when we talk about choice maybe in reproductive health options we aren't talking about access or injustice that's occurred over centuries and decades to marginalized communities people of color LGBTQ folks trans folks. So it's really it's an expansive theory and it's really acknowledging the injustice that has occurred in order to sort of move forward as a more collective group of people and advocate for everybody. I think that some folks will really define it as what the sort of vision or the like. When will we know when reproductive justice exists and that's when all people have the social political economic power and resources to make healthy decisions about gender bodies sexuality families for ourselves and our communities. It's really trying to transform this sort of power inequity that exists that's inherent in reproductive health and really just social justice work and create kind of these long term sustainable systemic changes. And so it really is like a grassroots effort realizing communities who are most affected by reproductive oppression. It really talks a lot about the sort of intersectionality framework of folks have these like different identities that affect them.

[00:12:44] And that really affects the ways in which you interact with your environment and the access you have to different options and things like that. So for us basically I think that we love this terminology because it feels so expansive and it doesn't mean that we don't love choice it doesn't mean that choice doesn't fit at all in the reproductive justice framework but choice is limited when we recognize that and we believe that as social workers we need to be advocating for everybody. And unfortunately with the choice movement has some limitations and we feel doesn't always represent everyone and so that's where we've sort of chosen to choose at least to do our best to work within this framework. One thing I'll say about reproductive justice is that it's a really beautiful framework. It is really challenging. It's a challenge every day to say that your reproductive justice oriented organization and we wouldn't claim to be perfectly fitting within that framework however it is where we strive to be. So we want to be a reproductive justice organization and we're doing lots of things to ensure that we are but that doesn't mean that some of the things that we might do we might just you know not be all the way you were sort of working and doing our best everyday so that we can be that eventually.

[00:14:02] It sounds like this is a great term I think for social work and it fits well with our social justice mindset and the history in our profession in terms of trying to take a bigger look at things and expand you know our focus so for instance if you have nurses for choice I mean they're working on that issue and that's great but I think this fits us really well in terms of not only the concept and the theory behind it but how many people then will be eligible to get involved in this. So I really like the thought that went into that in terms of how to make this really a uniquely social work oriented organization. So I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about why it's important then for social workers to understand this issue and this problem sort of from this perspective. Yeah

absolutely. Well I think you mentioned earlier that NASW actually has a statement about reproductive health options and actually claim that sort of within the social work profession being pro-choice really does support self-determination. And so in that code of ethics it does seem that social workers are ethically obligated to respect claimants right to self determination to decision making. And we believe that this is really important. This is really relevant to the work that we do and are unable to do this. We're not adhering to this code of ethics and we also believe that social workers are in a really unique position to discuss options like this. We're already in communities are already hopefully respected members of communities who are working with oppressed populations. And it's our job to give quality resources and referrals in general. And that's a huge part of our identity as social workers.

[00:15:46] And so really just being able to I don't think it even goes outside of what is expected of us it's sort of just honing in on this reproductive health aspect of it and saying you know with everything else we're giving folks self-determination and all these different options and things like that and why not with reproductive health that's part of our job kind of thing. So yeah so really giving people the whole story not just part of it and just really being able to talk about an unplanned pregnancy with somebody that already feels safe with you. And also I think another thing is sort of bridging that what might be and what sometimes can be a gap that folks feel between maybe themselves and the medical community. So can social workers be that bridge to really discuss and set people up for success in making these decisions before they get to a clinic and feel overwhelmed or whatever it is and really admitting such important issues as reproductive health and justice and social work curriculum as well if we're talking about education. We do believe kind of harms the mission of the profession. And then also not infusing it into practice it is harming the mission of the profession. And I think you've touched a little bit on what we have to offer in this area to meet some of these challenges that you've talked about. Are there other things you'd like to add in terms of what social workers have to offer to meet some of these challenges in various areas including choice and other issues that are pertinent to reproductive justice. Because I think some of the challenges like you said are a lack of knowledge about the need to bring this to the forefront I think and I'm not sure that people don't necessarily want to meet the challenges. They're not exactly sure you know how to take them on and definitely think Guy.

[00:17:32] Learning more about what this can look like within the profession revving up taking trainings things like that also just being sort of that bridge within communities that might not feel that that reproductive health options are Sobota. So really just being that sort of voice and light here is what's available to you and sort of looking at it as this is my profession to allow people to give people the tools to have this self-determination in all areas as well as you know and this area is not any different. What you're saying is really important because you are the bridge between so many other things and this is a natural fit for us to be a bridge here with some of these other connecting people to resources and just helping them in terms of awareness. And you mentioned before too that one of the goals of the group is to provide education and training. And so it may be that now that there's a resource for the education and training people can get more information after you know once they've left their educational programs. And I also think that social work education community has an obligation to to kind of start talking about this and integrating it more into the curriculum at the highest W9 must of your level and so maybe this will be a catalyst for that as well. I wonder what are some of the projects that you're working on to spread the word about this. Really the biggest project that's occurring right now is our webinars series that really focuses on infusing the reproductive justice framework into social work practice.

[00:19:10] So what we do is we kind of set it up so the first webinars will really be focusing on why are we talking about this you know what's the need to kind of that discussion we had earlier about folks maybe they're not getting the training that they need and there is definitely research that supports that. Social workers are sort of inserting and do because they're not getting the training

probably personal viewpoints or into discussions about reproductive health with clients. So really having the conversation about why this is necessary and why we need to kind of move past this as a profession. And again while we're in a unique position to be these points of support for folks in this aspect the second seminar is going to really focus on reproductive justice 101. And so we're really saying this is what reproductive justice is. This is how it relates to many social movements that are deeply connected with social work social justice movements racial justice movements immigration raids LGBTQ rights transformative justice feminist theory all of these things you know how is reproductive justice really compatible with those and therefore really compatible with the social worker model. And how can we all infuse how can we begin to infuse reproductive justice into our already existing practice and not making it like this. O'Heir this massive other thing you're going to have to tack on to what you do but rather something that will organically infuse into the work that we do just because it is so compatible so really giving people some tools on how to do that. And then our final our third Wagenaar is going to really focus on actually providing unbiased options counseling for folks. It might sound daunting but this is kind of something that we deal with social workers giving options counseling. However at least not any.

[00:21:00] Most places that I have been most on profits are most in social work. Schools are now giving folks that specific skill and how to talk to people in an unbiased way about reproductive health options. So really providing folks with like and again infusing the code of ethics in all of these webinars are really talking about all these different references self-determination being the biggest the pro-choice model as you mentioned cultural competence and social diversity is a tenant of the code of ethics privacy and confidentiality discrimination social and political action. Those are all of the different pieces of the code of ethics that we sort of use to argue that you know this is really compatible with what we do and in fact it's necessary for us to adhere to this code of ethics. So those are really the biggest things we're working on. I know that we're doing a few presentations here and there. Maggie my co-founder is doing your presentation at the D.C. chapter of the NASW on reproductive justice 101 and little bit of that a lot of it definitely just networking and things like that are coming up that really the web or is there kind of the biggest thing on the docket right now. Great. It sounds like you're really thought about ways you can move this forward and and keep in touch with practitioners and stay and kind of take advantage of the technology that's available now to get the message out so that's great. So from the perspective of people who are hearing us and wanting to get involved with this.

[00:22:30] Can you talk with us a little about some very concrete ways that social workers can get involved and help move this forward and maybe at the S.W. level to be level and you know research level if you have any thoughts about those. That's a great question. I think we are really looking for folks who want to be deeply engaged in this movement and grew up with us. So right now really the biggest way to get involved is being involved in our advisory committee and we're very much open to new members and new energy new folks with different ideas. I think with that you really have the opportunity to really get involved there is a lot of work to be done. We're working on other ways that people can quote unquote sort of volunteer with us. Right now I am working on and this is kind of before probably after the webinar series but really working and like a way that people can do house parties. So I'm working on kind of a toolkit that we would have on our Web site that folks can really. So maybe they saw our web in our series and then they want to do like a mini training of their own for you know 10 or 15 of their closest friends. So really spreading the word about are 10 or 15 other courses you know social work friends. So really having ways for people to do this in their own communities you know so that's kind of definitely something that I think will be next. But like currently what's available for people are really just reach out and say Hey I'd like to get involved and being on the advisory committee or just you know helping out with a block.

[00:24:01] We need blog posts like any time somebody has an idea for a blog post. We'd love to have it. We really want to do more of those social media support with things like these webinars we

love how people's idea is any support that people can give us in that area. Yes so those are sort of what's available now. It's a little bit vague sounding but I think that if anyone were to want to get involved in the advisory committee who would absolutely be welcoming to them. So you can feel free to email. Katherine@swrj.org. so you can just email me there. We can also do Maggie@swj.org. Either way one of us will get back to you and definitely we'll talk about the different options for working with us and we'd be excited to touch base and I think that's a great way to kind of move this forward. And I wonder if you have any other thoughts about what your vision is for social workers for reproductive justice as it moves forward. Absolutely. So certainly where we're at right now is kind of in this training tapes and I think that we are probably going to really work on different aspects of training different groups so we can you know really making this information accessible to folks so again those house parties are something that I'd really like to implement soon so you know giving people a way to do things in their community that can support our efforts. I think eventually we'd really like to have something like campus chapters or regional chapters.

[00:25:46] We haven't quite decided yet whether we think it makes sense to have these chapters like on at social work campuses or if we want to help them be more like really accessible to sort of everyone like professional social worker or student so making it more of a regional thing we're still sort of in the decision making process about that. But we do want to have chapters of some kind. So in that case once we have those established that would be a really nice way for folks to get involved to in their own community. And so I get into continuing with training for now we'd really like to work on potentially working with social work schools and curriculum development for this issue. So really again shocking about why this is important and why this training should be happening in social work schools and not just left to well if they get a good CEO or a provider that can tell them about this issue. No it shouldn't be optional it should be obligatory for folks to learn about. Great. Well it sounds like you're doing some really great work that you're working really hard to move this forward. It's not easy to start from the ground up when you've got a great beginning here and I think a lot of momentum. And I believe that it's going to move forward hopefully quickly and certainly hope that the listeners out there will be very inspired by this and hopefully want to get involved as well. So thank you so much for taking time with us to talk with us today about the organization and how it came to be and the things that you wish to do and I hope it goes well.

[00:27:19] Thank you. Thank you so much for having me. I really encourage folks to reach out to us. We'd love to hear from you. You have been listening to Dr. Gretchen Ely interview. Katherine Bisanz about reproductive justice we hope that you found this topic informative and inspiring I'm Charles Syms. Please join us again at in Social Work. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history our online and on ground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. And while you're there check out our technology and social work research center. You'll find it under the Community Resources menu.