

Asian American Reproductive Justice Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

SUJATHA JESUDASON

Interviewed by

JUHEE KWON

July 29, 2013
Oakland, California

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Narrator

Sujatha Jesudason (b. 1967) was born in Madison, Wisconsin. She received her B.A. in Economics from University of Wisconsin-Madison and her master's and doctoral degrees in Sociology from the University of California, Berkeley.

From 2002 to 2004, she was the Movement Organizer for Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice. She transitioned to Center for Genetics and Society in 2004, where she served as the Associate Director and worked closely on their Gender, Justice and Human Genetics program. In 2008, Jesudason became the founding member and executive director of Generations Ahead, a social justice advocacy organization working to expand the public debate and promote policies on genetic technologies that protect human rights and affirm our shared humanity. In her career, Jesudason has also been involved in Marin Abuse Women's Services, 9to5 National Association of Working Women, Alliance for South Asians Taking Action (ASATA), MOVE: Men Overcoming Violence, as well as the executive board of National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum (NAPAWF).

Jesudason currently serves as the Director of CoreAlign and a researcher at Advancing New Standards in Reproductive Health (ANSIRH), both at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF).

Interviewer

Juhee Kwon (b. 1991) is an undergraduate at Brown University, studying Biology and Ethnic Studies.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded in MP3 file format using Olympus Digital Voice Recorder VN-702PC. One file: 52 min 46 sec.

Transcript

Transcribed and edited for clarity by Juhee Kwon. Reviewed and approved by Sujatha Jesudason.

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Transcript of interview conducted July 29, 2013, with:

SUJATHA JESUDASON
Oakland, California

by: JUHEE KWON

KWON: This is Juhee Kwon. Today is July 29, 2013 and I am here with Suthaja Jesudason in her office in Oakland for CoreAlign. And this is for the Asian American Reproductive Justice Oral History Project. Okay. So let's start at the very beginning, wherever you want to deem that, maybe about how you grew up and what kind of developed your political consciousness.

JESUDASON: Sure. I was born in the United States in Madison, Wisconsin, in the mid-sixties. Both my parents were graduate students at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and it was really the height of the sixties anti-war activism. And so I very much grew up with a sense of the kind of social change possibilities, and activism was a very integral part of that growing up. We lived in graduate student housing, so it was a very multiracial graduate student housing. Yeah, I just remember both my parents staying up late with other grad students, talking about politics and smoking pot and listening to music; it was the sixties. So I have very clear memories of that.

00:28

And then when I was five years old, both my parents finished their graduate studies, and we went back to India. So I lived in India, I lived in New Delhi for eight years until I was thirteen years old. And then we came back to the United States, again, to Madison, once again. I went through eighth grade, high school, and then college in Madison, and then came out—No, after college, I worked for five years, doing community organizing in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, did grassroots neighborhood-based organizing.

KWON: How was that?

1:47

JESUDASON: You know, Milwaukee was an interesting town. It was one of those kind of Rust Belt towns, in the sense that it used to have a very large working class population, a very large African-American population that had just really suffered with the changing economy. There was very much of a sense that grassroots organizing was really important, I mean, a little bit—

I'd say, so, what, there's a six-year age difference between me and Barack Obama (laughs).

KWON: That dates you.

JESUDASON: (laughs) Yes, it does. And we were part of that generation that really did believe in community organizing, and that that was an honorable profession. So I did that for five years; I did neighborhood-based organizing and then I worked for the National 9 to 5, so it was [the] National Association of Working Women. And I helped organize women, who were on welfare at the time fight for paid family leave. So it was a fascinating time to be doing organizing. There was very much of a sense of a power to it, and at the time, Milwaukee was a city that was very Black and White. So as an Indian woman, a South Asian woman, there really wasn't a political home for me, in the sense of racial politics. And so my decision to come out to the Bay Area was both I wanted to go back to graduate school, but I also wanted to live in a city that had a large South Asian community, an Asian community. So the Bay Area was the place I came to. I did three years of grad school and then started working again, mostly because I was not a good graduate student (laughs).

KWON: What were you studying?

3:39

JESUDASON: I was studying Sociology. You know, I still adore sociology, but I was not a very trainable graduate student. So it ended up taking me thirteen years to get my PhD.

KWON: Oh, wow.

JESUDASON: For ten of those thirteen years, I worked full-time. [I] started working for a South Asian domestic violence organization, Narika. I was first on their board and then their staff, and then from there, started doing more violence against women's work. I worked for a violence-prevention organization in San Rafael, California, called Marin Abuse Women's Services. From there I went to working for a men's batter intervention program [MOVE: Men Overcoming Violence]. And from there, I got a job at, what was at the time, APIRH, Asian [and] Pacific Islanders in Reproductive Health. So I was there, 2002 to 2004, so it was right around the time that they changed their name. So it's kind of fun to see it on the timeline here. I was like, "Oh wait. I was right there" (laughs).

KWON: I just wanted to ask you more about the South Asian work that you did. What makes domestic violence such a relevant issue in the South Asian community?

4:56

JESUDASON: You know, it's always been a curious question to me. But for some reason, the South Asian American community has been very organized around the issue of violence against women. And I don't think it in any way implies that there's more violence, but there's some kind of a political analysis at least in the United States that has allowed for the creation—at least now, there are thirty South Asian women's organizations in this country. And they're South-Asian-specific, in the sense that they're not pan-ethnic, in terms of Korean Americans and Chinese Americans included. I think the only other community that I know that has had ethnic-group-specific [organizing around domestic violence], I know there are a couple of Korean American DV [domestic violence] organizations or violence against women's organizations. But South Asian women for some reason, there's been quite a few of them. And at some point, it'd be fascinating to trace the history and why it is that this group in comparison to other groups [do more DV organizing], but yeah. So I don't know.

KWON: Did you do direct work? Counseling, hotline kind of work?

6:10

JESUDASON: Yeah, so the group that I worked with [Narika], I was the volunteer coordinator. It very much started with a peer-to-peer notion of support for women around violence. So volunteers would get 40-hours of training, and then they would be the ones answering the hotlines, helping women out, giving referrals whether it's to lawyers or to shelters, et cetera. But it was very much—and they used to talk about it. They would describe it or we would describe it as a sister-to-sister help network.

And at the same time—and this is dredging, really going back. You know, another—well, I don't know if you want to add this organization to the timeline, but at the time—so this would've been. . . 2001? There was this case of an Indian landlord in Berkeley, who was caught trafficking young women. So there was all kinds of marches and demonstrations and a lot of activism in the community. And a bunch of us formed an organization called the Alliance for South Asians Taking Action [ASATA]. It became this very political and politicized group talking about issues in the South Asian community, mostly originally focused on trafficking of young women, but later has now morphed into—I think post-9/11, it became more—in which case, it must not have been 2001. Maybe it was 2000 that we started. Maybe even—Yeah, the dates all merge together. But anyway, so at the same time that I was working at Narika, I was also organizing ASATA on the side.

KWON: And you jumped from there to the Oakland-based APIRH?

8:04

JESUDASON: Yes.

- KWON: And APIRH from what I gathered wasn't a very South-Asian-woman-heavy organization at all. In fact, it was mostly led by second-generation East Asian American women.
- JESUDASON: Yeah. And at the time, I mean, APIRH was a very small organization. So there was Eveline, Dana Gin Parades, who just recently left Forward Together. She was there as their organizing person. I was supposed to do Movement Building work for them, and I think they had like one other staff person, who was more—
- KWON: Oh, that was it?
- JESUDASON: Yeah, and if my memory serves me correctly, she was a Latina. So it was—I mean, we were all, I guess, to some extent were like 1.5- or second-generation. Not all necessarily deeply connected to our communities, in the sense that I don't think any of us lived in a neighborhood that was an Asian neighborhood by any stretch of the imagination. Yeah, but they had a broad enough vision. I mean, I don't know if it was the API that spoke to me as much as it was the reproductive agenda and women being able to control their bodies. So that was the piece that spoke to me.
- KWON: When you came in had they already gone through the transition with HOPE [Health, Opportunity, Problem Solving, and Empowerment] and Khmer Girls in Action and things like that? 9:29
- JESUDASON: Yes. Yeah, so I came in on the tail end of it. I didn't actually have any interactions with the Khmer Girls in Action folks, and partly because of that split is why they also started entertaining the idea of changing their name. So that's where ACRJ [Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice] then emerged as a name.
- KWON: I wanted to ask you more about that. Did you see a direct shift in the goals or the aims of the organization right before the name change actually happened?
- JESUDASON: It's hard to say. Because I was so new to the organization, I didn't have that much of a sense of what they did before.
- KWON: Changed. Yeah.
- JESUDASON: I think Yin [Lin Leung] is probably the person, who would have the best sense of how they had imagined themselves before. I think they had a couple of—at least one large federal grant, an NIH [National Institute of Health] or an NIEH [National Institute of Environmental Health] grant that was able to sustain them, but they used to do much more

environmental justice kind of work. But with the shift to the reproductive justice and the reproductive freedom agenda, they very much became much more reproductively-oriented.

KWON: Okay. Yeah, what kind of programs were you involved for movement building?

10:56

JESUDASON: Yeah. I think primarily the two programmatic pieces that I did was—one was reaching out to a lot of other organizations and trying to figure out, What were they working on? Were there any intersections? And then hosting cross-organizational conversations about? What were the issues that we had in common? Was there any work that we wanted to pursue? I had a name for it. Something about conversations.

Yeah, but it was also an organization that was in big transition at the time. So both there was the name change, we were applying for another big NIEH grant, Eveline was out some part of it on maternity leave, so yeah. And I think I was only there for like two years, so I don't—you know, it was two years when the organization was in transition, so.

KWON: Oh, okay.

JESUDASON: Yeah.

KWON: Do you remember if they did any local organizing work or what communities they worked with and things like that?

12:00

JESUDASON: Yeah. So are you going to interviewing somebody from ACRJ [Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice] or—

KWON: Yeah. I'm interviewing Eveline, but she could only give me 45 minutes of her time.

JESUDASON: Okay.

KWON: And it was really difficult to get the interview, and so I wanted to hone in on two or three things while I was with her.

JESUDASON: Yeah. So at the time, they were working young students in East Oakland, and that was mostly what Dana did. You should interview Dana.

KWON: Okay.

JESUDASON: Yeah. She would be great. I mean, besides the fact that she's been—She was with ACRJ. She would've been with them for ten years. So she would—

KWON: Oh, so if I wanted history—

JESUDASON: Yeah, because she was the one that did most of the organizing with the young women. Right about the time I left is when she developed the SAFIRE [Sisters in Action For the Issues of Reproductive Empowerment] program, so yeah. She'd be a good person to talk to for that.

KWON: Yeah, so where did you go after ACRJ then?

13:08

JESUDASON: From ACRJ, I went to the Center for Genetics and Society. Part of it had been [that] while I was at ACRJ, the Center for Genetics and Society had brought together a bunch of academics and activists to talk about the implications of new reproductive and genetic technologies, and I had been invited as representing ACRJ. While I was there, [I] just realized the kind of impact these technologies could have on communities of color and women of color, and that there was nobody within our movement at the time that was talking about it, so—

Oh, just going back to ACRJ, I just recall [that] one of the pieces of work that I did help them with is—At the time, they were just starting to develop their reproductive justice agenda, and I helped in the very early stages of articulating the difference between reproductive health, reproductive rights, and reproductive justice. And then just sharing that with other folks and getting feedback and stuff like that from allies, so that was a piece of the work that I did.

But anyway, so having talked to all these other organizations about what's the cutting edge work that they were doing and realizing that nobody was really taking on the issue of reproductive genetics. Center for Genetics and Society had an opening, and so I decided to take that. And mostly, I took it because I cared not so much about the genetics stuff, which I'm still not interested in the science, but really realizing the implications for communities of color and women, and that the social justice movement broadly wasn't talking about it. So my agenda with that position had been to raise the awareness and debate about reproductive genetics in social justice spaces.

KWON: Did you have any background in science going in?

15:06

JESUDASON: (shakes head)

KWON: No? What? Wow. You're so brave.

JESUDASON: Well, I . . . Yeah (laughs). I don't know if it's brave as much as just sort of naive. I was like, "Of course I can—it can't be that hard."

KWON: Were there any major challenges? It's a different—I mean, I'm sure it's different, because it's a Center for Genetics and Society, so they already have a social issue lens. But often working with scientists or even with my biology friends, the conversation and their framework is just very different, and sometimes I just can't get through.

15:23

JESUDASON: Yeah, it's just a very very different framework. Probably if I had come to this through science, I would not have been asking those questions. It was really because I came from both a social justice and a sociology perspective that I was asking those questions. I mean, I think the biggest challenge that I realized in the work is [that] I could be very effective at organizing social justice folks around these issues, but to get scientists to actually listen required credentials. And so some part of me being at UCSF [University of California, San Francisco] now is that at UCSF, now I have an institutional backing behind my name that at least gets people to pay more attention, too. Pedigree really does matter in some of these conversations (laughs).

KWON: Oh, man. It's tough. Yeah.

JESUDASON: Yeah.

KWON: Let's see. Where did you go after that?

16:43

JESUDASON: So while I was at the Center for Genetics and Society, I was the director of their program on Gender, Justice and Human Genetics, and a big part of what I was doing there was also, once again, reaching out to social justice groups, educating them about the issue, helping them understand the basic science of this. And while I was there—I was at Center for Genetics and Society for four years and realized that they were a public interest organization/non-profit that actually took a very clear stance on these issues, which was then hard for other social justice groups to figure out what they thought about it. And so I left the Center for Genetics and Society and started my own organization called Generations Ahead, with very much the intention of bringing people together across movements to have these very intersectional conversations about these issues and creating the space for them to figure out what they believed about them and what policy position they wanted [to take] on them. So it was a less directive and more of a coalitional building, and in many ways, technical-assistance-providing organization.

KWON: Did you bring in your past experiences with race [and] gender into that work as well?

18:01

JESUDASON: Yeah, it was very much informed by that. We worked with mostly reproductive justice organizations but some reproductive rights

organizations. We brought them together with disability rights groups and with LGBT [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans] groups to talk about, Well, what does it mean when we're talking about assisted reproductive technologies for LGBT folks? What does it mean for the issue of choice? And how does disability and disability discrimination play into all of these decisions?

KWON:

Yeah, I was actually really interested in the intersection between reproductive rights and disability rights, because I don't think a lot of people have talked about that. What are some tensions or conflicts that could come up in those conversations?

18:38

JESUDASON:

Well, I mean, truthfully, the state of that conversation is that there's really no conversation between those two movements. We did a series of round table conversations, and there's actually a report that's still on the Generations Ahead website that is probably worth checking out, where we essentially brought those two groups together and said, What would make for a fruitful conversation? And part of it was, it made a difference when it was more reproductive justice folks who were at the table, because they understood that they live these intersectional lives with multiple lived experiences, and so it's not like there's just one issue that trumps all the others. And for the disability rights folks, I think, for them, to be in a conversation with people that wasn't just about disability but was also about race and class made a difference. So there was more of an opening and more possibility for folks to build alliances. And in fact, a group of folks came together to write a position statement—and it was a petition that went around. It's also on the Generations Ahead website—about how important it is not to pit disability rights against reproductive rights, and that you can actually think of them together in complimentary ways.

KWON:

I mean, there's a lot of intersections, but I feel like especially with the people that I've interviewed, they've just been like, I don't really know very much about that, or, There's really not much going on about it. But it's really important.

20:12

JESUDASON:

In Generations Ahead, we had a very active disability rights program, and so we did a lot of work with the World Institute on Disability and the Disability Rights Education Defense Fund. And in fact, we also brought together, I want to say, fifteen disability rights leaders to create the space for them to talk about new reproductive genetic technologies and what they thought about them and what their position was on them. That's also another report that's on the website.

KWON:

Yeah. I mean, I've glanced through them, but I'll go and download them. One of the other reports you did was also on sex selection, right?

20:57

JESUDASON: Yes.

KWON: And it kind of became relevant with the states' PRENDA [Prenatal Nondiscrimination Act] laws and things like that. Could you tell any personal perspectives on—

JESUDASON: At Generations Ahead, we really took up the issue of sex selection for many reasons. One, because it was such an intersectional issue, so clearly race is very deeply embedded in any conversation around sex selection. And also it was, for us, the leading edge of the conversation around reproductive technologies. So if we believe in a pro-choice framework, are we saying that women have the right to choose the genetic characteristics of their future children? And sex selection was really that on-ramp to that conversation. So we did a lot of work; we created a toolkit, which I'm sure you might have seen,

KWON: Is that also online?

21:53

JESUDASON: Yes, it is online. And we did that in collaboration with NAPAWF [National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum] and ACRJ. Yeah, so we did the background piece on sex selection, ACRJ did some interactive exercises around sex selection, and then NAPAWF did the policy piece of that toolkit. And then we just did a lot of—let's see—the last two years of Generations Ahead, we focused pretty intensely on the issue of sex selection, so both trying to bridge the divide between the Asian women's organizations, including violence against [women organizations]—so the South Asian women's organizations the DV organizations—and the reproductive rights organizations, in terms of talking about this.

We first took it [on] around the federal legislation, PRENDA, and then we started seeing it in states. The first to hit was, I think, Georgia where they had the race and sex selection abortion. So we also started taking on the issue of race in abortion and how all of those conversations were going. We did some really interesting work around cognitive linguistics analysis and how to talk about sex selection. I'm trying to remember if we wrote up a report on that. I know we have a couple of position papers also on sex selection. But in many ways, we helped women's organizations use the language of "many of us are uncomfortable about this but banning sex selections is actually not the solution. We really need to take on the issue of son preference and gender discrimination," which for many people, I think, it was not an easy place to come to just because their knee-jerk reaction tends to be, Well, this is a terrible practice. And part of that I think is some notions of, It's those *Asian* women that do it. So it's easier to demonize (laughs).

KWON: What was it like leading your own organization? Were there any challenges that came up for you?

23:54

JESUDASON: . . . Yes (laughs).

KWON: It's always hard.

JESUDASON: Yeah. Well, for me what was hard about running an organization was, one, I was the founder so everything was learning it from scratch. There were no systems in place, there's no infrastructure, there wasn't a senior team or any of that, so having to build that along the way. We launched in 2008, we started in 2008, which is also the year the market crashed, so the market crashed in 2007.

KWON: That's really out of your control.

JESUDASON: Yes (laughs). And so for a while there, we really struggled hard to keep our head above water. And I mean, we have a non-profit system, where smaller organizations can't really afford super skilled staff, so we hire folks and we train them, and then by the time they get trained, they take the next job at the bigger organization that can pay more. So there's a constant revolving door of training folks. And on top of that—in a competitive market after a stock market crash—we had to show such outcome, so there was just a lot of pressure to perform well.

I eventually decided to close Generations Ahead, in large part because we had lost so much funding that we could've stayed open with a small budget, but mostly by that point, it just felt like, I'll just come to a job and feel good about myself, but how much impact could I actually have? And so, we closed in 2011 [Correction: 2012].

KWON: Who were the staff members that were along with you throughout the organization?

26:09

JESUDASON: I'm trying to remember if there was anybody who stayed. Nobody stayed the whole four years. There were a couple of staff who probably—well, Marina [Ortega] who was the—she started out as the Associate Director and then became the Managing Director. Well, she was actually there the whole time. I think she just started two months after we launched. But you know, and part of it for her was like she had to be willing to be flexible in a changing organization to change roles. So when I hired her, she was supervising four program staff, and then by the time she left, she was like the half-time managing director of a very small operation with more consultants than staff.

KWON: Did you also reach out to some of your other networks in your other organizations? Because you were talking about the collaboration between ACRJ, NAPAWF. What other organizations did you work with?

27:04

JESUDASON: So we worked with a lot of organizations. Our primarily mode for doing the work was collaborative, so we worked actually with Planned Parenthood Federation of America, we worked with ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] of Northern California, we worked with the LGBT Center of New York, like I said, Disability Rights Education Defense Funds, World Institute on Disability, worked with NARAL [National Abortion Rights Action League], Reproductive Health Technologies Project, Center for American Progress. So we worked with a lot of—most of our work was collaborative work; it was really about bringing organizations together to talk about, What do they think about these issues? How could they integrate them? [Generations Ahead] worked with pretty much all of the reproductive justice organizations, so [National] Latina Institute [for Reproductive Health], CLRJ [California Latinas for Reproductive Justice], California Black Women's [Health Project].

And in fact—I'm trying to remember what year this would've been. Maybe 2009? We did a convening, where we brought together about twenty-two women of color reproductive justice leaders to talk about what a women of color reproductive justice analysis of human genetic technologies would be. That's also another report that's on the website.

KWON: Yeah, but can you tell me more about what went down, in terms of what kinds of things were discussed and if there was good conclusion they came to?

28:45

JESUDASON: So we weren't seeking consensus; it was more an attempt to document the perspective of women of color—a reproductive justice perspective on these issues. People talked about ways to understand reproductive genetics outside of them being commercialized; how to take a more community based and holistic community-centered approach to it, really emphasizing that family ties were not just biologically-based, but were actually social and created; and more than anything, they were advocating for women of color and folks who were most impacted by these technologies to be at the center of decision making process. Yeah, and for many of them it was like, you know—so the Asian women talked about sex selection and the ways these technologies affect their communities; the African American women talked about the history, the eugenics history, in terms of the ways in which their family ties had been devalued historically, and so this presumption that these new technologies were not actually going to be respectful of family connections and family ties; and the whole biological determinism argument that if you have certain genes than you must be X or Y, or behave in X or Y way. So those were some of the issues that they talked about. It was a great. I think we spent three days together talking about—

KWON: Wow.

JESUDASON: Yeah, yeah.

KWON: That's crazy. Wow. I mean, just the idea of having all the women of color reproductive justice leaders in one room is just really exciting.

JESUDASON: You should definitely check out the report, because it will give you also snapshot of who the leaders were at that time, so—

KWON: Yeah.

JESUDASON: Yeah.

KWON: Could you talk a little bit more about ART [assisted reproductive technologies] and possible problems and things like that? I don't want to get too technical, but I'm really fascinated by it.

31:11

JESUDASON: Problems in terms of?

KWON: Potential conflicts. What kinds of issues are relevant for women of color to discuss? Commercialization of egg and sperm, surrogacy, all these things.

JESUDASON: It's funny. I mean, there is a way in which the approach to the use of all of these technologies in the United States is very individually oriented. So if there is an individual family that's suffering from infertility then, of course, we should use whatever technological means necessary, in that they can afford to pay for. What doesn't get talked about is the collective impact, and I think sex selection is one of those great examples of, within a family, a family might have a strong son preference or a woman might be under pressure to have a son. And it might make sense in that individual context to say, Okay, let's use some technology to make sure that we have a son, but the collective impact of it, in the aggregate, does have some very important social [impacts]. And so the two big concerns around assisted reproductive technologies is both the ways it gets commercialized—and part of the commercialization is just that there is less attention paid to safety. So what's the impact long term effects of providing eggs is still unknown, there's all kinds of mixed reports about, Is there a higher incidence of autism with assisted reproductive technologies? et cetera. But in the long term, in aggregate, there's just this deep concern that we haven't as a society figured out how to talk about, which is if we allow for trait selection, genetic selection, is there no place we can draw the line? So do we allow people to start selecting for skin color and then hair color or eye color or whatever supposed gene there might be for sexual orientation or intelligence and all of that stuff. From a technological and commercial perspective, there's no reason to draw the line, but definitely from a social perspective—and I don't even know if I

like the language of drawing a line as much as, What is it that we as a society agree about the ways that we treat people and [our] values? Because this assumption that somehow these decisions about genetic traits are not going to be implicated by racism and homophobia and sexism, that's not true.

KWON: Do you do similar work now here at CoreAlign?

34:17

JESUDASON: I do. 20 percent of my time is on research.

KWON: Exactly 20? (laughs)

JESUDASON: Exactly 20. One day a week. So the couple of things that I—so I'm still doing a lot of research and writing on sex selection, and then I'm also doing a project on egg donation and really trying to bring women donors back into the center of the discussion. Because often times people are saying, Oh, it's too dangerous, or Women should do it or shouldn't do it, but very rarely do we hear from women, like why do they consider doing it? What makes it an appealing process to them? And what do they want to have happen during the process? So we're doing that piece of research right now. Those are my two kind of—and then I still do some work around reproductive rights and disability in the context of reproductive genetics. So talking a little bit more about ethics of late abortion and how to bring disability right folks—keep them in the conversation.

KWON: I'm interested in the path that you've taken, in terms of like you've done identity-based organizing, and you've also done this science aspect of it, and this broader academic, report-producing aspect, which—

35:27

JESUDASON: Yeah (laughs).

KWON: I don't know. It just seems interesting. What do you think about that?

JESUDASON: I'm not saying that I followed a particular path—certainly not something well thought out. I've mostly been somebody who has just followed the—when doors have opened and they've looked interesting, I've walked through them. I think that's how I got from—I mean, I got into the domestic violence work, because I was interested in working with the South Asian community. From there, I was really interested in working on women and body issues, and that both took me to the DV work, the domestic violence work, and then to the reproductive justice work. And in some ways, like all—So I talk about my work now at CoreAlign, as—I mean, 20 percent is research, but the 80 percent of the work that I do, I consider it movement building work. It's about building a new movement, and I think of this as a movement that's really about all people having the resources, rights, and respect to have love, sex, family, and community—

like some very broad ways of defining it. I would probably say that that's been the through line, so making sure that people have the right to love who they want, when they want, how they want. Same with sex, and same with family. It's like, How can we be as both self-determining as possible in terms of love, sex, family, and community, but also within the context of family and community? So it's not just about what *I* want, but how to do it in a relational way. It's definitely—I mean, like I said before, it took me thirteen years for me to finish my PhD, and—

KWON: When did you finish?

37:41

JESUDASON: 2007.

KWON: Oh, okay. Pretty recently.

JESUDASON: Yeah.

KWON: Cool. So you're a doctor.

JESUDASON: Yes. And when I finished, I never thought I would end up at an academic institution, since I was such a not-stellar grad student. But here I am at UCSF, which is, you know, it's a pretty well-recognized institution, so—

KWON: It is.

JESUDASON: Yeah. So it's like, "Wow. Okay (laughs).

KWON: I think we skipped over the part about your work with NAPAWF?

38:19

JESUDASON: Oh, yes.

KWON: You were a board member, right?

JESUDASON: Yes. So I was at ACRJ, when Kiran [Ahuja] recruited me to join the board.

KWON: Oh, okay. How did you know Kiran?

JESUDASON: So when Kiran started as ED [executive director], she did the tour of meeting all the key Asian leaders around the country. And when I was at ACRJ, I think Eveline was still on maternity leave or something, and so [I] met with Kiran then. I have to admit, I was somewhat skeptical of NAPAWF, just because I think pan-Asian organizing is challenging. We're much more comfortable being organized either as Korean Americans and Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans and South Asian Americans or Indian Americans than we are in a pan-ethnic way.

But Kiran was such a compelling leader. I wanted to support her and her vision, and while I was there [at NAPAWF], then she transitioned off.

And I decided to stay on for another three years, mostly because I wanted to support Miriam [Yeung]'s leadership. She was another very exciting, dynamic leader coming out of the LGBT movement, and so brought a very different sensibility to the work, which was very exciting to see. In that time period, so when Kiran was the ED, I think they had like four or five offices. There was New York, there was D.C., there was Seattle and Los Angeles. They had offices all around the country, and now it's more consolidated to, I think, just New York and D.C., so there's been a lot of transition there, too.

[Knock on the door]

Come in. Hey.

[BREAK]

KWON: I also wanted to ask you about Miriam. So you were involved in the selection process?

40:11

JESUDASON: Yeah, so I was not on the hiring committee.

KWON: Oh, okay.

JESUDASON: Yeah.

KWON: But do you kind of know—

JESUDASON: Well, so—and just as an aside, so Miriam was on my Board of Directors at Generations Ahead.

KWON: Oh, because she was involved with LGBTQ [Center of] New York.

JESUDASON: Yeah, yeah.

KWON: So you already knew her previously.

JESUDASON: Yeah, which was why I was not on the selection committee, because it would've been a conflict of interest.

KWON: Was there like a shift in the direction of the organization in terms of what they were looking for? I know they wanted to make it a more national

40:46

presence in terms of like someone at the table to speak for Asian American women?

JESUDASON: Yeah. I mean, so Kiran had done such a phenomenal job. I remember when she was hired, they just had a \$50,000 grant, which I don't think was enough to pay her salary. But she grew it from that to a \$600,000 to \$700,000 organization within a few short years. So when Miriam came on, it was already an organization that had a national presence, and particularly, as a national reproductive justice leader, they had a presence. I don't think they had as much of a D.C. presence, and so that's one of the things that Miriam has really been great at has been ramping that up. So they had a very high—amongst—in the reproductive rights and justice field, they had a very high profile around health care reform, they've definitely been the leader on sex selection in terms of policy work, and now, they're one of the leading organizations around women's health issues and immigration reform.

KWON: Right, right, right.

JESUDASON: Yeah, so to that extent, that they're invited to all the—not all, but they're invited to the White House tables, and they're part of that consultation.

KWON: Did you by any chance get to know Sister Song through NAPAWF?

42:21

JESUDASON: Yes, so actually while I was at ACRJ, I was the staff person at ACRJ, who represented ACRJ at SisterSong. So when they did the 2003 conference, I helped with organizing the 2003 conference, and then I was on their Management Circle—maybe, so 2003—so maybe for four years or so. So I was on SisterSong management circle till shortly after they bought the motherhouse in Atlanta, and then I got off.

KWON: Could you talk a little bit more about that? I actually haven't been able to find anyone who knows very much about SisterSong.

JESUDASON: Sure. Oh, there's a whole other history (laughs). Although you know that Loretta Ross, who was the director of SisterSong is also doing the [Sophia] Smith Oral History project.

KWON: Yeah, she did a Voice of Feminism one. Yeah, back in 2004, I think.

JESUDASON: I thought she was still doing it.

KWON: Oh, is she? Okay.

JESUDASON: I thought so, because I think she was recently at Smith College.

KWON: Oh, I don't know. Yeah, maybe she is. I know she interviewed Peggy Saika, Mary Chung, people like that.

JESUDASON: Yeah. Let's see what to say about SisterSong.

KWON: I mean, you don't have to give me the entire history, but maybe what you experienced out of it.

43:57

JESUDASON: Well, so the amazing thing about SisterSong is [that] they really emerged at a moment in time where—so this is around the March for Women's Lives. Loretta, Kiran, and Silva Henriquez, who was the Executive Director of National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, the three of them were very instrumental in getting the march to shift from a March for Women's Choice to March for Women's Lives. And it was a very powerful vehicle for all of the women of color to be a part of, to then advocate together for more place and more power at the table around reproductive rights issues.

KWON: Did you attend the march?

JESUDASON: I did. I attended the march.

KWON: What was that like?

JESUDASON: It was a ton of fun (laughs). And it was like, you know, there were just hundreds of thousands of people, so it was hard at the time to get a sense of just kind of the magnitude. Looking at pictures afterwards, it was very impressive.

When I was in college in 1989, there had been another march in D.C., and I was in college at the time, and four friends and I, we carpooled—you know, whatever, did a road trip to D.C.

KWON: From Madison, Wisconsin?

JESUDASON: Yes, we did. Yeah.

KWON: Wow.

JESUDASON: In some ways that's little bit more the memorable part for me. We slept on somebody's basement floor. Yeah. More than anything, I would say for the movement, it really changed the way the movement thought about reproductive justice as a framework, as a constituency. And there were very clear women of color leaders that emerged out of that, in an intentional way; it didn't just happen. These women worked hard and made that happen. And so I would say after that march the reproductive rights movement was never the same again in terms of presumption of

either more affluent choice issues or the lack of women of color leadership. So it was very cool.

KWON: I also know you went to the Michigan conference recently, right?

46:26

JESUDASON: Yes, and I was also at the RJ [Reproductive Justice] for All conference. I was on the advisory committee for that.

KWON: Oh my goodness. Okay. Just quickly, what you thought of each one of them.

JESUDASON: So the Reproductive Justice for All conference was interesting, in part, because what they tried to do was take some of the more contentious issues—so in terms of child welfare, and assisted reproductive technologies, and some other issues—and really get people to dive deep on it. It was also probably the first time—it was a collaboration of Planned Parenthood and somebody at Smith College. Patsy? No. Patsy Mink's daughter?

KWON: Oh, I know who you're talking about.

JESUDASON: Yeah.

KWON: Gwen Mink? Wendy Mink? or something like that.

JESUDASON: Yeah. But anyway, so it's those two folks—Planned Parenthood and Smith—[they] hosted it together. And it was also in some ways the first time reproductive justice had been used by a non-women of color reproductive-justice-led organization, so there's a way in which it gave—I mean, there's both arguments about, Did it appropriate reproductive justice? And also there was a sense that, Oh this is a very serious—you can no longer avoid reproductive justice.

And then the Michigan conference was really—it was a conference hosted by the University Michigan, where they were trying to bring academics and advocates together with the hope that the advocates would talk about their research needs and the academics would then say, We'll do the research for you. I think it was a little naive in its assumptions about how research partnerships form, and that a weekend is actually—was it even a weekend? (pause) Yes, it was a weekend. I think it was like a Thursday. No, it was a Thursday, Friday, and then—Yeah, but just that two days is not enough time to build enough trusting relationships to move a research agenda. It was great to see folks in the reproductive justice movement, because—Since SisterSong stopped doing their conferences, we haven't, as reproductive justice folks, we haven't had a chance to get together, so.

KWON: Oh, really?

JESUDASON: Yeah, so yeah. Apparently there was a SisterSong reproductive justice conference in Miami sometime. I don't remember when, but yeah.

KWON: How present are community members and community organizers in these conferences?

49:10

JESUDASON: Well, community members and community organizers. Community organizers are staff, so definitely present. It depends on the organization, so I think organizations like ACRJ who do—I think they probably took a lot of their youth there. There've been a lot of college-age folks, so yeah. But it's not really a space for—it's not a community conversation about these issues.

KWON: I have one last question to wrap it all up then. I know you do a lot of work here with different intersections of like race, gender, biology, genetics, and I was wondering how you personally positioned yourself within the Asian American Reproductive Justice movement.

JESUDASON: . . . How I position myself?

KWON: Mhmm. Like how do you perceive yourself to fit into the larger movement or how your work give back to the larger movement?

JESUDASON: Well, I . . . I always think of myself and the work that I do that's—I mean, that benefits both me and my community. So I don't see myself as separate, like I'm not doing this work on behalf of somebody else. To the extent that I took on Asian women's reproductive issues, I consider myself an Asian women, who has reproductive needs. To the same extent with CoreAlign, I think of myself as somebody who wants to have a rich life in terms of love, sex, family, and community. The same thing with reproductive genetics, and in fact, the sex selection is stuff that hits close to home, more so in terms of the son preference part of it than the sex selection, but—So they've all been very deeply personal, and I would also say, and this kind of goes back to the beginning of as a child, as somebody who's born in the sixties at a time of deep social change, I see myself as an integral part of that social change. Much of the work that I do is in service of a better world. So I don't see myself as advocating on behalf of a better world, I see myself as agitating for a better world.

KWON: One more follow-up question real quick?

JESUDASON: (laughs) Okay.

52:03

KWON: Also if you had to choose one issue that you wanted to focus on in the future? Because a lot of your work is very future-oriented, I was wondering if there was something that the reproductive justice movement needed to work on in the future. The work that still needs to be done.

JESUDASON: Yeah, so for me, CoreAlign is that work—we have a robust field with a lot of organizations, a lot of great people who do passionate work, but we haven't been winning on our issue for the last couple of years. And so for me, the work around CoreAlign is under this broad umbrella of thinking about human beings and relationships, and who we love, and [who] we have sex with, and who we create families with. I want us to build a winning movement around those issues, and so that's—There's a lot of internal work that we need to do as a movement to change, to be more effective, and then there's also a lot that we need to change the world, so. Yeah (laughs).

KWON: Thank you so much for taking time out. I know you're busy. Got meeting after meeting.

JESUDASON: Yes, so thank you for being flexible.

KWON: Yeah, thank you so much.

JESUDASON: Yeah, good luck.

END OF INTERVIEW



