

Komen's Betrayal of Women's Health, and their Voice

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As a psychologist who chairs the Society for the Psychology of Women's *Reproductive Issues* committee, and a cancer researcher, like so many others, I was appalled by the Susan G. Komen Foundation's decision to cut funding for Planned Parenthood grants to support breast cancer screening programs for low-income women, and heartened by the overwhelming response to this decision, which has ultimately led to its reversal. On Facebook, I saw the uproar wasn't only, or even primarily, from my friends and acquaintances who normally alert me about new assaults on women's reproductive rights, but also from some of the more politically dormant corners of my world. Reflecting on this, I realized that our anger was about much more than Komen's betrayal of its commitment to making breast cancer screening available to those with the greatest need, although we were certainly angry about that. What enraged us was that Komen abused the platform we created, the over one-million of us who raced for the cure to raise awareness and promote research on breast cancer, and co-opted our voice to make a statement against women's reproductive rights to which so, so many of us wholehearted disagreed.

I did my first "Race for the Cure" in New York City 1997, having been inspired by my first AIDS Walk the prior year. Walking with survivors, and in memory of those who hadn't, I appreciated that my body was needed in the race for a cure, while also embracing the sense of community these events inspired. In graduate school, I "raced" in Phoenix with my classmates and gave and sometimes raised money each year for the "Komen run", gathering a mountain of t-shirts that I could wear (over my pink "awareness bra") to publicly display my commitment to Komen's mission. Walking "in celebration" of affected friends, and "in memoriam" of family members, I had intertwined many of my most cherished relationships, and enacted my social identity as a women's health advocate, with and through Komen. Attribution theories underscore how the time, money, public displays, and social networks we all had invested in Komen further deepened our commitment to, and identity with, the organization.

Over the years, some of us had begun to look more critically at the Komen foundation, and to distance ourselves a bit from it, though not our commitment to women's health. Breast Cancer Action and the Breast Cancer Fund, as well as writers such as Barbara Ehrenreich ("Welcome to Cancerland"), and social scientists including Gayle Sulik and Samantha King (authors of *Pink Ribbon Blues* and *Pink Ribbon, Inc.*, respectively) encouraged us to think critically about "Pinkwashing," and the social and environmental issues that were overshadowed by pink. Was shopping for the cure substituting for political action? Were we commodifying

breast cancer, and running for a brand rather than women's health? Was the intense focus on breast cancer, while important, overshadowing awareness of other women's health problems, including violence against women¹, heart disease, or other cancers (e.g., lung, colon, pancreatic cancer)? Was a focus on early detection and finding a cure diverting our attention from thinking about prevention? What carcinogens were ignored, or under-studied, in the downtown communities we "raced" through, or were floating in the water we drank from our pink sport bottles? What estrogen mimicking chemicals, known or unknown and unstudied, were used in the "pink" make-up, body creams, and perfumes we bought from cosmetic companies that give money to Komen, but fight against safety regulations for consumers? Audre Lorde, who in her *Cancer Journals* imagined what would happen if "an army of one-breasted women descended upon Congress and demanded that the use of carcinogenic, fat-stored hormones in beef-feed be outlawed?" (Lorde, 1997), would no doubt be appalled that, instead of political action, each October women descend upon Bloomingdales and Saks Fifth Avenue to shop for the cure.

The Komen foundation's February 1, 2012 announcement that it would no longer be funding Planned Parenthood's breast cancer screening program was not only a betrayal of Komen's own commitment to breast health (among women most in need of their support), but also a betrayal of the women who have supported Komen and helped to make the foundation the massive nonprofit that it has become. It was a betrayal of *our* voice – whether through walking/running, through shopping or even leading Komen-affiliated local chapters – we were Komen, and Komen was now speaking in our name against women's reproductive rights, and doing so at the expense of women's breast health. I was born after Roe V. Wade. Many in my generation no doubt take for granted that our reproductive freedoms will always be there, even as we stand on the sidelines as they are slowly eroded. Perhaps this recent Komen debacle will remind us that we must speak our views, make our values known, or risk having someone speak in our name against our own interests. Fortunately, for now, women have let Komen know that it cannot divert our support for breast cancer awareness to serve someone else's political agenda, particularly when that agenda undermines women's health.

References

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¹ Discount Gun Sales reported that they were teaming up with Susan G. Komen in selling a pink "Hope Edition" handgun. While Komen has denied partnering with Discount Gun Sales, this nonetheless speaks to the commodification of "pink" paraphernalia to sell just about anything. According to the Violence Policy Center, in 2000, 50 percent of female homicide victims (for whom the weapon was known) were killed with a firearm. And of those female firearm homicides, 1,009 women (75 percent) were killed with a handgun. (See http://www.vpc.org/fact_sht/domviofs.htm, http://www.alternet.org/newsandviews/article/770241/pink_gun_for_the_cure_komen_would_rather_be_associated_with_a_handgun_than_planned_parenthood/)

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