



Why Jessica González-Rojas Champions Reproductive Justice

The executive director of the Latina Institute for Reproductive Health talks about how legislative restrictions on abortion impact our health and our communities. Jessica recalls how a trip to a clinic to get birth control became her first act of political activism, what it means to reframe the abortion debate as a matter of reproductive justice, and how Latinas, often perceived as either “virginal” or “hyper-sexualized,” actually view sexual health.

Clip (González-Rojas): *I always say that the Latina community has been perceived as either virginal or Catholic, or promiscuous, hyper-sexualized. Right? So, I say that we're all of that and we're none of that, right? We're a spectrum of experiences, a spectrum of opinions, a spectrum of perspectives that make us incredibly diverse.*

Alicia Menendez: Jessica González-Rojas is the Executive Director of the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health. She's spent most of her career fighting to ensure that Latinas have access to reproductive care, and with abortion restrictions sweeping the country, a fight has never been more in focus.

Jessica, thank you so much for joining us.

Jessica González-Rojas: Thank you for having me.

Menendez: Let's start where we are right now. A bunch of different states have passed laws to restrict abortion. When a law dictates that a woman can't get an abortion after six weeks or after a fetal heartbeat is detected, what does that really mean?

González-Rojas: That means that the state legislatures, mostly men, have control over our bodies. So what it means, too, is that those who can leave the state, who have the means to do that, can get the care they need. But, those who are low income, who are immigrants, who are women of color, who don't have the access and ability to leave the states that they live in won't get the care that they need.

It could potentially mean criminalization, and it could potentially mean a death sentence. In Texas, they held a hearing where they could charge a woman with homicide for having an abortion. So, this has gone beyond the scope of narrative. It is way out of sync with the national understanding of our rights and our body and our ability to make decisions for ourselves. So, it is extreme and dangerous.

Menendez: What is the perception of how we as a community view sexual health issues and abortion specifically?

González-Rojas: We've done opinion polling for the last eight years. It's important that we do opinion polling because major mainstream opinion polls leave us out. It costs double for entities to poll Latinos because not only do you have to ensure the questions are crafted in a way that's culturally competent, you also have to transcreate the questions into Spanish.

Menendez: You can't just put it into Google translations?

González-Rojas: No. You can't do it. If anyone's done that, you know there's lots of errors. Transcreation means the intent of the question is mirrored in the other language. It's very expensive. And, we've been specifically targeting Latinx voters.

Menendez: Which means what? That you're checking it against the voter file?

González-Rojas: Yes. Yes. We've paid a lot of money to make sure that this is a representative sample as well, so that it's against the voter file, and it's also reflective of the Latinx population in the United States. We've done a poll about every two years or so. We ask sort of the mainstream questions: Do you think abortion is legal? Illegal? Should it be legal or illegal? In most cases? In all cases?

Latinos tend to skew a little conservative: It should be illegal in most cases or in some cases. But if you ask a Latina, a Latino, "Would you support a loved one who's made a decision about an abortion? Would you support them?" 90% of those have said yes. So, if you look at it in the context of their real lives—not just a right—but actually, if those in your life need the care, there's compassion. There's empathy.

I think that's actually a more important question to ask. We have a question about "Would you support abortion rights and access to the Supreme Court justice rule to uphold women's access to abortion?" They mirror the general population, which is 73% said "yes." They believe birth control is not a religious issue. It's often painted as a religious issue, including 76% of Catholic Latinos; they said it's part of preventative care.

So, all this is really important to note, because our community has been painted as conservative on reproductive justice issues. The conversations haven't been had in our community. When we do outreach and organizing with Latina, Latino, Latinxs, what we learn is many of them haven't even learned about their own bodies. We don't get sexual health information. We don't get it in a way that's culturally competent. And, we often start with worthiness, because you know the messages that we get today as Latinas is that we're not worthy, that we are less than. And, these messages come from the President of the United States to the media, to our own communities. We often internalize these hostile messages.

So, we start there. When we talk about worth and worthiness and values and contributions and who we are and how we've actually been at the forefront of our own rights, and we've been fighting for reproductive justice for decades, they start seeing themselves as something: a part of a movement. They start shedding away those problematic notions of who we are. I always say the Latina community has been perceived as either virginal or Catholic. You know, very conservative Latina. Or promiscuous, hypersexualized, right? So I say that we're all of that and we're

none of that, right? We're a spectrum of experiences, a spectrum of opinions, a spectrum of perspectives that make us incredibly diverse.

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When to start a family is a really personal decision. Some of us want kids now, and some of us aren't sure if we'll ever want them. Before I got pregnant with my daughter, my friends and I would often talk about how we wished we knew more about our own fertility, because the not knowing only made decisions and plans more confusing.

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Menendez:

What was your first act of political organizing?

González-Rojas:

Getting birth control was an act of political activism. In 1995, I had a partner. I went to Boston University. We were sexually active. I wanted to get my birth control. So, I got the address of a local Planned Parenthood, we had an appointment, we walked to the place. I remember walking by a crowd, and I just kept walking. I was like, "That's the clinic." We had to turn around and go through that crowd, and this was when I was less politicized.

That's the moment when I saw mostly men carrying those horrible signs of fake baby parts. They were grabbing me and spitting at me and yelling at me—they're like, "Don't do it. Don't do it." And I was like, "What is happening?" I remember trying to get through that crowd and not understanding really what was happening, then getting to the door, and the door is locked because of security. I had to buzz in. I had to say my name out loud. These people were surrounding me. The security guard finally let me in. I remember in that moment when I finally sat in the waiting room, I was so angered, and I was so upset.

In some ways, I think about it like this: they were trying to prevent me from getting an abortion, but what they did is enable me to become an activist, because just that experience made me realize how much our bodies are controlled, and how we're targeted as a community just for making decisions for ourselves.

Menendez: Is there an experience around abortion that crystallized for you how you feel about abortion specifically?

González-Rojas: I've had family members who had abortions. It was almost, for me, never a question. It was like, "Yes, of course. Whatever they need." And the family, it was what I said earlier about the data, that Latinos who may be conservative and may not support abortion for themselves will show up for their family members. So, it was this quiet secret in the family that there was this family member who got an abortion. No one talked about it, but everyone sort of silently supported it. She got the cure that she needed. She was young. She wasn't ready. She made the right decision for herself at that time. So there wasn't the judgment or shame or stigma that I would have maybe expected from people in my family. It was this quiet support.

For me, this spoke to where the Latinx community lives within this movement. We may not be seen on the front lines. But, we are in the front lines. We are supporting this issue whether it's quiet, through holding a hand or giving \$100 to the family member or friend who needs it. Or, like many Latinas in history who have been at the forefront of this work, it is about speaking up and speaking out and working to change policies, so no one has to experience discrimination and barriers to the care that they need.

Menendez: Twenty six years-old: you run for public office.

González-Rojas: Yes.

Menendez: Why did you decide to run?

González-Rojas: I was a community activist. I had worked for a Congresswoman in the community, and I was really involved in work around the census, the 2000 Census. So, '99, 2000, I became part of an immigrant rights organization called New Immigrant Community Empowerment to ensure that our communities were being counted. I lived in Jackson Heights, Queens, which is one of the most diverse communities in the United States. It was really important for me to see us being counted.

Menendez: You ran for Democratic State Committee.

González-Rojas: Committee, yes, so it's a political position. But it gave me the opportunity to shape the party platform in New York State. I was sort of encouraged to do it. I looked into it. I said, "Why not?" I realize what a wild decision that was at 26 years-old when I was working full time and going to grad school in the evenings and then going out and knocking on doors every night for months. But, it was a really exciting civic moment.

I won the race in a three-way race against two other Latinas, which was hard because these were two Latinas that I respected and knew. But, you know, I did the work. I did the work. I think about Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez who talks about it's the grounding. It's knocking on doors. It's talking to communities. And that's what I did every night. Despite the fact that I had a paper due, or I had a work project to do, I went out every night and knocked on doors.

Menendez: What did you learn from that that you now carry into your work?

González-Rojas: To listen. To listen to people. That sounds simple, but I see so many people not listening. What my organization does is invest in the communities that have been left behind. We as a community, as an organization, do integrated voter engagement, which means that we knock on doors in communities of Latino, Latinx voters who are low propensity or high potential. I like high potential, meaning that they might just vote in Presidential elections. They don't come out for primaries or state-wide races.

We go and knock on the doors and say, "Hey, do you know that there is a primary? Do you know that there is a state-wide race? A local race? This is our organization. This is what we stand for. Your voice matters." We do that work in Texas, in Virginia, in Florida. So, we capture the people that candidates don't care about, because candidates want to look at those who turn out in every ... You know, who are those triple prime voters who are always engaged. So, our community gets left out.

Menendez: You have a tee shirt on. It says: "Organize. Agitate. Educate." Organize, educate, most of us can do those things. Agitate.

González-Rojas: Yes. That is a thing a lot of people did not grow up comfortable with doing.

Menendez: Yes. Did you have to learn how to be comfortable with agitating?

González-Rojas: Yes. Yeah. I am a people pleaser. I value relationships. I value being in community with others, and sometimes agitating means agitating our own spaces. So, I think about patriarchy in the Latinx community. That's real. We see it, and we have to disrupt it. We have to agitate it, and we have to dismantle it.

Menendez: In our homes? At work?

González-Rojas: In our homes, in our families, yes. So, I think that's actually the hardest part of those three words, because it's confronting really uncomfortable realities and dynamics that many of us have been raised within to be okay. But, it's not okay. In order to get to the world that I want to see for my son, for the next generation, we have to agitate. It's hard, and it's uncomfortable, and you're going to be at risk, and people are going to go after you. And believe me, they have. But, I think we have to hold that as a tool to dismantle the problematic systems in our society and in our own families and cultures.

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Menendez: Before I ever was pregnant, I don't think I would have realized that meant you—in a best case scenario—only know that you've been pregnant for two weeks. That means you took a pregnancy test the minute you could, and that pregnancy test was accurate, and then you had two weeks.

González-Rojas: I didn't know I was pregnant until eight weeks along. I didn't know. And, here I am a reproductive justice advocate. I have a really vast understanding of my body and of reproduction, and I didn't know myself that I was pregnant until about eight weeks, maybe seven weeks, eight weeks along. Most people will now know they're pregnant at the point in which abortion has been banned, so that gives us no options.

Menendez: In addition, too, one of the things we always talk about in this conversation is the affordability of accessing that care and the amount of time it sometimes takes someone to pull together the funds to access that care.

González-Rojas: Yeah. That's a huge barrier, and again, it directly impacts those who earn the least. There's an amendment in Congress that we've been fighting for 43 years. It's as old as I am. It's called the Hyde Amendment. What it does is prohibit federal coverage of abortion care in programs like Medicaid, like Veterans healthcare, like the Indian Health Services. So those who need it the most, need that access to resources the most to get the care that they need, won't be able to get it.

The first woman who died because of the Hyde Amendment was a Latina from Texas, Rosie Jimenez, who was studying to be a teacher. She already had a daughter. She found herself pregnant. She was unable to carry that pregnancy to term. She was unable to raise another child. And, she was on Medicaid. Just because of the fact that she was on Medicaid, and just because of the fact the Hyde Amendment passed just a few weeks before, she ended up getting an unsafe abortion. It didn't prevent her from getting an abortion. It prevented her from getting a safe abortion.

Menendez: Talk to me a little bit about that, because I think that can sound very amorphous to people, this idea that if women can't access legal care, they will still find a way to do it. What does that actually look like on the ground?

González-Rojas: In Rosie's case, it meant her life. Rosie lost her life. Thankfully now, there is so much advancements in technology. There is really good options actually that are outside of sort of a medical setting. There is medication abortion. There's Misoprostol. There's pills you can take that are actually very effective. We want to make sure that anyone who needs those pills are getting them from a reliable source with instruction.

Menendez: And that's something we saw at the Texas border, that people were accessing that.

González-Rojas: Exactly, And for those who had accessed it, many of them had successful abortions. But, many were not getting the proper pills, were not taking it properly, and we worry about that, because when it's sort of out in the wild, we don't know what our communities are getting. We want to ensure that they're getting the most safe and effective methods. When you legislate abortion out of reach, people are going to find other methods. Many are safe. But when there's not regulation of it, who knows what we're getting? It could just be from ineffective to dangerous.

Across Latin America, we see abortion nearly outlawed, but it doesn't mean women don't get it. It just means that they're a little more at risk of getting a safe abortion or getting more of a clandestine abortion.

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Menendez: If you are a Latina in Missouri or Alabama or Indiana, how do these decisions affect you specifically?

González-Rojas: What we might find are people who are pregnant and don't want to be and can't be might end up having to carry those pregnancies to term. And, we know that those who want an abortion and seek an abortion but don't get it end up four times more likely in poverty. Many are already facing poverty, but it drives them deeper into poverty. So, we look at abortion as both a reproductive justice issue and locating abortion within the context of our lives. For an immigrant woman, there's already barriers. For low income women, there's barriers. For trans men who find themselves pregnant—trans men can still get pregnant—there's stigma and discrimination that they face. So then compound that. The barriers that exist right now with the six week ban... it makes it untenable.

Menendez: Many argue this is a much more concerted effort to make a legal run at Roe v. Wade.

González-Rojas: Yes. Yes.

Menendez: So for someone who doesn't know: What is Roe v. Wade, and how does it relate to this debate?

González-Rojas: So, Roe v. Wade is a 1973 decision by the Supreme Court that upheld that abortion is accessible law of the land. But, what we've seen since 1973 have been

other Supreme Court cases that have chipped away, so where we landed is abortion is law of the land up until viability.

Menendez: Which means what? What's viability?

González-Rojas: Which means when the fetus could live on its own. But—there's scientific disagreement about what that point is, but—generally 20-something weeks. What we've seen states do is disrespect that precedent and start finding ways to challenge those notions of what is viability. We've seen a really concerted anti-choice, right-wing conservative movement that is looking to use junk science to say that the fetus has feelings or the fetus can feel pain, and all that has been disputed by medical experts.

But, the anti-choice forces don't care about truth. They don't care about science. They really care about controlling women's bodies and the bodies of those who get pregnant. So, Roe v. Wade has continuously been chipped away over the last 40 years. We're seeing state after state after state implement legislation or introduce legislation, now seeing them passed, that have just pushed the boundaries of access to care. What the anti-abortion forces are doing is trying to introduce laws that are unconstitutional, so then they get challenged, and that the Supreme Court now, which is in conservative hands, will have to reassess that decision, which is very frightening. Very frightening.

Menendez: What do you say to someone who listens to your argument about how this is about controlling women's bodies and says, "Okay, Jessica, I hear you. I'm on board with that. And at the same time, I have a moral quandary around this question, and I feel a tension within myself that is hard to reconcile."

González-Rojas: Yes. And that's okay. That's the work, right? The work is that we find a lot of our own activists who say, "I think abortion's a sin. I wouldn't get one for myself, but if a loved one decided—if my niece decided to have one, I love her and I support her, and I support her decision. And that politician shouldn't be making that decision for my niece."

González-Rojas: So, it's nuanced. I think that's the problem with society. We're quick to make something black or white, yes or no. It's like we exist in these binaries, but we're so much more nuanced and complex that we recognize that it's okay. It's important to have a faith, and it's important to have your moral compass, and even if it doesn't align with your own decisions, having an abortion if you find yourself pregnant, that's okay. It's about controlling the ability for someone else to get that care.

Menendez: Jessica, thank you so much.

González-Rojas: Thank you so much. This was wonderful.

Menendez: Thanks as always for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me. Maria Murriel is our sound designer. Carolina Rodriguez is our sound engineer. Emma Forbes is the show's intern.

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