



How Monica Ramirez Embraced Solidarity to Build a Movement

She spent her early career advocating on behalf of farmworker women. Then in 2017, as Hollywood reeled from revelations of sexual abuse and harassment, she wrote a statement of support that reshaped the #MeToo movement, and set the groundwork for the Times Up Initiative. Monica talks us through that choice, how she persevered through intense resistance, and gets candid about the personal cost of being a public face of a social movement.

Alicia Menendez: Growing up in Ohio in a family of farmworkers, Monica Ramirez was inspired to dedicate her career to fighting for farmworker women. Then in 2017, as women in entertainment began to take on sexual assault in their industry, Monica shared a declaration of support and solidarity on behalf of women farmworkers that would shape both the time's up movement and the course of Monica's own life.

Menendez: Monica, thank you so much for doing this.

Monica Ramirez:

Thank you. It's always a pleasure to be here with you.

Menendez: Monica, your work fundamentally centers on justice. What is your early memory of witnessing injustice?

Ramirez: My earliest recollection of understanding that something was wrong that needed to be fixed was when I was 14 years old the local newspaper had this huge pullout section that was about fishermen, welcoming them back into the area, it was really bothersome to me that there wasn't something like that for farmworkers because I come from a farmworker community and in that area and my parents spent a lot of time, my father, in particular, spent a lot of time talking to us about the importance of lifting up the community and honoring the work. And so that's one of the most visible memories that I have and it was actually the thing that I think really propelled me into the activism that I do today.

Menendez: Back in 2003 you launched the first legal project in this country focused on addressing sexual harassment, other forms of gender discrimination against farmworker women, and over the course of about a decade, that work grows into Justice For Migrant Women. What is interesting to me about that, Monica, is that we all seen the studies about harassment, about sexual violence in the fields, how is it possible that this was a void that wasn't filled? And what was it that allowed you to identify it as a need?

Ramirez: Unfortunately, I think many of us have experienced gender-based violence or have witnessed gender-based violence, and in my family from a very young age, I remember violence, not within my immediate family, but domestic violence was an issue that impacted some of my other family members, and sexual violence is an issue that I knew about really early in my life.

Ramirez: I think the void that you're talking about, it was because issues like gender-based violence, issues like sexual violence, those are not issues that people want to deal with, they don't

want to touch them, they want to look past them. And I think for farmworker women, there's a lot of taboo so women weren't speaking out necessarily, or survivors weren't speaking out because it's such a taboo issue. And the advocates that were aware of it didn't feel like it was a priority issue to address because farmworker women were a minority of the workforce.

Ramirez: At that time, farmworker women were really thought of as economic... they were not thought of as economic migrants, they were thought of as family migrants, women traveled with their husbands to support their husbands while they were working. And so there were all these different social dynamics that I think caused people to overlook the topic and to really make a decision to dedicate resources and energy to addressing it.

Menendez: I mean, you were entering an advocacy field that was storied, right? I mean, this is a well-established group of people who have been doing this specific type of labor organizing for years. Was there any sense that you were a newcomer or an interloper or push back to your arrival?

Ramirez: One of the biggest things that I experienced when I first started my legal practice was that there was a lot of concern about getting the men in trouble. There was concern about like, "Well, what if our members are the people who were committing the sexual harassment? We wouldn't want to take any action against them." And so I remember getting that kind of resistance.

Ramirez: And then I also got resistance, initially, from the church. In particular, one church was concerned that if I was going to talk to farmworker women about their rights around sexual harassment, that I was going to talk about abortion and reproductive rights, and so they didn't want to let me come and do outreach or do work on the issue because they were afraid of what I was going to talk about. So I experienced pushback in different ways. And certainly as a new, young Latina attorney... still today there's only 2% of all lawyers in this country are Latina. So when I started over 20 years ago, we were like maybe 1%. And so there was also pushback in the legal field.

Menendez: Monica, I was doing something that I often do, and I am preparing for these conversations, which is I reached out to all of our mutual friends to be like, "Well, what do I need to ask Monica? Or what is the context that I need for Monica that I'm not going to get in an article?" And someone who loves you very much but is also deep in this work said to me, "I mean, you have to understand Monica is one of the [inaudible 00:05:26] of #TimesUp, it would not have happened without her." So 2017, the effort is gaining momentum in Hollywood, you write what would become a game-changing letter on behalf of women farmworkers and I want you to just read this one part of it.

Ramirez: We do not work under bright stage lights or on the big screen, we work in the shadows of society in isolated fields and packing houses that are out of sight and out of mind for most people in this country. Your job feeds souls, fills hearts, and spreads joy, our job nourishes the nation with the fruits, vegetables, and other crops that we plant, pick, and pack.

Menendez: You were counseled by someone close to you, I think, to instead of framing this as a question of solidarity, frame it as a critique of why low-wage workers weren't included from the get. I want you to talk me through your thinking on why solidarity was the way to approach this.

Ramirez: It's actually interesting because no one said, "Talk about low-wage workers." In fact, that was, I think, what the expectation was. And some people say that our letter... because at the time when I wrote that letter, I was the Board President of Alianza Nacional de

Campeñas, which is an organization that I co-founded. And some people have said that the letter basically was push back to the fact that the focus of the sexual harassment cases that were coming out were about women in Hollywood, and that actually wasn't what the letter was about. It wasn't supposed to be a letter, it was never supposed to be published in a magazine. In my capacity as the Board President of Alianza, we were watching what was happening with the women in Hollywood and we were trying to figure out what our role was, and should we speak out and what would we say?

Ramirez: And we'd already written letters and taken action on behalf of other women in other industries that had been sexually harassed. And so at that moment, we made the decision to be part of a march that was happening in Hollywood to support the women. And at that time, it coincided with a call that I got from Time Magazine, they wanted to interview one of my clients to be part of what would become the Silence Breakers story. So they wanted to know if I had B-roll of the farmworker women that I was in community with and we didn't. And I said, "But we're going to be at this march and we're going to read this statement from the stage, it's a statement of solidarity, maybe you should go there and you should cover it." And the reporter said, "Send me what you've written."

Ramirez: And so I sent it, that was a Tuesday or Wednesday, it was a Tuesday. And by Thursday, she wrote back and said, "Don't do anything with that, we're going to publish it." And they published it on Friday. So it was actually written as a statement of solidarity that was meant to be read from the stage. And I think that's really important for people to know that because it wasn't about us saying like, "Hey, we have it worse," or "Hey, you've forgotten about these other people," or "You'll pay attention over here..." it wasn't that at all. What we understood from our organizing was that, at that particular moment in time, these women were starting to experience backlash and retaliation and we understood that if people didn't start speaking out in favor or in solidarity with them that the likely consequence was that they were going to be shut down and the conversation would have been over and nobody would have felt like they could come forward.

Menendez: It also has the unintended consequence, that letter, of catapulting you as a public figure. And I wonder what the learning curve has been on that on becoming a person who not just does the work but is the face of the work.

Ramirez: I mean, it's been really difficult to be very honest with you. You asked earlier about pushback, I actually got a lot of pushback after this happened, and people were upset that I was getting a lot of attention because of the letter, because of the work. People made comments to me or they made comments to other people who I know who came to me and said, "Hey, we want you to know that this happened."

Ramirez: I remember this one woman came to me and she said, "I was in a meeting..." and it was probably a week or so after the Golden Globes had happened and she said, "I was in a meeting and there were people talking about the fact that you went to the Golden Globes and they're upset about it because they said it wasn't your turn." And I remember just being so heartbroken and shocked because, essentially, to be questioned in a way that was about like was I about the work or was I about this new media attention that I was getting, that was really painful for me.

Ramirez: And that took a lot of adjusting because we were trying to manage a moment that was so huge. I mean, the speed at which things were moving when #TimesUp launched, just all the different conversations and events and media and just so many things were being thrown at us. And at the time Alianza was not funded so there was also this reality that we

were trying to organize and do this work at the level that we were doing it at with no financial support. People who know me well understand that my life basically changed overnight and not with a lot of control on my part, and that meant change for my entire family, at the time, my son was four. And so all of a sudden I was on the road all of the time and there were all these new demands and we were just trying to figure out how to make it.

Ramirez: The story that people were seeing was what was happening in the media interviews, in the news articles, and everything looked really packaged and polished and pretty, but on the background, there was a lot of just trying to honestly managing the chaos and figuring out how to take this opportunity to finally bring awareness to an issue that many of us had been organizing around for years and years, and how did we do it before the window closed? I think many of us who were deep in it, in the work, we felt like we were racing against a clock. And that was a lot of pressure. Some of what I was managing on a personal level was just figuring out, "How do you keep your life going while it's completely changed and keep the work moving in a way that actually is going to make a difference?"

Menendez: And if I understand correctly, part of your decision in that period of things swirling is to move back home to Ohio.

Ramirez: Yeah. I moved back home. I actually had, at the time when everything kind blew up with #TimesUp and with the letter, I had two other jobs in DC that I was doing and I left those two jobs so that I could manage all of the work that was happening. And then I moved home. I moved home though not just because I needed additional support, I'm so grateful because my parents are there, my family has been so supportive since we've moved back. But we moved back because there was a major immigration raid that happened in June of 2018, and the last day of school near the community where I live, there were a hundred children that were left without parents in one day, and then later that week there was another major immigration raid, and I was trying to organize from DC to help on the ground because there wasn't a lot of organizing infrastructure where I'm from and it just became apparent that it needed to happen on the ground and I needed to be in Ohio. And so we moved basically in one week, we picked up all of our things and we moved back home and got to work there.

Menendez: I think this is true of a lot of people who do grassroots organizing or organizing in general, which is you are required to toggle between the people you serve and elites. And so we are talking about code-switching at like level 10 code-switching.

Ramirez: Yes.

Menendez: And sure, yes, most of our Latina to Latina listeners have been doing that their entire lives, but you are doing it at a Ph.D. level and I wonder how do you both show up in your community in a way that is authentic and then show up on a red carpet or in an organizing meeting where most of those people live in million-dollar mansions?

Ramirez: Yeah. The way that I show up is every person is a person no matter where they live or how much money they have. And I think that actually one of the things that has helped me create some really important and strong relationships with some of the folks you're mentioning, like the very well-known people is I just treat everyone the same because I need to always be grounded in my community. And so that is where I live and that is where I always try to stay, and no matter who I'm meeting with or speaking to, that is my framework. But of course, when I'm on the red carpet or when I'm doing a high-level media interview, when I got to speak at the UN, there are changes that you have to make, there's

a certain way you have to approach those things, and my goal is to just always show up authentically and I hope that translates.

Menendez: It does, it's just this extraordinarily hard thing to do. Someone was joking like, "Yeah. No, Monica will go to Davos, but she'll like take the bus to get there."

Ramirez: We have a very good friend and we were leaving from the same place, we were heading to the same place, and because whenever I travel, I'm trying to guard all of our limited resources so I travel on the last seat of the bus, the cheapest ticket available, what have you, and so our good friend was, she was like, "[inaudible 00:15:14]?" She was giving me advice about this because I think I arrived something like 10 hours later because I went on a plane that had three stops or something. And she was like, "Okay, let me have a talk with you about that."

Menendez: Because I want our listeners to understand this because I think it is a tension that shows up a lot, especially if you didn't have money growing up, which is that even... We talk a lot about how you guard your personal finances, but if you are the steward of an organization's finances, a lot of those same issues show up.

Ramirez: That's right. And you know what? That's actually been one of the most important learnings of the last couple of years is I have to figure out, "How do I maximize on all sides?" But in that efficiency, I also have to take care of myself, like, "Okay. What is the cost of this?" I'm still working on it, but those are the kinds of calculations that we need to make, not necessarily, "What is the cheapest way that I can do this?" but "What is the real cost of this and how do we do it in a way that's sustainable?"

Menendez: To me, it feels like the work you had done up until #TimesUp and then #TimesUp, and then the work that you are now doing, the work at Latinx House, which I want you to talk about, to me it feels like a pivot, and I wonder if it feels like a pivot to you or just a very natural extension of the work you've always done.

Ramirez: I feel like I learned a new tool and I'm now using that new tool for my work. The change with #TimesUp is it brought my work more to the mainstream. I'm still doing rights-based work, I'm still building power, I'm still trying to advance policy change, all of those things, but the difference is now the tool that I have that I didn't have before is narrative.

Ramirez: So the Latinx House, and for folks who don't know what it is, it's an organization that was created to celebrate the excellence of the Latinx community and focus on the representation of the Latinx community. A lot of our work is about narrative. I believe, in this country, there's a narrative about the Latinx community that says that we are takers, that we take jobs, we take resources, we take opportunities, and the truth is we are givers, we give opportunities, we create jobs. The reality is our community faces some of the biggest gaps, we have the biggest wealth gap, Latinas have the widest pay gap.

Ramirez: The fact that things like the El Paso Massacre have taken place, when you think of the different ways in which the community experiences discrimination and stereotyping, it's not by accident, and the narrative about who we are as a community is directly related to the way that we are treated and seen in society. So the Latinx House, it's about changing the narrative, it's about building social capital, and it's about addressing some of these big societal issues that our community is confronting, and we believe that's not good only for Latinx people, but it's good for our country.

Menendez: Monica, thank you so much for taking the time to do this.

Ramirez: Thank you.

Menendez: Thank you, as always, for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Manuela Bedoya is our Marketing Lead. Kojin Tashiro is our Associate Sound Designer and makes this episode. We love hearing from you, it makes our day, email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, slide into our DMS on Instagram, tweet us @latinatolatina, check out our merchandise that is on our website, latinatolatina.com/shop, and remember, please subscribe or follow us on Apple Podcast, Google Podcast, Goodpods, wherever you are listening right now. Every time you share this podcast, every time you share an episode, every time you leave a review, it helps us to grow as a community.

CITATION:

Menendez, Alicia, host. "How Monica Ramirez Embraced Solidarity to Build a Movement." *Latina to Latina*, LWC Studios. September 12, 2022. LatinaToLatina.com.

Produced by:

