



What Activist Tania Rosario Méndez is Doing to Combat Femicide in Puerto Rico

The Executive Director of Taller Salud, a feminist organization in Puerto Rico, breaks down how the island's struggling economy and social systems fail survivors, what needs to change, and what we can each do to combat gender-based violence.

Alicia Menendez:

In the past six years, more than 150 women in Puerto Rico have been killed by their intimate partners. This year alone, there have been at least 21 femicides, including the killings of Keishla Rodriguez and Andrea Ruiz. High-profile cases that have renewed calls to hold accountable a system that fails to protect survivors. Gender-based violence is not unique to the island but what is happening there is a window into what happens the world over. When I asked one of my best friends who lives in Puerto Rico who can help us understand what is happening, why it's happening, and what we can each do to calm that gender-based violence, she recommended Tania Rosario Méndez. Tania is the executive director of [Taller Salud](#), a feminist organization on the island that works to tackle inequality, and everything from health care to economic growth. And, Tania argues that that inequality is central to understanding violence against women.

Tania, there is a renewed focus on femicide in Puerto Rico, but this is of course, sadly not a new phenomenon. What is your earliest memory of stories like this?

Tania Méndez: It's actually a story my grandmother told me. When she was very young, she married someone else, not my grandfather. So she's this young wife, she has two small girls and her husband used to lock her up in the house. She told me this story and she was not being, she was not even resentful. She was just telling me this story about her first husband and how he would leave to work and leave her locked up.

She was saying how silly he was so jealous, stuff like that, right? For me, I was terrified at the idea that someone else would lock me, an adult, and in a house because he was jealous someone would, do, look at me. For me it was outrageous, but I don't remember voicing that to her because she was so matter of fact about it. That's the earliest memory I have. I was about nine. It grew on me how normalized it was for several generations in my family, and in my country, and my culture that men could do that to women.

Menendez: Draw a line for me, as you see it from that story to how we're still talking about femicide in the year 2021.

Méndez: I think we've overcome some obstacles, but sometimes I think everything that has been gained is always at the peril of being lost. So, we not only have to fight to keep what we've gained, but also to move forward with bolder and expansive ways of not only dealing with

the problem itself, you know, with gender-based violence, but also with naming it, storytelling it. How do you tell the story of the victim? Why do you say death and you don't say homicide? Because I'm raising a daughter and sometimes, I'm terrified that she's going to go in the world, she's going to go out in a world that doesn't think of her as a full human. So that's, it's a terrifying thought.

Menendez: I have two daughters. That fear is very real and different somehow when you have the fear for someone else, than when you have the fear for yourself. We'll talk about institutions because there are a lot of institutions that need to be held accountable in all of this. But I do want to ask you culturally, what you think underpins violence against women?

Méndez: I'm very mindful of, I had a lot of reflections about the notions of machismo and how there is culturally a tendency that is different in Latino culture than it is in other cultures. I think gender inequality is all over the world. And I think femicides are all over the world happening. We, of course, are observing that there are regions and countries where women are at higher risk of fatality or of suffering greater abuse. But I don't think it's a phenomenon that is only pertaining to one culture. Now, Puerto Rico has this unique mix of influences, like Puerto Rico culturally feels and behaves very much like a Latin-American country, but it has a great deal of influence that comes from the States, the good and the bad influences.

So, I would say that at this moment I think that the worst or heavier underpin has to do with denial. There is a very strong agenda of public opinion influence to deny the fact that there are gender differences and that gender inequality even exists. I think it's very dangerous, not only because it will hinder public policy efforts, but also because of what it does to victims, because then everything that is happening to you, you are imagining it. If everybody is repeating constantly that, you know, women have acquired so many rights, women can study, can vote, can be a public elected officials, women can be homeowners and can you know — in Puerto Rico I'm saying — can inherit, and can be CEOs ... and so that means that gender inequality is resolved and is no longer an issue. So, if you deny inequality, then everything else, it's like a cascade effect. So, everything else related to gender inequality, gender-based violence, or even conversations about gender identity; they just lose priority status. They are no longer priorities. This is a non-issue right now, we should focus on different issues that are actual priorities.

The victim starts to think they are imagining what they are going through. So for organizations like mine, reaching out, being available to victims becomes a task in itself. Like, doing outreach requires community bridges so that you can reach people that think that they are going through is something that can be resolved in therapy, for example, like there's something wrong with you so you have to seek help, individually, and it's not something pertaining to other realms of social dynamics.

Menendez: Do you have a sense of who or what is driving that denial?

Méndez: Talking from experience in Puerto Rico, there are several fundamentalist groups. They drive a very aggressive agenda. They are very organized and have a lot of resources. They even organized a party and were able to elect two legislators in their first ever run. They have radio stations and newspapers and TV outlets and YouTube channels. So, they spread a hate narrative around genders specifically, they're talking about the dictatorship of gender. It's super, you know, polarizing and hate driven to anything that is slightly out of

the mainstream ideas of very traditional roles. So, a lot of people fall into those glitches. If you start saying, you know, this is what is safe, anything that won't fit in this box, it's a danger to your children. People start going into this spirals of hate. We've had a rise in trans femicides as well.

And in a particular case, the fatality was a result of an incident, a public incident regarding the use of a bathroom where people, like normal people, in a fast food line felt compelled to correct something that in their minds was not only harmful to I don't know what, but dangerous in some way that they thought. And so the bully started in the fast food and then went on to the social media and then ended up with some people following this person. And, you know, it's like a terror movie.

So, people think that it's harmless, but this hate narrative is not because once it settles, anything that is perceived as harmful can be understood as a validation of your violent behavior. So, you are somehow legitimized to be violent, right? The state has a role here in preventing this hate narrative to spread. They are dangerous to the safety of people.

Menendez: Tell me what you think that the role of the state is.

Méndez: So I think the state has a role in setting up a robust, coordinated response for people that are vulnerable to violence. As a state, to provide social protection systems that are public and that are known. So, if you are in danger, you know where to call, where to go, because this communicates that you're not on your own.

Menendez: What would it look like for these systems to work?

Méndez: Well, specifically if we're talking about victim protection — what we should be doing is looking at what is not working. If women are seeking protection and are still getting killed, there are things that are not working. Systemically, there's a pattern. I'm talking about victim services that are provided by the state, right? So what it would look like is we are correcting this, you know, we are making a priority to correct these glitches that are a part of the coordinated response that is not coordinated at all. It's not that we are, you know, setting this up from zero. We have infrastructure and we have laws and we have 40 years of trial and errors. So in my opinion, what I'm trying to say is that it's not acceptable that we overlook systemic errors.

Menendez: Can you paint a picture for me, perhaps using either a real example or an imagined example of where the system breaks down?

Méndez: OK so protection services have different entry doors. So this is the first thing for me that should be corrected. So entry doors are not robots, are people, are nurses in triage in public hospitals and emergency rooms, are police officers in local precincts in each town. Those are the entry doors. You have people operating hotlines that can be operated by the state or by organizations. That's another entry door. You don't walk yourself into a shelter. You need an entry door. So everyone in an entry door needs to be trained. You cannot enforce best practices if you are not trained. Training is constant. You need to train those people. You need to know that you are going to have a lot of turnover because that work is exhausting, so people leave. So you need to constantly train those people.

The other correction that could be done immediately is waiting periods are critical, need to be reduced, because each hour and each day is higher risk for a victim. So how do you

reduce that? In my opinion, in Puerto Rico, it requires more participation of municipalities and the resources.

Waiting periods are a disaster. That's where victims retract, that's where victimizers get braver somehow. The combination of a victim, like, when you retract, you do so because you feel you're on your own. So that has other consequences because when you go forward to seek help, you are using all the courage that you have at hand to show up. So, if you reunite courage and show up, and you are rescheduled, you are postponed, you were told that was not the first step you should have taken. Then you retract. So, you are weaker and the effect it has on victimizers is the opposite. So, abusers get fueled by this. So, waiting periods are critical. They should not be taken lightly. They have an effect. And we've seen them in the past homicides. We've seen that it was in waiting periods where women were assassinated. So it's not my opinion is what I'm trying to say.

Menendez: Why is this in focus in Puerto Rico and not New Jersey? Why is this in focus in Puerto Rico and not Florida?

Méndez: I think it's pretty unique what's happening in Puerto Rico in the past six years or so. I would think that Puerto Rico could be used as a case study for other jurisdictions and countries because of the combination of factors that operated here. So you have in 2016, a fiscal oversight management board appointed by Obama to restructure the debt who actually the real agenda is to force Puerto Ricans to pay the debt. And you have that set up and put in place. And a year after, you have two category five hurricanes in a two-week period, make landfall in this same place where poverty and austerity and a lack of services were already a reality a year before the hurricane. So you had a massive migration, a total collapse of system protections, of social protection systems in the island, a total collapse is not an exaggeration, like absolute collapse of hospitals, courtrooms, police stations, electrical grid, water supply and communication grid.

In 2018, in November, before the Harvard study was published and before the chat was leaked, we had a demonstration asking for the governor to sign an emergency state due to gender-based violence because at the time, we had already doubled gender-based violence killings from the previous year. So we knew this was gonna happen. Because we had studied previous disasters in other jurisdictions so we know that when protection systems collapse, violence rises. So all organizations were trying to prevent this, but we were on our own. There was not a single government effort to provide a coordinated response to, where to go, where protection orders were going to be automatically extended. Could you leave the country with your kids? There were no instructions for anyone. I believe the numbers are 37 killings in 2017 and 64 in 2018. So, this happens in November, the Governor Ricardo Rosselló refuses to sign any declaration of emergency or to even acknowledge there was an emergency. And then comes the Harvard study, then comes the leakage, and then comes the ousting of the governor. So, I think these are circumstances to observe, right?

So what we have right now, which is the declaration of emergency that was signed in January, took two years and three governors to be able to have someone to acknowledge that to a point that he would sign a set of instructions to all the cabinets, with a timeline, to do something about it. I'm not saying it's perfect or even that it, you know, solves anything immediately, but at least it does communicate a sense of urgency and priority. And I think that is important not only to activism and to grow, you know, people's awareness about the

problem, but it's crucial for survivors living in violent situations to know that they are a priority.

If you are trying to solve anything, any problem that has some, you know, observable tendency that has been rising or growing, you really need to look for, you know, the previous five years and what is leading up to this rise. Because things are not happening in a void, they do have context.

We don't need others to explain to us what's happened. We know what happened because we were here. And so we have a right to our story. I think, you know, that would be also the most fundamental and basic rights of survivors. You are entitled to your story. No one has to tell you what you went through. You survived it.

So, you know, that's a fight, incredible as it might sound, that's a fight that we're willing to give to survivors in Puerto Rico.

Menendez: It also explains to me why every time I read an article about this, "six years" is used as the period of time in which we are measuring femicides and such.

Méndez: Yes.

Menendez: Tania, thank you so much.

Méndez: Thank you. Thank you for the opportunity.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Sarah McClure and Paulina Velasco are our senior producers. Our lead producer is Cedric Wilson. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer. Stephen Colón mixed this episode. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor and ad ops lead. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, slide into our DMs on Instagram, or tweet at us @LatinaToLatina. Remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Goodpods, wherever you're listening right now. Remember every time you share the podcast or leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

CITATION:

Menendez, Alicia, host. "What Activist Tania Rosario Méndez is Doing to Combat Femicide in Puerto Rico." *Latina to Latina*, Lantigua Williams & Co., July 26, 2021. LatinaToLatina.com

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