



What Paula Ávila-Guillén Believes Reproductive Rights Advocates in the U.S. Can Learn from Movements to Expand Rights in Latin America

The Executive Director of The Women's Equality Center shares her insights on the efforts to end El Salvador's total abortion ban, and Honduras' total emergency contraception, as well as the movement to expand women's rights in Argentina, Colombia and Mexico. Paula shares how she came to see reproductive rights as central to civil rights, and how her own fertility journey shaped her advocacy.

Alicia Menendez : For years, Paula Avila-Guillén has been at the forefront of the fight for reproductive rights across Latin America at the Center for Reproductive Rights, and now as the executive director of the Women's Equality Center, among her efforts ending the total abortion bans in El Salvador, along with the total emergency contraception ban in Honduras and the support of the movement to legalize abortion and expand women's rights in Argentina, Colombia, and Mexico. She's an attorney by training, so Paula and I talk about how she came to see reproductive rights as central to civil rights, how her own fertility journey shaped her advocacy and what we in the United States can humbly learn from our sisters in Latin America. Paula, thank you so much for being here.

Paula Ávila-Guilén: Thank you so much for inviting me. I am really excited.

Menendez: Growing up in Colombia, how old are you when your first classmates become pregnant?

Ávila-Guillén: Well, I grew up in a small town called Yopal in the state of Casanare. I was known in Colombia, but this a small town going in a public school, which is something that in Latin America, if you have some resources, you don't do it because the public system is so bad. But in this town that was all we had. And it was a school that was administered by the church in these type of Catholic schools, but it's still public school. So I was in seventh grade when the first classmate got pregnant. The first reaction from the school at that time was to try to kick her out of the school. I was probably 13, so she was around that age and I was actually the representative of the students of the class. And I had this big fight with the school to let her stay studying.

But then when I go to eighth grade, so one year later, it was three classmates who were pregnant. At this time, the reaction from the school was to put as a video of the 60s or 70s of how abortions are done, which is horrifying and not true. And that was it. That was it. During that time actually Colombia's Constitutional Court state that you cannot kick out people for being pregnant. So that was their only

reaction and it just really shocked me to the court how normalized it was for society, for everybody. I mean, we did baby showers at 14 for our classmates and in Colombia a statutory rape is at 14, some of them were even 13, were in the crossover. Nobody even mentioned the possibility that they were raped.

Menendez: At what point does it become clear to you that this is the work, reproductive rights that you want to dedicate your life to because you get your law degree in Colombia, you come to the United States to get your LLM.

Ávila-Guillén: Yeah.

Menendez: Is that always with a vision towards this?

Ávila-Guillén: Initially it was a more general vision on human rights with that lens and gender, but the town I grew up was also a town very affected by the Colombian conflict. I learned to distinguish between guerrillas and paramilitaries and army when I was like 10 years old. And I remember seeing every time that you get stopped by any army group, all the girls like little girls with their guns and soldiers. So I always thought there was going to be gender in the concept of war, right, of human rights and war. Later on when I started studying, I realized that the core of it, if I wanted to stop women from being forced to join military groups, as we learned that that's how they did it, I needed to focus on women feeling autonomous of their own body because that's at the core of it. At the core of inequality, at the core of everything is somebody else believing that they can own us.

And if we don't feel that we can own our own body, then we will not feel the power to fight back. And I think that that goes back to this idea of we grow up in a society where the government sends a message that women don't have the capacity to be fully autonomous, that we don't have the capacity to make our own decisions for our own body. So the government needs to make them for us. And if it's not the government, then it's our husband. Right. This idea of always somebody else involved in those decisions. And I think that's a very dangerous message.

Menendez: I love this part of your bio. It boasts of, "Keen political judgment and ability to identify opportunities." Tell me about a time Paula when that judgment or that ability to spot an opportunity has led you to an effective social impact strategy.

Ávila-Guillén: Honestly, I don't know how to describe it, but you just feel it in your tummy, this hunch, right, that this is the way to go. And none of this work and none of this success has been my own. And I want to be clear, like you don't create social change by being one person. All of this is collective and is grouped with the partners and people on the ground and a lot of movement building, but to be able to advise and provide a strategy for the Argentina change of the law in 2020.

Menendez: Walk me through it though. For people who are not following reproductive rights in Latin America as closely as you and I are, remind us of where Argentina was, where Argentina is now, and the point at which you enter to offer that council.

Ávila-Guillén:

So before December 2020, Latin America only had two countries, Cuba and Uruguay, they had abortion based by choice. Every other country had exception systems. Now I think that we are familiar in the United States with exception systems unfortunately. And during 10 years in Argentina, a group called La Campaña Nacional por el Aborto Legal Seguro y Gratuito, the national campaign for legal, free, and guarantee abortion. We're trying to advocate for this idea of abortion as a choice. So every year they present a bill before Congress and the bill doesn't go anywhere. In 2018, the president of our time decided, well, Congress should discuss this law because of some of the work that we have done at WEC in El Salvador, they just contact us and say, "Hey, it seems that you know something about political strategy and communication. We have this chance of doing this. Do you think that you can help us?"

And we started working in Argentina in 2018. We were able at this point have two years or year and a half of implementing a full-fledged communication and political campaign with tons of partners and tons of organizations included from talking to the middle to galvanize massive mobilizations on the base and making sure those were seen by the most international big press that you could have. And in 2020, Argentina legalized abortion. Eight months later, Mexico Supreme Court decides to change their law. Another eight months later, Colombia Supreme Court also legalized abortion up to 24 weeks. Then just last year we were able to decriminalize emergency contraception in Honduras, and then the Supreme Court of Mexico also ratified that the service should be provided at the federal level. So in the course of three years, Latin American reproductive rights have changed, but is this idea of taking a momentum and just pushing it as further as you can and nonstop just keep pushing and pushing and pushing and pushing in a smart strategic way, but not letting the noise distract you. And we completely changed the landscape of Latin American reproductive rights.

Menendez:

I in an earlier part of my career, reported from Guatemala on the pregnancy crisis for young girls in Guatemala. To your point about it not being framed as a question of rape, when you're talking about 12 year olds, 13 year olds, I also reported from El Salvador specifically on immigration and why you have so many young people coming to the United States at the time. But what really struck me in El Salvador was I met a woman about my age, so I was probably 31 or 32, and she lived with her daughter who had recently become a mother herself. So at 31, she was a grandmother, and she and I were having a conversation about the opportunities that her young daughter and now her young grandson would or wouldn't have. It just became so clear to me that you can't talk about migration to this country, you can't talk about asylum claims in this country without talking about pregnancy and bodily autonomy. Yes, there are many economic questions. There are questions of investment. There's also this piece that we rarely connect the dots on.

Ávila-Guillén:

Absolutely, absolutely. And this is the case. So El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Dominican Republic still have a total abortion ban. And what people sometimes don't connect is that when you change abortion laws, when you have total bans, these end up affecting access to contraception. These end up affecting access to sexual education. It creates a whole change of events. And

we just really ignore very frequently how a girl who is pregnant at 12 or 13 or 14 is just probably going to be in a cycle of poverty the rest of her life and her children will be in a cycle of poverty for the rest of her life. El Salvador has done a lot of work. They have done two studies that I think they are really important. One of them is the social cost of early pregnancy and then the economic cost of early pregnancy. It's just so in your face.

The social cost for baby, I am a mother. I can't imagine my 3-year-old being raised by a 15-year-old. Even just the maturity you need to do. I struggle with his tantrums. I can imagine what that would be for being younger and not being able to handle it, and then the economic cost of that and the implications of that in the long term. The reason why El Salvador also [inaudible 00:11:18] is because in my first visit, the partners took us to visit prison and I thought that we were going to visit women who were in prison because they have had abortions because that was the claim. And when I heard the testimonies, I discovered that they were in prison because of miscarriages and stillbirths and sentenced up to 40 years in prison. And that was just completely devastating.

At one point we documented over 60 women in prison under the same circumstances. I had a miscarriage myself before I had my baby. And when I had it, I just couldn't stop thinking about the cases of the women El Salvador. And to think that you're in the pain of losing a wanted pregnancy. On top of that, you need to give explanations to the police about what happened to you. That's what they do in the total abortion ban. That's the problem when you believe that reproductive healthcare should belong to the criminal law.

Menendez: Thank you for sharing that part of your own story because it is devastating to have a pregnancy loss.

Ávila-Guillén: It is.

Menendez: So to compound that grief with the fear of the state coming after you is unimaginable. And yet we have seen that here in the United States, in the wake of the overturn of Roe v. Wade. I have to imagine you feel a little bit like you're living in the upside down, that here you're making progress in Latin America and then here in the United States we're moving in a different direction. What is it that women in the United States can learn from the success of pushing for greater access in Latin America?

Ávila-Guillén: I actually feel a little frustrated when it comes to the reproductive rights, state in the United States because I had been an immigrant for 18 years, but most of my work has been in Latin America. It's because I saw it coming, but nobody can listen. I remember very vividly hear people saying, women will never go to prison for miscarriages and stillbirths in the United States. That will never happen because our criminal system, because our courts, because, and I was like, no, no, no. If you don't do anything, it will happen. When Roe fell, my partners and my friends, activists from Latin America started texting me, "How are you?" And I was like, it was the first time I realized that this actually affected me as a woman

because I am used to working countries where I can still have a safe haven going, fly back home. And I was like, oh, no.

So they asked me how to help and I told them, bring the green bandanas, bring the green pañuelos. It's the symbol of the resistance for reproductive rights in Latin America. These green scarves that are used to represent that you're fighting for abortion rights. And in the first march I was in New York and I just give away boxes of pañuelos with my husband and other friends. So I think that there is lessons for people seeking access and there is lessons for the movement. For people seeking access or for women in general, for people who think this will not affect me because I will never have an abortion, then let me tell you, you are wrong. Because wanted pregnancies could end up in situations in which an abortion is necessary for you to save your life.

That's just what it is. And then for the movement, it's very important to learn from the South. And I think that this is a moment in which the movement should also reflect and say, okay, we have been doing this for many years and we are in a crossroad and maybe we haven't had the same success. Maybe it's moment to start trying what work in other countries. But there is a lot of skepticism.

Menendez:

There's skepticism. There's also the American we know best energy that we come into every room with, those of us who are American-born. I think so often when we talk about Latinas in the United States and their views on abortion, there's a real misconception that we as a group, which of course as a group, we contain multitudes, multiple countries of origin, multiple levels of acculturation, that we are anti-choice, that we are not where we actually are on reproductive rights. And I remember being in both Arizona and Nevada during the midterms, and what I heard, especially from older Latinas who were Spanish dominant, was that they felt that Republicans had become too extreme on abortion. They didn't talk about it necessarily the way that reproductive freedom activists might talk about it, but they talked about it as government overreach. And so I wonder what research and your work tells you about where Latinas in the United States are on this issue and how that should inform thinking going into the 2024 election cycle.

Ávila-Guillén:

So I actually love Arizona. I have been a few times in support of the movement in Arizona and it's one of the strongest, more vibrant movements that I have met. And what you heard there is what the research tell us. Yes, the majority of Latinas will not say that it is necessary by choice, except with Gen Z. Gen Z has a completely different view of the world, which is amazing. But for the other, it's less about choice and it's more about freedom honestly. Part of the reason why many Latinas leave some of our countries is for feeling secure, and safe, and free. We have gone through governments that maybe were not really governments, but had been dictatorships. So this is just resistance with the idea of involving the government in your business. So the fact that you are coming here and now the government is trying to tell you how to live your life, I think is something that Latinas reject.

The other part that we see is that many of Latinas don't want their daughters to repeat some of their own stories of the stories that you hear back home of getting

pregnant at 13, at 14, at 15. And they want them to have access to contraception and even have access to abortion if necessary, because part of the reason why they came here is they could go to school, they could go to college, they could have a better life. Right. So I do think that Latinos in general, this is an issue that really moves them. You will be surprised, but in Florida, Florida's Latinos might be more conservative, but they got enough signatures to have abortion on the ballot. Right. So I think that it's just something that we are going to keep seeing across.

Menendez: What did I miss? What do you want to make sure that we get to?

Ávila-Guillén: Part of the strategy from the other side is to attack us, to worn us down, to tired us, to make us feel completely overwhelmed to the point that we think that there is no possibility to create change. The moment that we start believing that, that is the moment that we really lose. And I learned this from some of the activists who have been living in some of the most difficult circumstances under dictatorships, under total bans for years, where there is no possibility of change, but they just keep fighting. Hope is the only thing that's going to keep us going and that's going to keep us alive. And that I think is the most important message as we are facing this new reality in the United States. We cannot lose hope.

Menendez: You are amazing. Thank you so much for taking the time to do this.

Ávila-Guillén: Thank you so much for the interview. This was fascinating. Thank you.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Virginia Lora is our producer. Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer. Trent Lightburn mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. Email us at holala@tinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram or on Threads and TikTok @latinatolatina. Checkout our merchandise at latinatolatina.com/shop, and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Goodpods, wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share this podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

CITATION:

Menendez, Alicia, host. "What Paula Ávila-Guillén Believes Reproductive Rights Advocates in the U.S. Can Learn from Movements to Expand Rights in Latin America" *Latina to Latina*, LWC Studios, March 4, 2024. LatinaToLatina.com.

Produced by

