

BOLD, BRAVE, AND PROACTIVE: ADVOCACY AND ORGANIZING AT THE INTERSECTION OF REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE AND LGBTQ LIBERATION*

JESSICA GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS**

The National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health (NLIRH) is the only national reproductive justice organization dedicated to building Latina power to advance health, dignity, and justice for 25 million Latinas, our families, and communities in the United States. We do this through leadership development, community mobilization, policy advocacy, and strategic communications.

We work on a range of issues that affect the ability of Latinas to live with *salud, dignidad, y justicia*—health, dignity, and justice—including abortion access and affordability, sexual and reproductive health equity, and immigrant women’s health and rights. We are also deeply committed to centering the needs of those most affected by reproductive oppression: low-income people, LGBTQ people, pregnant and parenting youth, and undocumented people.

Since our inception, we have defined reproductive justice to include social justice and human rights for LGBTQ people. The LGBTQ liberation and reproductive justice movements share the values of bodily autonomy, sexual liberation, and the ability for persons to decide whether, when, and how to build families and relationships of their choosing. At the core of each movement is the belief that our most personal decisions should be free from political interference.

Right now, we’re in the middle of an incredibly challenging time for social justice advocacy. It’s true—and exciting—that we have seen tremendous gains in legal protections for LGBTQ people and we certainly advanced in terms of a national conversation about the need for immigration reform. At the same time, it’s no secret that reproductive rights have seen tremendous setbacks, particularly at the state level.

But the rollback in legal protections for abortion is not a new threat or the *only* threat. While the Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade* enshrined the right to safe, legal abortion in concept, it did nothing to ensure that those services would be available or affordable.¹

* These remarks were presented at the Center for Gender & Sexuality Law’s Symposium on Marriage Equality

Nor did *Roe* prevent the steady march of more restrictive abortion laws that seek to close clinics, punish providers, shame and burden women, and ultimately reduce abortion rights to a legal fiction.

One of the clearest examples of this is the Hyde amendment, signed into law each year by Congress since 1976—my entire lifetime.² The Hyde Amendment and other bans on insurance coverage for abortion force women to make impossibly difficult choices in order to keep themselves and their families healthy. We hear these women's stories, women who have to choose between paying for rent, groceries, childcare, or paying for a needed abortion.

In some respects, our biggest challenges today are those that have been with us for decades: the need to make civil, human, and reproductive rights a lived reality for our communities.

and Reproductive Rights: Lessons Learned and the Road Ahead, held at Columbia Law School on February 28, 2014.

**** Jessica González-Rojas is the Executive Director at the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, the only national reproductive justice organization that specifically works to advance reproductive health and rights for Latinas. Jessica is successfully forging connections between reproductive health, gender, immigration, LGBTQ liberation, labor, and Latino civil rights, breaking down barriers between movements, and building a strong Latina grassroots presence. She was honored by *El Diario/La Prensa* as one of 2009's "Mujeres Destacadas" (Women of Honor) and is a regular contributor to *El Diario/La Prensa* and Huffington Post Latino Voices on pressing reproductive health issues in the Latina community, as well as a regular media voice in local and national outlets such as National Public Radio, the *Brian Lehrer Show* (WNYC-FM), the *Boston Globe*, and *The New York Times*. She was elected to the New York State Democratic Committee for the 39th Assembly District from 2002–2006. For 11 years, she served on the Board of Directors of New Immigrant Community Empowerment (NICE), and has served as a board member for Medical Students for Choice and the Latina Political Action Committee (LPAC). She is a featured expert for the National Council for Research on Women (NCRW), and an Advisory Member for several organizations and coalitions, including the Women of Color Policy Network (WOCPN), Law Students for Reproductive Justice (LSRJ), Raising Women's Voices, and the We Belong Together Campaign. Jessica is an Adjunct Professor of Latino and Latin American Studies at the City University of New York's City College and has taught courses on reproductive rights, gender, and sexuality. Jessica holds a M.P.Adm. from New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, a Bachelor's degree, *cum laude*, in International Relations from Boston University, and completed a certificate program from the Institute for Not-for-Profit Management at Columbia University's Graduate School of Business.**

1 *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973).

2 *See Access Denied: Origins of the Hyde Amendment and Other Restrictions on Public Funding for Abortion*, ACLU, available at <https://www.aclu.org/reproductive-freedom/access-denied-origins-hyde-amendment-and-other-restrictions-public-funding-abor> [http://perma.cc/6Y3U-WHUU] (last visited June 8, 2014).

And while some policymakers and advocates are recognizing the need to work across issues and to act in solidarity, that doesn't always translate to seeing the connections between issues. It is clear to me that the need for an intersectional analysis—the very heart of reproductive justice—is greater than ever.

Even with the gains we've made, and a majority of the public on our side, we are living in an incredibly hostile time. The right, supported by an entrenched, moneyed, and increasingly emboldened minority, has succeeded in shifting the range of politically viable policy farther and farther to the right, so much so that we're debating birth control.

It's increasingly clear that we cannot and will not win *unless* we are bold, brave, and proactive.

We at NLIRH have clarified our mission in the last year, committing ourselves in a big way to a multi-prong strategy—

- Proactive policy advocacy that puts our values in front;
- Culture shift campaigns that build the world where these policies are possible; and
- Good old-fashioned door-to-door, face-to-face organizing.

And from a messaging standpoint—we are not going to win anything by *not* talking about abortion.

That's why we're a proud co-founder and co-convenor, along with the National Network of Abortion Funds, of the "All Above All" Campaign—a public campaign and diverse coalition dedicated to lifting bans that deny abortion coverage.³

This campaign, which includes multiple strategies encompassing communications, field organizing, movement building, and policy change, is very close to my heart and in keeping with our reproductive justice values.

"All Above All" speaks from an authentic voice of youth, people of color, and low-income people, and seeks to galvanize those same constituencies for change. We know that millennials and women of color haven't really been reached by traditional, narrow "choice" messages—they connect reproductive rights with economic justice, gender justice, racial justice, and human rights. That framing really resonates with the rising American electorate,

3 ALL ABOVE ALL, <http://www.allaboveall.org/> [<http://perma.cc/KHX3-CNRBza>] (last visited June 8, 2014).

including the one in ten voters today who is Latino.

The tagline for the “All Above All” campaign is brave, bold, and equal, and that philosophy runs deep.

We know that this isn’t just about flashy new media, or winning a campaign; this is about building and strengthening a movement.

In terms of strategy, we need to be bold, but also nimble and collaborative. When we do work in states, for example, we don’t charge in with an agenda, we come to the table with respect and resources for the organizations, often led by women of color, who are working on the ground every day. We work in partnership; we act in solidarity.

I want to close by talking about winning and losing. We’ve learned a lot about losing in the last few years—whether it’s the heartbreaking deportation of 2 million people by the Obama administration or the attacks on a woman’s ability to make her own decisions about abortion.

This was always a long-term fight, particularly for those of us who center the people and communities most affected by oppression.

And the tide is turning. Latinas and allies across the country are standing up, and joining together to bend the long arc of history toward justice, human rights, and true self-determination, for ourselves, our communities, and this nation.

And when we focus on how we do the work, when we build new leaders, forge new relationships, organize and empower communities—well then, even if we do lose, we’ve already won.