

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

50 YEARS AFTER ROE, IS REPORTING ON ABORTION STILL TOO WHITE?

LAURA FLANDERS: What does the coverage of the Supreme Court's overthrow of Roe versus Wade reveal about our media? Are journalists asking the right questions, and what difference are BIPOC, Black, Indigenous, and people of color media making to the way that people with real life experience are able to influence policy. This week, Mitra Kalita and Sara Lomax-Reese of URL Media are back for our monthly "Meet the BIPOC Press" round table. This time they are joined by two women with experience as activists and in politics. They are Assemblywoman Jessica González-Rojas, who represents District 34 in Queens, New York. And she's the sponsor of a bill that would fund abortions for out of state women. And La'Tasha D. Mayes, Democratic nominee for the Pennsylvania House from District 24 in the heart of Pittsburgh. Both our guests come to politics from a long history in organizing on this issue, Mayes with the group New Voices for Reproductive Justice, and González-Rojas in the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Justice. It's an important conversation. Mitra, Sara, over to you. I can't wait to join you at the end of it for a debrief.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Thanks a lot, Laura. It's great to be here for this edition of "Meet the BIPOC Press." Let me just open up with a real basic question. With the overturning of Roe V Wade, how have Black and Brown communities been disproportionately impacted, and how do you see the coverage that the media is doing around this issue as it relates to BIPOC communities, are they covering it in effective and meaningful ways? And I'll throw that first to you, La'Tasha.

LA'TASHA D. MAYES: Thank you so much for having me on the show today. As a reproductive justice leader and organizer for over two decades, I think that we are in such a watershed moment. We are in a new era that the main mainstream media, as well as mainstream reproductive health and rights organizations are calling a post-Roe world, but for Black women, and folks of color, and poor abortion seekers, we've been living in a post-Roe world before June 24th. And so what I do see is far greater representation of Black women, leaders in the reproductive justice movement, women and folks of color. There are more stories, more coverage, there's more depth to how our stories are being told, and we are also telling our own stories like today.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Assemblymember, González-Rojas, what's your take on the coverage and the impact on BIPOC women and communities?

JESSICA GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: We know what it meant to have Roe as a right, but no access to that right because of immigration status, because of racial identity, because of where you live

in the country, because of how much money you have in your pocket, because you're transgender or gender nonconforming, we know Roe has not actually been a right for so many people, but to actually strip off that right nationally, is terrifying. So as now a state legislator, I represent a predominantly diverse and immigrant centric district of Jackson Heights, East Elmhurst, Corona, and Woodside, the home of Mitra as well, we know the impacts of our community, we know that this is going to be far more difficult for people of color to access the reproductive healthcare that we need. And that's why I introduced the Reproductive Freedom and Equity Fund Act in the Assembly, it's called A10148, is the number. And it would provide the resources to ensure that New York is actually a safe haven, is an actual safe haven, not by just providing resources to providers and clinics, to allow for more capacity, security, recruitment, all the things that they need to provide care, but actual funding and resources to communities directly that need access to that care. So it would provide grants to organizations like abortion funds that gets the money right in the hands of the people that need the care most. And it's often the women of color, communities of color, queer and trans communities that are going to be left to die if they do not have access to these important resources.

S. MITRA KALITA: One thread I saw immediately after the Supreme Court's overturning of Roe, was this call from Black and Brown women saying, "Please don't make us the afterthought here." And from a media perspective, please don't make us the sidebar. Meaning, the main story will be about Americans as mainstream media defines Americans, and then it'll be how are Black women in the South going to get abortions as though somehow that's separate from the fundamentals of what has been lost. Is the consciousness there now? Do people get how much has been lost?

LA'TASHA D. MAYES: I don't even know if we have enough time to really dig into this because it is . . . We're talking about decades and generations of Black women leading work for reproductive justice, organizing for reproductive justice, long before 1994 when our movement was created by 12 Black women in Chicago who were saying the same thing, "Don't make Black women an afterthought, don't make women of color an afterthought." And out of that came a strong powerful movement for reproductive justice. What I'll say is that, I think that we are in a moment where people are like, "Oh, shoot, we've lost our rights." And I don't know if it's human nature or not, but we don't react or respond or pay attention until we lose. And so, but who's losing the most? It's Black folks, it's folks of color, it is gender nonconforming, non-binary, and transgender, abortion seekers. And that's, I think, in terms of media and how we talk about abortion access, that is the greatest change I've seen around being more expansive around gender. So I just said to a room of suburban white women the other day, that saying a woman's right to choose supposes that everybody who needs an abortion identifies or is a woman, and that everybody has equal and equitable choices when they're seeking this critical care. The Supreme Court case was about Black women, I don't think that is understood. The only clinic in Mississippi brought their grievance to our Supreme Court, and so Mississippi has such a great

representation of Black people. So then of course this impacts Black women. I don't think the media talked about it in that way, it's just the Dobbs case, but who it really was about, the actual lawsuit, and the actual Supreme Court decision, that was about Black women in the South. And so I think people have greater awareness and consciousness, I think our movement for reproductive justice has brought us to this moment, has brought us to a time where we were like, okay, yeah. The way we were talking about this probably wasn't right, our political and legislative strategy was not inclusive, it was not intersectional, it was not multi-strategy, and reproductive justice as a movement, as a framework, and as a practice has always been that. So what I tell people now is we're rising above the ashes of Roe v. Wade, and the way forward is reproductive justice, and the way forward is Black and Brown and folks of color at not only the center, but at in the leadership of a movement for reproductive justice we were not, it includes reproductive health rights, but it is not, it is a much broader human rights based approach to abortion access, the ability to control our bodies, our sexuality, our gender, our work, our reproduction ability to form our families.

S. MITRA KALITA: Jessica, what's your reaction to that? I should say, I've known you for 25 years, you started out as an immigration rights advocate, pivoted to reproductive justice in health, and now are in the State Assembly. And so the trajectory in many ways is exactly what La'Tasha's talking about there. Do you see the public getting it though?

JESSICA GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: Audre Lorde has said, there's no such thing as a single issue struggle because we do not live single issue lives. And reproductive justice is the epitome of that. It understands that we cannot fully achieve the ability for someone to determine if, when, and how to create a family, and then be able to raise that family without the conditions that allow us to do so. So for example, in my work, we did a lot of work with undocumented communities. In a world where we have the draconian immigration policies that we do, we cannot ever see reproductive justice if we continue to see families being torn apart, so immigration is a reproductive justice issue. As La'Tasha clearly laid out, racial justice is a reproductive justice movement. And that's so important, and why it's critical that people like us are involved in politics and civic engagement, and our advocates to change the root cause of some of these systems, right? We have to look at the ways we can change the policies to really fully address that. But it is the organizer, it is the people on the ground, it is the community's most impacted who we need to listen to. And I just want to recognize that since the dawn of our country, since the founding of our country, we've pathologized and harmed Black women and Black people, and this is just a continuation of that. And we really need to own that. We had the Moynihan Report that created the welfare queen, and this was about Black motherhood. So we're still looking at a system in which, in New York state, three times as many Black women die from childbirth than white women, right? So we have to look at this very holistically, and we have to look at this as a racial justice issue. And abortion is not about life, it is about power and control over our bodies, and that's something we need to name. It is forced pregnancy, it is forced

childbearing, and we have to continue to fight and we have to continue to follow the voices of Black and BIPOC communities.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: I think we also have to follow the money because I think this issue is also an economic justice conversation.

LA'TASHA D. MAYES: So I want to make it clear for the audience that most abortions are provided by freestanding independent clinics. In Pennsylvania, specifically, over 80% of our counties do not have an abortion provider. Pittsburgh, where I hope to represent the 24th legislative district, we have two abortion providers in our county. So we have, in states next to Pennsylvania, Western Pennsylvania, specifically, in Ohio where there's an abortion ban, in West Virginia where there's an abortion ban in Points West, they will now be traveling to Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh will be one of the top five places that abortion seekers flock to during this time, during this time of confusion and chaos and misinformation about the legality of abortion access where they live and where they're traveling to. So when we think about that, most counties don't have an abortion clinic or provider, they're limited providers where they do exist, like in Pittsburgh, Allegheny County, in Pennsylvania. So a person has to not only account for the cost of an abortion procedure, but they also have to take off work. They're going to need at least two days in Pennsylvania because of our draconian laws that strip us of our human right to make decisions for ourselves, so there's that 24-hour waiting period. You probably took off work to go get your abortion, you have to travel there, maybe I can rent a car, you have to certainly pay for gas and tolls, and then you need a place to sleep. So these are, and then you, if you have children already which most people who have abortions, they already have children, they're already parents, they'll probably need childcare for them. So what I've been saying is abortion access is not just about a legal right, it's about whether a person has the financial material resources and conditions to be able to get the abortion care that they need, and we have to look at total costs when we talk about the economic injustice of it all. And that is what Black and Brown communities are dealing with because of the intersection of class and economic oppression.

S. MITRA KALITA: So I just want to pick up on that thread, Jessica, with you, your bill essentially creates a safe haven out of New York. I wondered if you could pick up on Sara's question about finances and then relate it to the legislation that you've introduced.

JESSICA GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: So the Reproductive Freedom and Equity Fund does three things, it provides resources to clinics and providers to do everything from get more staff, to retrofit their space, to get security, because we know there's a lot of security threats. Number two, it provides funding for those who are underinsured, uninsured, or whose insurance aren't accepted in those particular clinics. And three, and most importantly to this conversation, it provides grants to nonprofits that work directly with communities, with abortion seekers, to facilitate access to abortion. And as La'Tasha mentioned, this means everything from providing

childcare, to travel, to an abortion doula if they'd like, to hotel stay, these are the practical needs to actually get people to New York, so that New York can be a safe access state for anyone who needs that. If we are going to say we are a safe haven, we must be a safe haven and we must put our dollars behind that. It is not a panacea because as my work has shown over the last 13 years at the National Latina Institute, that people who are undocumented, people who can't take time off, who work in jobs that don't allow for that freedom and that accessibility, there's so many barriers still to those to be able to get to states like New York, even if someone's there. So I do want to acknowledge that, because there's a lot of people that just can't cross state lines, even if they had the childcare resources, even if they had a plane ticket, even if they had money and a place to stay, there's still those barriers. So there's, we still need federal action and much greater federal action that's been done, but we need federal action to make sure that everyone can access safe abortion care.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: For so many young women, they always had access to safe and legal abortion. And so I wonder with both of you, in electoral politics coming out of community activism, what is your sense of how this issue is going to play out in terms of energizing voter turnout, as particularly for women of color in the midterms?

LA'TASHA D. MAYES: I cannot stress this enough that the attack on reproductive justice has been a galvanizing force and campaigns across the nation. And my race specifically as... And I know Jessica, when she ran originally, we were already talking about abortion access. And we were speaking about it apologetically, which is far different than, at least in Pennsylvania, and where I live in Pittsburgh, the partisan party politics, where they were not bold and unapologetic in speaking about, speaking directly to the issues that are on the minds of voters and residents in our communities in my district and the region. And I think that translates across the state, even to Philadelphia, Sara, like the work I've done as the former president-CEO of Voices Reproductive Justice, I credit that work for 18 years of priming the ground to educate Black women and Black communities about reproductive justice. So that when this moment came, that we knew, that we in the reproductive justice movement knew was coming, that we would be ready. And I told people on the campaign trail that the movement for reproductive justice prepared me to run for office.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: But La'Tasha, let me just say this, because there has been conversation on WURD, which is a Black talk radio station that Black people, the abortion issue is not an issue that resonates or feel, like is going to move people to the polls, and I want you to respond to that because there are, like issues around morality and all of this stuff when we think about talking about abortion in direct terms, and how that plays out in the Black community specifically, and is it actually going to move people to go to the polls?

LA'TASHA D. MAYES: It certainly will move Black women to the polls. And I just want to say that Black Americans in general are supportive of Roe v. Wade, have been, and they're supportive of us trusting Black women to make these decisions for ourselves. And that is quantifiable polling research that our national policy convener In Our Own Voice: National Black Women's Reproductive Justice Agenda, we did research to ask Black people how they felt about how abortion access, and overwhelmingly, they were supported. We're talking about 70%, 80%, making sure it's available in communities, making sure it's taught in our curriculum, health, our comprehensive sex education curriculums, making sure that doctors direct healthcare, not legislators. And so I know from the work that I've done and led, and I know from quantifiably asking Black folks, we are supportive even regardless of our religious or political affiliation, and I think that is not an angle that the media talks about too. And so I think that you definitely have a vocal few who call into the station and talk about, it's not going to move us to the polls, but that's not true because I've done work that has moved Black women voters specifically to the polls, where we outpace and outperform all other groups in the electorate in Pennsylvania and nationally. So as someone who's been on the ground, working at this intersection of policy, and activism, and electoral justice, that I would argue it in that way.

S. MITRA KALITA: One of the goals of our network is exactly to pick up on, what La'Tasha said is highlight these issues in the media, so I wondered if I could ask each of you, and I'll start with Jessica, What's a story that you think we need to be covering both within BIPOC media, as well as mainstream media right now?

JESSICA GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: I think it's telling the real stories and the lived experiences of your everyday person who seeks an abortion. That person is generally already a parent, that person is often struggling economically, that person may have made the decision for an array of reasons and it doesn't matter. And that's what those stories need to be, it is our neighbor, it is our loved one. Renee Bracey Sherman says, "Everyone loves someone who's had an abortion, whether you know it or not." And I think that's what's really important. I worry that the media has sensationalized this issue in a way that has fueled the partisan divide. We know Republicans get abortions, we know Democrats get abortions, it is beyond these other identities. We have to make sure we're telling the stories of the everyday people that need and seek abortion care, and it is the people in our lives that we love and care about. And that's just really critical, because the sensationalization of this issue as a hot button issue, makes it more and more difficult to actually address the health disparities and inequities that we're seeing across this country. Because again, abortion's connected to the full spectrum of reproductive healthcare, whether it starts with sex ed, and ends with menopause, and all these other needs that we aren't talking about. So it's so critical to really paint this as an issue that anyone in our lives might face.

LA'TASHA D. MAYES: Three stories that the media and the BIPOC media should be covering is how Black women voters will save Pennsylvania and so many other states from abortion bans.

With our organizing and our leadership, and our vision for reproductive justice, I think we should be covering, I think you all should be covering abortion, how to provide abortion access on federal lands, including places like Pennsylvania where abortion is still legal. I think we should be covering the stories of Black and Brown folks who are providing abortions in abortion clinics and through abortion funds. And lastly, how we absolutely should be defunding crisis pregnancy centers or fake clinics in places like Pennsylvania, where our government gives over \$7 million to lie to largely Black and Brown and poor folks about abortion access.

JESSICA GONZÁLEZ-ROJAS: Just so you know, in New York state, again, the bastion of support for abortion, we have more crisis pregnancy centers, more fake clinics than abortion clinics.

S. MITRA KALITA: Thank you for being so concrete, not just on those ideas but throughout this conversation, it's been fabulous. Assemblymember, Jessica González-Rojas, La'Tasha D Mayes, thank you so much for being with us.

LAURA FLANDERS: You two, so important that conversation. I mean, media have been critical if you think of how this issue moved from the margins to the mainstream of right-wing politics, and how they used local media and ideological media and pressured politicians. How this history happened, media at the center of it. And your guests just put their finger on it so beautifully, what the BIPOC press can be doing differently and are doing, I think, to result in different outcomes.

S. MITRA KALITA: Sara and I have actually talked quite a bit about the framing of abortion within our communities. And what I really loved about this conversation was how they connected it to so many issues of policy that where abortion is not front and center but has everything to do with it. So for me, it was a real... I leave feeling resolved to frame that better. And then I got to say, within my own communities, I think your viewers know I'm a daughter of Indian immigrants raised in Puerto Rico, both of those communities do not talk in the open way you see on social media where white women are saying, "I had an abortion at 19, it changed the trajectory of my life". They make it very, very concrete. I do not see that conversation happening in my communities, and I think it is the role of our media to facilitate that a little bit.

LAURA FLANDERS: Sara, I mean, I don't know how many times we say this, but how different would history have been if the story had been covered differently from the beginning.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: There is a lot of shame, there's a lot of judgment, and a lot of silence around this issue in the Black community. Similar to what Mitra was saying in the South Asian and immigrant communities, we need to tell our stories, we need to tell Black and Brown women's stories, so we normalize and connect it with the continuum of reproductive health and

wellness and justice. So it's not just this silent back room thing that you do and you hide, but it is a part of our full range of services, of access to full reproductive health and wellness that changes the trajectory of women's lives. So I just think it was a powerful conversation.

LAURA FLANDERS: Yeah, I love the Assemblywoman saying, "It's not about life, it's about control." Sara, Mitra, thank you as ever.

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