

Abortion rights in USA: Frontera Struggles for Reproductive Justice

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Rosie Jiménez died at the age of 27, in 1977, a year after the passage of the Hyde amendment, which removed Medicaid funding for abortions. This meant that people such as Rosie could no longer afford medically safe abortions, and instead, had to find alternatives. Her future as the parent of a 5-year old daughter and as a soon-to-be-qualified teacher was robbed from her. Rosie was from McAllen, TX, one of the main cities in the Rio Grande Valley on the US-Mexico border and is the first known person to die as result of the Hyde Amendment.

Her story and legacy is remembered daily by the grassroots organizers of the RGV, who continue to fight for a future where reproductive justice and body autonomy is guaranteed for everyone.

Reproductive Justice and Body Autonomy in the Rio Grande Valley

The struggle for reproductive justice in communities of color such as the RGV has been deeply interwoven with issues of racial justice, LGBTQ+ rights and the fight for body autonomy and body self-determination. In many communities, exclusion from quality, inclusive and dignified healthcare is deeply connected to issues of reproductive justice. The material fight for healthcare access matters for everyone, but for our community, the fight for healthcare, and for particular types of healthcare, is the fight for survival. The RGV, like many other places in the United States, has always had a thriving grassroots tradition which has developed through struggles for the right to one’s own body and a dignified life.

There are some important but often overlooked aspects to the RGV, and many other communities along the US-Mexico border. Many may be surprised to learn that the United States has 71 internal checkpoints 100 miles north of the US-Mexico border. The geography of the RGV allows these checkpoints to cut off the RGV from the rest of the country entirely. There are only two roads north, and both have permanent checkpoints (Falfurrias and Sarita), and all three Valley airports have CBP agents that check every passenger prior to any TSA checks. Until very recently, the Whole Woman’s Health Clinic in McAllen was the only clinic where pregnant people could receive an abortion in the Valley. Anti-abortion advocates have attempted to shut down the Whole Woman’s Health Clinic in McAllen for the past few years. The fight to keep the clinic up and running is documented in the

2022 documentary, “On the Divide.” However, in July, the clinic was forced to close, along with other Whole Woman’s Health Clinics in Texas.

The next nearest abortion clinic in Texas used to be in San Antonio, but it is currently being relocated to Albuquerque in New Mexico. It used to be around a four-hour drive (if you’re driving from Brownsville, TX to San Antonio) and would force pregnant people to go through the checkpoint along the drive there, which isn’t a viable option for undocumented immigrants. In short, for many pregnant people in the Rio Grande Valley, and many other places along the US-Mexico border, the only available choices to them are to risk being deported or be the victim of a forced pregnancy.

There are many ways in which the fight for reproductive justice is the fight for racial and social justice in communities like the RGV. Wealthy people, with US-citizenship, will simply be able to travel out of state for their abortions. The lives placed at risk will be the ones belonging to pregnant people who lack the means and the freedom to move around the United States when trying to terminate their pregnancies.

And of course, there is a further risk: in the absence of safe abortions, more people may choose to carry out their pregnancies to term, increasing the risk of children ending up in foster care or adoption services. In Texas, children in foster care or adoption services are at significant risk due to the religious nature of those services. It is worth remembering that the United States is the only country that has not ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Not only are children of color over-represented in foster care, but most of the agencies in charge of placing these children in homes are religious, and often place LGBTQ+ children in situations or families that violate their dignity and integrity.

The Power of Resistance

However, it is precisely in this time of outrageous attacks on our most basic rights that communities like the Rio Grande Valley also show the power of resistance and the ways in which we can organize hope. There are two examples that are worth highlighting. The first one was the July 2021 successful defeat of an ordinance in the city of Edinburg, TX. The ordinance attempted to create a sanctuary city for the “unborn” in Edinburg. This was an important victory, and one that was organized almost overnight.

It mattered because local activists considered this to be a test case. Edinburg city officials probably did not expect such protest, because in their view the proposed ordinance would not really have an effect on Edinburg, as there was no abortion clinic in the city. But if successful, it would have paved the way for neighboring McAllen to approve a similar ordinance. Local activists, especially, La Frontera Fund, knew that it was crucial to win this battle. And they certainly won. This was such an important victory, ahead of the changes the following 12 months would bring, including SB8 and the overturning of Roe v. Wade, perhaps the two most devastating events on our basic human rights.

Lizelle Herrera could have been forgotten in a South Texas jail. On April 2022, before Roe v. Wade had been overturned, the 26-year old was arrested and placed into Starr County Detention Center on a \$500,000 bond. The county sheriff’s office stated the reasons for her detention as: “intentionally and knowingly [causing] the death of an individual by self-induced abortion.” Once again, the resourceful and quick reaction of local organizers who immediately went to protest outside the center and mobilized extensively succeeded in freeing Herrera. Local reproductive justice activists used social media to accomplish both victories and gained national attention in doing so.

For us to ensure that abortions are safe, legal, and accessible, we need to make sure that we are

centering Black and Brown people, working-class folks, people with disabilities, young people, immigrants, and queer and transgender people in our work. We will be the most impacted by abortion bans, and we will also be the ones leading the fight for liberation. Struggles for body autonomy and liberation have historically been inextricably linked with struggles for racial and sexual liberation.

Communities like the RGV need to be brought to the forefront of the national reproductive justice agenda. This is down to the ideas, experiences and particular ways in which our community is impacted and able to organize in especially challenging circumstances. The fight for reproductive justice continues in the RGV and grassroots organizers are considering ways in which they can continue their work in an extremely hostile environment.

One way of doing this, besides continuing with the limited work that can be done in the current legal environment, is to establish counter-institutional power in the community. The group South Texans 4 Reproductive Justice, a volunteer-run group, that among other activities used to escort people seeking abortions at the recently closed down Whole Woman's Health Clinic in McAllen, are currently fundraising to buy the clinic building to create a community center that will educate, promote and create a safe space for emergency contraception distribution and delivery, as well as building community power.

While the reversal of Roe has been a major setback for the reproductive justice movement in the Valley, the fight for liberation is far from over. The community's outpouring of support for La Frontera Fund and South Texans for Reproductive Justice's efforts shows otherwise. More than ever, more people are interested in and committed to joining the movement. The RGV has always been resilient when faced with adversity and will continue to be so.

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• Spectre. September 10, 2022:
<https://spectrejournal.com/frontera-struggles-for-reproductive-justice/>