

Post-Production FILE

**EPISODE 27
DISMANTLING RACISM AND ABLEISM - CENTERING THE MARGINS
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>> NOTARIO: Welcome to Policy & Advocacy in Action NRC DV Radio's new podcast channel. I'm Heidi Notario and today I will be exploring the intersections of racism, ableism and violence against women. We will also explore issues related to wellness and self-determination.

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>> NOTARIO: Policy & Advocacy in Action brings new perspectives to the issue of doing our work intersectionally. My guest today is Renee Lopez, a self-advocate and activist that does national and local work. Good morning, Renee.

>> LOPEZ: Good morning, how are you?

>> NOTARIO: I'm doing well, thank you, I'm so glad you're here today.

>> LOPEZ: Thank you.

>> NOTARIO: So we really wanted to spend some time talking about the importance of doing our work intersectionally. So really taking into account the experiences of people and paying attention to all of the intersections of their identities. And in this particular case, we wanted to highlight the experiences of people with disabilities and the intersections of violence and racism.

I'm really looking forward to having this conversation with you. So to start, can you tell us a little bit about yourself? How do you identify?

>> LOPEZ: Well, my name is Renee Lopez, as you mentioned. And I am a woman who was born with a disability. In 1961. And it was a very rare disease called arthrogryposis multiplex congenita, AMC for short.

So I'm also born of Hispanic origin. My grandparents were from Mexico. And so I identify as a Mexican-American woman with a disability.

>> NOTARIO: Okay. Thank you. So in listening to that, you're talking about being a Mexican-

American, having a disability, being a woman, and I'm really interested about how those identities or those intersections show up in your life.

So can you tell us a little bit how ableism and racism show up in your life?

>> LOPEZ: Well, ableism is something that has been part of my life for so long that I didn't even know it had a name. I think what we used to call pity is now referred to as ableism. But it's primarily a way of telling people with a disability how they should live their lives. As if they cannot make the decisions on their own.

I know better than you do. And it's a form of oppression. And one thing I've experienced throughout my life is being a woman, a female, in a Hispanic society or community where women are not as high on the ladder as men are, has put me in a position where I really thought I was lesser than.

And so when I was being told what to do because I was a woman, and then being told by the white society what to do or not do or what I am capable of or not capable of because I'm Mexican was also there. And then there was the ableism where people would tell me what I can and can't do. Because I have a disability.

And those three things all became an extreme oppression to me. And I know that in my teen years, I went through a period where I didn't even want to live anymore because I just didn't know how I was ever going to get past those barriers.

>> NOTARIO: So I think you're talking about three layers to the person that you are. So it's a fact of being a woman.

>> LOPEZ: Yes.

>> NOTARIO: You are using the term Hispanic to identify yourself. So the child from immigrant parents from Mexico.

>> LOPEZ: Yes.

>> NOTARIO: And also have a disability. So there are three pieces. Uh-huh. Go ahead.

>> LOPEZ: Yeah, I was just going to say, because I was thinking about this earlier. That I always struggle with identifying myself because sometimes I feel as if I'm being asked, what labels do you want to put on your forehead?

Because I was struggled with what do I want to refer to myself as when it comes to having a Hispanic origin. So I could say Hispanic. But then you know it's a broad umbrella but then Latina is an even broader umbrella and then Mexican-American is much closer to who I really am because I get to honor my heritage when I say I'm a Mexican-American female. And because I live in Texas I am -- to say Mexican-American is very common. Because we're so close to Mexico. And so many of us do have our heritage from Mexico.

And like I said, my grandparents were from there. I grew up speaking Spanish. I was very brought up in the Mexican culture. Even though my parents wanted us to assimilate because they thought that our lives would be better if we were more white than Mexican.

So I had to speak English most of the time. And my parents, like I said, were very assimilated into the American culture because they thought life would be easier for us if we did that.

And then there was also a shame to being Mexican. Because so many people think that we

are all aliens. We were called wetbacks. And we were considered trespassers. And you know, really we never were. Because the country that I'm living in right now or the state that I'm living in right now was Mexico. We never really went anywhere. We never really crossed the river. You know, we were always here.

But I was too young to understand that. And to be Mexican was to be something to be ashamed of. And of course we were called, you know, spics and greaseballs and wetbacks and all of those derogatory terms.

And so I remember there was a short period of time in my life when I told people I was Italian because that seemed more acceptable. And -- but I didn't go very long with that. Because, one, nobody believed me anyway. And second of all, I felt really bad. Because my parents and my grandparents were very proud people. And there was nothing to be ashamed of. And I had to learn to be proud of my heritage. And not fall into the trap of feeling like, you know, I wasn't a complete person just because my heritage is from Mexico.

So I struggled with that. And being here in Texas I like to refer to myself as a Mexican-American because I now embrace my heritage. I'm very proud to be a Mexican. And even though I was not born in Mexico, I like to embrace that as my heritage. But on a broader spectrum I like to call myself Hispanic. You know, that's just the word we use here.

Latina I always thought of as something that's even a bigger umbrella. It can refer to someone from Cuba or Puerto Rico. And because those cultures are further away from me I usually don't call myself a Latina. But when I want to be a part of the group like something like this, I don't mind being called a Latina, because I want to be a part of the entire umbrella of the social oppression of people with -- who come from a Latin background.

>> NOTARIO: Thanks, Renee, I think you are touching on a lot of interesting points about there's a pressure, as you said, to choose a label. I think ultimately you said a personal journey that a lot of us go through. And the decision between one term or the other I think is incredibly personal.

So I really appreciate you sharing some of the as you call struggles in trying to identify and learning about those pieces of your identity.

I also find very interesting listening to your point about whether Mexicans came from somewhere but the reality of how that all happened. And as you pointed out, you were already here.

So I really appreciate all of that.

>> LOPEZ: Yes.

>> NOTARIO: So you shared with us pieces of that journey. And I'm now interested in hearing about -- you talked about being proud of being Mexican-American. And you're proud of your heritage. And I know that with your life, you've done a lot to dismantle oppression as you are describing here.

Can you tell us a little bit about your passion and activism? And what is it that you feel passionate about, the work that you do every day?

[CHUCKLES].

>> LOPEZ: You know, it took a lot of inner work, as you say. It was a very personal journey.

To break from those chains of oppression. Because -- I don't know if you have heard the term internalized oppression. I'm talking to the audience.

But I realized that I internalized all of those labels of oppression and made them my own. And then as I became an adult and as I started doing my personal spiritual journey, it was actually more of a spiritual journey, I started to realize that I am not those labels at all. Those oppressive labels that were placed on me I don't have to accept. I have a choice. And I decided to do away with them. And all of those labels that made me feel like I was less than human, not worthy, don't belong, different but in a bad way, those things I did not want on me because those things were keeping me oppressed and I realized that as long as I held onto them and made them my own, I was never going to grow as a person. And I was never going to be the valuable person with the valuable experience that I have come to have in my 58 years of life. And when I started just throwing them off, you can picture someone throwing off bales.

I found my strength inside. And realized that I do have a voice. I'm a very strong woman. I've overcome many obstacles. Societal and physical.

And I developed a sense of self and a sense of pride. And I think when you develop that within yourself, you have to share it. You just have to. It's not something you can keep. And I think that's what -- it's sort of a love for my people. A love for society. A love for my fellow man. That got me into the passion of self-advocacy. Because I now work in many different arenas that deal with women and people with disabilities. And I am particularly passionate about ending violence against people with disabilities and ending violence against women.

I'm also passionately involved in ending violence against Hispanic women in particular here in Texas. Because it occurs so much. And it's a silent epidemic. Both in the disability community and in the Hispanic women community.

And I like to give a voice to that. I am very articulate in both English and Spanish. And so I figure I would use that gift of being bilingual to bring across issues to the Legislature or wherever my voice is needed in order to bring those issues to light.

>> NOTARIO: Yes. And I know you're very involved in policy advocacy.

>> LOPEZ: Yes.

>> NOTARIO: Can you share a little bit -- you talked about ending violence against -- against people with disabilities. And you talked about the -- you called it a silent epidemic and the fact that a lot of the work that is being done and has been done for many years to end violence for disability rights work, we have seen a lot of victories over time. A lot of good things have come out of the disability rights movement, the violence against women movement, but what we see today is that some of that work is not intersectional. So we see a lack of visibility and analysis around what -- the topics that you are talking about. The intersections of violence in the lives of people with disabilities. Who may also be people of color. So can you share when you talk about your commitment to ending violence what some of the things are that you advocate for in the Legislature? Things that are bigger that have to do with economic justice, things that keep people with disabilities oppressed at a societal level but then are also connected to violence against people with disabilities.

What are some of those things? Can you give me some examples of what you are

advocating today for in the Legislature?

>> LOPEZ: You know when I first got started in this work and being -- I started being an advisor to the SAFE which is Stop Abuse For Everyone here in Austin.

I became part of the Advisory Committee for Disability Services.

And I did that because I was well aware of the fact that many people with disabilities were part of the silent epidemic. There was no voice to people with disabilities on getting help.

And a lot of it is because of the lack of awareness from the organizations that are doing great work. But I think they forget about people with disabilities. Not intentionally. It's just that I think there's a belief in society that that doesn't happen to people with disabilities. I think people don't realize what a vulnerable population this is, especially if there's an intellectual disability. In particular if a person is not able to speak. In particular if a person is so physically disabled that they cannot fight off a perpetrator.

And that sometimes even when you bring it to the consciousness of organizations, there are still people who say, oh, you've got to be kidding. That could never happen. Who would do that to somebody who is disabled?

What they don't realize is that perpetrators look for vulnerability. And that's one of the things that is so -- what do I want to say? So easy. It becomes easy prey to perpetrators. Because just like we hear in the Catholic Church how the priests abuse young boys, well, they put themselves in a position where they can do that without anybody realizing that that's what's being done.

It's very hidden. It's very quiet. And many times the people who are being abused and they can't speak, they end up showing that something is wrong by behavior problems. And instead of trying to understand why that person is behaving that way, they tend to think that that person is just behaving badly and the person gets punished.

As I said, I was aware of all of that and wanted to bring that to light. And in particular there's -- you know, we've gotten rid of a lot of the physical barriers, architectural barriers. That's what we had really done. And that's what the Americans With Disabilities Act has taught about in our society. I don't worry so much about ramps and accessible bathrooms anymore. But I think that there's violence in many ways.

One of them is to bring about the fact that there's a lot of institutional violence. And that brings -- for example, the violence occurs in state schools and in state hospitals and in group homes. And in places where there's, quote, nobody watching. And then you take that further into society and we have greater what I consider to be institutional violence by the way that society sets up governmental things for people with disabilities. For example, if you require Medicaid, you are so limited in the amount of money you can make that you almost have to depend on other social services in order to survive. You need to in an apartment that's Section 8. Or HUD housing. And you have Medicaid which means you're limited to the kind of healthcare you get. And the amount of money you get you can't spend so you're not perceived as a person who is a consumer in society. And before you know it, we're considered the takers of society.

And that puts us, again, in a negative light. And there's further institutional violence in what

I consider to be oppression. By these things that are set up. Like Medicaid and not being able to go to work because if you go to work, then you lose your Medicaid. But how many people are going to make enough money to live independently unless they get a college degree? Where you're able to pay for a home and attending care and transportation. You know you would have to make a lot of money. Most people with disabilities can't do that.

There's also employment. Many employers don't want to hire people with disabilities because they are not going to be fast enough or they are perceived as they are not going to be good workers or they are not going to be -- they are going to miss a lot of days of work because they have a disability. And that's actually not true at all. People with disabilities make some of the best employees around because we're so committed. And we're so grateful to have a job. And the cross-sectionality, also, deals with, particularly here in Austin, when it comes to the Mexican-Americans, if you are Mexican-American and you have a disability and you are being abused, you not only have to overcome the oppression of being a female but the fact that -- I -- well, okay, let me backtrack.

I'm going to give my experience as a person growing up in that my parents were very intimidated by the medical society. I had to see a lot of doctors. And my parents were really intimidated and terrified of doctors. And were afraid to speak up. Because their Islam is God. And they were all white men. And that was even more intimidating. And it got to where I was -- I was very scared of white men. They held a lot of power. And I saw my parents feeling -- sort of cow tailing to them.

So I felt the same way. And I think that's one of the things is that when you're taught to be oppressed, when you're taught that you are not of equal value, then when you receive services, that are even for your own benefit that you don't really trust it or you don't really feel that you deserve it. Because those doctors, those white men doctors, have a lot of power.

And so I think you know that came from being Hispanic more than from having a disability. But it put us into that situation of having to deal with the medical community probably more than most people.

>> NOTARIO: Thanks, Renee. I think in there you are talking about a lifetime of interactions with systems, with so-called professionals, with others that directly or indirectly contribute to your experiences around oppression. Whether you needed an assistance medically but also I think you're making a distinction there around the amount of power that some of these people held in your life and in your family decisions, right?

>> LOPEZ: Right.

>> NOTARIO: So I wanted to share with the listeners today that we are part of a group, a national coalition, called Uniting to End Violence Against People with Disabilities. Which is a collaboration between the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence and the Vera Institute of Justice. And you are a member of that coalition alongside with other self-advocates and disability rights advocates and anti-violence advocates.

>> LOPEZ: Yes.

>> NOTARIO: In that context, we are doing some of the work that you are mentioning here around also doing the internal work of dismantling internalized oppression or internalized

superiority. And I think that has been difficult work. Hard work. That we all have been doing alongside our goals of policy advocacy and education.

So I am very glad to have you there as an active member, who is really educating the entire group on some of these policy advocacy strategies and priorities.

So I wanted to mention that here.

And speaking of policy advocacy and strategies, one of the things that comes up a lot for people with disabilities is the topic of affordable and safe housing. And that is also part of the issue.

>> LOPEZ: Right.

>> NOTARIO: So according to the National Council on Disability, affordable, accessible and appropriate housing is an integral part of making any community more livable for people with disabilities. Yet the gap between demand for adequate housing and availability continues to grow. Many of those with disabilities remain on housing wait lists for years, with countless others having the lack of options available to them.

Affordable and safe housing, as well as accessible, does that exist, in your opinion?

>> LOPEZ: No.

[CHUCKLES].

>> LOPEZ: But let me give you a little background. When I was in college, and I was an adult, deemed -- I was over 18. I had to live in Section 8 housing because I didn't make any money. I was a student. And when I finally got a full-time paying job that paid me well, I then had to go in search of an apartment that I could live in comfortably that was accessible.

And I had to search and search until I finally -- I did find one. Excuse me. But I had to pay more money because I had to pay for an apartment that was a one and a half bedroom because everything was bigger, including the bathroom, rather than being able to live in an apartment that was more affordable and smaller but I wouldn't be able to get around in because it wasn't accessible. So sometimes you have to go bigger just to be able to fit, especially if you're in a wheelchair.

And at some point after I had worked for a while, I decided to buy a house. And I was dating -- well, I was going to live with someone who was also in a wheelchair. And we must have seen about 60 houses before we settled on one that would be comfortably accessible, even though we still had to make some adjustments. And so that's my -- my history is that I've always had trouble finding a home that's accessible and affordable.

Now, what I want to bring up is that currently in Austin, Texas, there are buildings, apartments and condos going up like wildfire around here. However -- and they are accessible. They are -- they do have a few accessible apartments. However, they are not affordable. Because we're talking about \$3,000 a month. And many people with disabilities, especially if you're on Medicaid or you know disability benefits, that's your whole check, if you even get that much. So they are not affordable. So they may be affordable to people with disabilities who are professionals. But how many of us are? When you're not even able to get to that point anyway.

And one of the things that I fought for with my colleagues, with my disabled colleagues here in Austin, was trying to get these apartment complexes to accept vouchers, housing

vouchers. So that people with disabilities would be able to live in these beautiful apartments that are going up that are accessible if they would just accept the Section 8. And they absolutely would not.

The entire renters association -- I may not be saying that -- Realtors Association was totally against it. We had to go before the City Council. My friends and I talked about how we lived in housing. We were great tenants. And I can honestly tell you that some of the best tenants you'll see are people with disabilities. Because once again, we're grateful to have what we have. What we've been able to get.

And -- but they were adamantly opposed. And we lost. So now there's thousands of apartments and condos in Austin. All downtown. All beautiful. All brand-new. But not one person with a disability can live in them. Or maybe at the most there's one.

I lived in an apartment complex that was -- would be considered a high rise or ritzy. I was able to live in it because of, you know, the money I made because I am a professional. And I was the only person with a disability that lived there. I mean, the only one out of I don't know how many apartments. Because it was a huge building.

And I was grateful that I was able to do that. But trying to get my brothers and sisters with disabilities to be able to live the same way was just -- it just didn't happen. And it still isn't happening.

And however, the good news is that I'm also on the Board of a nonprofit organization that we started here in Austin. And we call it Accessible Housing Austin. And through donations and grants, we're now breaking ground on a 27-unit apartment complex that will be integrated, accessible and affordable.

But it's only 27 units. And it took us ten years to get the funding for it.

We are breaking ground. And we already have a waiting list. So you know, we're just a drop in the bucket to what is needed in our community.

>> NOTARIO: Thanks, Renee. I think just now you touch on a lot of I guess things that are interconnected. And the ways in which people with disabilities are kept in poverty by some of the ways in which we do things. The things that are prioritized and who is deemed worthy of certain access to particular industries. Housing is a human right, right?

>> LOPEZ: Well, you would think so, right?

[CHUCKLES].

>> NOTARIO: Uh-huh, exactly. So with that, and in listening to the examples that you shared and your advocacy also in that context, what would you tell disability rights advocates, anti-violence advocates, housing advocates, about centering the voices of people of color with disabilities in their social justice work?

>> LOPEZ: I think that the first thing you have to do is recognize that the person may have a lot of internalized oppression. And it may come from the family because sometimes the family is also subject to the same oppression. Beliefs that are trickled down from our society, from Government.

I know I've run into a lot of people in my life that believed that I was not worthy because they heard the same thing. That, you know, oh, you poor thing. Or you poor cripple, you'll never

live on your own. You'll never have anything. You're always going to be on disability. And you're always going to need help. And your poor parents.

So I used to wonder, where did that belief come from? How do you know that? Well, of course they are subject to the same messages that are sent, you know, from our society. And so I think be aware of your thoughts when you run into someone who has a disability and may come from a background that is not Anglo American, you know, like I'm from Texas so it's primarily Mexican-American. But around the country there are other communities that are entrenched in certain areas. Asians, Middle Eastern. It just varies. But there are cultural oppressions that are involved with people with disabilities.

And a lot of ostracism, for example. A lot of shame. And those are things that we need to be aware of when you think culturally of a person. And then be aware of how much might have been internalized. That person may actually would have come to believe it.

And the other is to be aware of the fact that people with disabilities, we do know -- we're very aware of what we can and cannot do. We know what we want and don't want. We know what life is about. It's not a secret. Don't be afraid to say wheelchair. I have people sometimes they don't know what to say because they are afraid to offend. But you know, we have pretty much heard it all.

And don't be afraid to ask. Like you did, Heidi. Just how do you identify yourself? What would you like for me to refer to you as? And I know that those things are necessary to do until we get to a society where the only thing you ever have to ask someone is their name.

>> NOTARIO: Thanks, Renee. I would add to that from my perspective as an ally to people with disabilities, it's also paying attention to our own ableism, our own racism and our internalized superiority in that context to be aware of. That I think sometimes people who have been doing this work for many years believe that they have arrived and they are true allies.

And I think this journey on being an ally or a co-conspirator like some of my colleagues like to use as a term because it sounds more active and committed is really something that you receive from those who are most marginalized. It's not for us to say, hey, by the way, I'm an ally.

So that's why I think the work requires so much effort and attention and intention.

So what --

>> LOPEZ: Yes, I just want to add that I do like the word ally myself. And you know, one thing that just blew my mind wide open was when I -- because of the work that we had done with our coalition is when I came to realize that how much -- how embedded those ideas of ableism and superiority and oppression are ingrained in us. That we don't even know we have it sometimes.

And I commend so many of the allies that are part of our coalition. Because they stepped back and realized the internalized superiority that they have. And I had to step back and realized the internalized oppression that I've had.

And through that we grew tremendously as a coalition and I think because of that understanding that we had, the willingness to understand, see and accept the things that we are, the things that we have accepted about ourselves. And we have been able to work through them. And accept them. And heal them. That I think is the reason we are such a powerful coalition. So I'm hoping that that goes further out.

And that's one of the things I would say to other organizations. When you want to be an ally to really take a good look at your own beliefs on ableism. As you said, superiority and your beliefs about other people of different cultures. Racism.

>> NOTARIO: Thanks, Renee. So what makes you happy?

>> LOPEZ: Oh, there's so much that makes me happy now because I don't worry so much anymore about what people think about me. And that's been extremely liberating. But basically what makes me happy is hanging out with my friends. I derive great joy from seeing changes when we advocate for something like our 27-unit integrated accessible affordable apartment complex brings me great joy. That was a lot of work.

And you know, right now I'm happy to be alive. I really am. I think it's a good time to be alive. It's a time in our society when we're all having to stop and take a look at our own ideas of racism and ableism and all of these isms that have infiltrated our society that we once took for granted but I think we now have to really take a look at so we can heal it and become the society of one that we are meant to be.

>> NOTARIO: Oh, thank you, Renee. Thank you so much for joining us today. And thanks to all of you for listening. We'll keep moving forward with this work.

Thanks, Renee. Have a great day.

>> LOPEZ: Thank you. Thank you very much.

[MUSIC].

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