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LGBT Reproductive Rights: An Interview with Carmen Vazquez

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LGBT Reproductive Rights

An Interview with Carmen Vazquez

By Kelly Anderson

A thirty-year veteran of political organizing, Carmen Vazquez has been widely recognized for her leadership and intellectual contributions to the women's movement and the LGBT community.

In this excerpt from her oral history conducted by Kelly Anderson for the Voices of Feminism Project at the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Vazquez talks about the connections between LGBT liberation and reproductive justice and the urgent need for coalition building. Carmen Vazquez is currently the Deputy Director of Empire State Pride Agenda in New York City.

ANDERSON: Tell me about how you started to make the connections between the LGBT community and the reproductive rights movement.

VAZQUEZ: In New York, Center Kids was a project of the LGBT Center when I got there. It was a



Carmen Vazquez

volunteer-run project created in response to the burgeoning number of lesbians, mostly, but also some gay men, who were making decisions to have children in the late 1980s in New York, and they came together as a support group

for parents. The name is a little bit of a misnomer because it wasn't about the kids as much as it was about the parents and/or people who were seeking to become parents. Eventually we hired a staff person for the project. Terry Boggis, who is still the director of Center Kids, really opened my eyes to the phenomenal lack of resources available to lesbians and gay men and the impact on their health in terms of reproduction.

For example, because gay men can't donate to sperm banks, and because assisted insemination costs an arm and a leg (as I well know) and in-vitro fertilization is even more expensive, people were consenting either to sex or to donation of sperm that wasn't tested—there is enormous potential for HIV and other STDs in that. The reproductive technologies and insurance coverage available to heterosexual people versus those available to LGBT people are vastly different. One example is fertility treatment. You can diag-



nose infertility in a heterosexual couple and get some insurance relief for it. You can't do that with lesbians and you certainly can't do it for gay men. Another issue is the whole question of surrogacy and the ethics of that and the amount of money involved in that, as well as the amount of money involved in adoption. All of these are issues rarely, if ever, addressed in the policy work of either LGBT or pro-choice organizations.

So it became clear to me that this thing called the reproductive rights movement, identified in the United States more as an abortion movement, had real impact on lesbians, gay men and bisexual and transgender people on practical, economic and health levels. The other thing that was always clear to me, way back from 20 years ago, is that reproduction—the link between sexuality and reproduction—is absolutely key, the linchpin of the political attack against queer people. I knew that, and some feminists knew that, but I assure you that the LGBT movement did not and still doesn't know that—not in a big way, in a way that translates into alliance and shared policy work between the two movements.

While politically the links between sexual and gender rights and reproductive rights and LGBT liberation were always clear in my mind, it wasn't until 20 years later that I saw a possibility for a practical expression of that political understanding as tied to the more practical economic issues and health issues of people seeking to become parents. That led to the creation of Causes in Common.

Causes in Common was an idea that we had for a while. We didn't call it Causes in Common at first. We were just calling it our reproductive rights, LGBT liberation coalition thing. And then in 2003, Ford funded the project, which involved inviting reproductive rights leaders and LGBT leaders to come together and have a conversation about what we understood to be the political and policy links between the two movements. We talked about what sort of common ground could we agree on as places where we could support each others' work and really understand that reproductive rights are deeply, profoundly, about sexual and gender rights and, therefore, about LGBT liberation.

The whole history of privacy rights in this country—when considered legally—is about the reproductive rights movement. It's about women's right to privacy and being able to use contraceptives in the privacy of their homes. The *Lawrence* decision in Texas [a 2003 U.S. Supreme Court de-

cision in which the criminal prohibition of homosexual sodomy in Texas was struck down] reads like a treatise on reproductive rights. And so it was clear that there needed to be a philosophical/political overview of the legal history of privacy, of how privacy is the foundation for the arguments that we make about our own right to sexual freedom and equality, and then from there move on to political and policy implications. So we had that discussion and wrote a preliminary draft of the pamphlet and spent about two summers worth of poor little interns researching all over the world for cases and links.

We didn't want just a rhetorical argument but one based in legal history and government policies and documentation of that history and those policies that we shared in common as movements. So we brought people together and gave them a draft of something that is now the pamphlet called "Causes in Common." A significant number of LGBT organizations have officially signed on to Causes in Common, and now more and more reproductive rights organizations are being asked to sign on.

The project seeks to build a national coalition of people who have signed onto Causes in Common and who will work together to lobby Congress and state legislatures to increase the amount of dialogue that exists between the LGBT movement and the reproductive rights movement on things that we have in common.

What were some of the biggest challenges in finding that common ground? What were some of the initial conversations and debates?

VAZQUEZ: Well, the biggest challenge comes from gay men—that's just the truth. I think lesbians—although at different levels of articulation, depending on their political history and sophistication—at least get that our rights to reproduce as lesbians are challenged or threatened, and we understand the body thing. We get the thing about the state intervening in our bodies, whereas I think that's a much harder link for gay men to make, and more of them are less interested in reproduction. There's even a fairly conservative wing of the gay world that says this is not a gay issue—and I say, "Go read *Lawrence*"—or they actually think that abortion is wrong and that we shouldn't be involved in that. So, I mean, that's where most of the resistance has come from.

I also think that it's part of a larger debate

about what's a gay issue and what's not a gay issue, whether we should be focused and our agenda has to only be about nondiscrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, so that anything that seems extraneous gets dumped.

And finally, there is the feeling that people in the gay movement, at least the progressive wing of the gay movement, have taken steps to stand with the reproductive rights movement, but that that solidarity has not been returned. For example, part of our screening for candidates who want our endorsement is a question about choice. And that had been true for a number of years—we didn't just recently add it. But the same was not true for reproductive rights organizations. So, part of this dialogue is asking if Planned Parenthood or NARAL or all those other people are going to endorse a presidential candidate, will they only screen for their position on choice or will they also screen for their positions on gay rights? So, while that was a lesser piece of the argument, it's definitely there and some resentment around it exists. We've stuck our neck out for these women—for people involved in the choice movement—and they haven't reciprocated. So those are the general areas of resistance.

From the reproductive rights end of it, did you find resistance in terms of, "We already have enough problems, why do we need to be gay- and lesbian-baited? Why cause more trouble for ourselves?"

VAZQUEZ: Yes. From the reproductive side of the discussion, the biggest obstacle was the sense that we are already seen in a negative light, so we don't need to take this one on. We certainly don't need to get mixed up with the marriage discussion now, with, you know, pedophiles and—queer people with children—how weird is that? And that's also a part of some of the conservatism and mainstreaming of the reproductive rights movement that wants to present the choice question as more wholesome,

MORE INFO

For a copy of Vazquez's complete oral history or for more information on the Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, please contact the Sophia Smith Collection at 413-585-2970, or visit their website at www.smith.edu/libraries/libs/ssc/ohlist.

more as just about women being able to make choices in their lives and lead productive lives.

And all of that is true but, the piece of it that has to do with the messier side of what this is all about—pregnant teens and the need for better prevention services, and dealing with kids and drugs, and the poverty issues, and forced sterilization of women of color—that is all under the tip of the iceberg in terms of the reproductive rights movement. And so it's hard for some people to bring this "unsavory" queer element into the national discussion about choice. But we say, "So what? Get over it." Fundamentally, there really is a link here, and if we don't make it, then no one else is going to except for political candidates—those on the right—who are only too happy make the connections. For 30 years the right has made a direct link between the choice movement and the gay movement, and we keep saying, "No, I don't know, where is it? I don't know. What are they talking about?"

Could you reflect on the future of the movement? What gives you hope and what do you see happening politically that gives us reason to believe that progressive change is still possible?

VAZQUEZ: I am made hopeful by the leadership of people of color. I said in a speech when I left the Women's Building (in San Francisco) that people of color will lead this movement, that if it is to succeed, it will succeed because of the involvement and leadership of people of color, not because we're smarter or cuter—although sometimes that's true—but because of the lived experience. And because of the bridge-building and alliance-building that this movement requires if it is to move past the stage of "just me" and truly be about justice and about the shared struggles of different oppressed people. That experience lies with people of color. And so, we—Nadine Smith and I—are older, or more mature, examples of that truth. But then I look at somebody like Rashad [Robinson], who is 25 years old, African American, works at GLAAD [Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation], and is a little snip of a guy who is so brilliant and so full of this phenomenal energy. I see the work being done to organize African Americans and Latino people initially around this marriage thing, but now more broadly, and it gives me more hope that that new leadership will emerge.

And I'm also made hopeful, especially in the



work that I've started doing in New York and with the Equality Federation, around building alliances with straight people. You know, we have so been inured from the necessity of actually figuring out how to do that and having straight people stand with us, but it has been to our detriment. And I think the opportunity is here—hopefully we'll have the smarts and the resources to actually act on that opportunity. It's a big if, but if we do, the opportunity to build a movement around gender and sexual rights that is very broad—that really does include our mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters and co-workers and the people they worship with if they worship and labor people—is there for the taking. It's really a matter of how well are we going to organize ourselves and what kind of resources can we put into that kind of alliance work. I see that moment being much more possible now than it was five, ten, fifteen, twenty years ago, when we were out there on the fringe and not so much a part of the daily conversation among average Americans.

I'm made hopeful by the emergence of people like Barack Obama as political leadership of this country, because I think there's going to be more people like him who step forward and have a much more progressive and reasoned approach on how to deal with the international community, our economy and our own internal struggles and contradictions around race and class and sexual orientation. So that's what makes me hopeful.

What do you think are the biggest mistakes your generation made, in terms of strategy or vision, that you would like to caution my generation against?

VAZQUEZ: Isolation, meaning, building a movement around an identity that is too narrow to really pull other people into—I call that isolation. And the other is the mistaken notion that what we ought to be about is integration and assimilation. We have an opportunity to carve out a different vision, a different world, a different understanding of family, how it gets structured, how people get to protect those families. And we should take every opportunity to scream to the heavens what that difference is and celebrate it and understand it for its unique contribution of the whole of what this society looks like and to understand the evolution of where we come from. We come from terrible, terrible, terrible pain and being wounded

and hiding in bars and people's living rooms and not being able to shout out our name and certainly not our love. But it's over. It's got to be over.

The next generation of LGBT leadership has the capacity—and I hope will take the opportunity—to build on what has been created by several generations of queers who came from much more wounded places. I hope it is a generation that can bring to the public arena an appreciation for what queer life has given us and given the country in our work as peace activists and as environmental activists and as reproductive rights activists. You

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know what I mean? One of the terrible, terrible things that homophobia did to us is that we built the infrastructure of the reproductive rights movement and the domestic violence movement and so many other movements, but we weren't out in those movements. And so, visibility, I think, will be really critical to an embracing of queer sensibility as something that enhances the whole of society rather than something that should be scratched and hidden and somehow made to look like straight, heterosexual life.

And finally, I would say that there was a refusal, if not reluctance, on the part of my generation of queers to be absolutely fierce in the articulation of the connections between race and class and gender and sexuality. That has really been to our detriment. That has made it very hard for us to make those alliances I'm talking about. And so, that is something this generation does have to do over and over and over again—be really clear and articulate about what those connections are and take every opportunity, not just to make it intellectually clear, but to act on them, so that change will be possible. ●

KELLY ANDERSON is an educator and historian who has been conducting oral histories with social activists for many years. She is currently part of the *Voices of Feminism* project at the Sophia Smith Collection and is teaching at Bennington College. She lives in Western Massachusetts with her partner and 3-year-old son.