

Dr. Helen Rodriguez-Trias

A Voice for the Reproductively Repressed

By: Rose Lopez

Dr. Helen Rodriguez-Trias contributed her life to the betterment of health care for underrepresented individuals. As a woman and an individual of Latin descent, Rodriguez-Trias faced biases and discrimination firsthand. Her personal experiences and those she observed occur to family and friends drove her to become an active voice for those who were not heard. She said in an interview that what inspired her was “the experience of [my] own mother, my aunts, and sisters, who faced so many restraints in their struggle to flower and realize their full potential” (*FamPlan*, 2021). She was born in New York in 1929 to parents who immigrated from Puerto Rico. In her infancy, they returned to their native country only to return to New York in 1939. Despite spending her youth in the United States, she was drawn back to Puerto Rico for college and medical school. In an interview, when asked why she returned to Puerto Rico, she stated, “In Puerto Rico, racism was subtle. There wasn't the kind of separatist racism like in the US. I wasn't used to this” (*Changing the Face of Medicine | HelenRodriguez-Trias*, n.d.).



She first attended the University of Puerto Rico in San Juan as an undergraduate and continued into the University of Puerto Rico School of Medicine. On top of being a woman and a Latina in the medical field, by the time she graduated medical school, she was 31, divorced twice, and had four kids. She faced many obstacles in and outside of her field, especially at home, adding further stress. Despite these hardships, she was able to become an active voice for those who were being taken advantage of. She focused heavily

on pediatric medicine but moved into reproductive health and rights. She advocated heavily against sterilization abuse, access to care, HIV/AIDs, and abortion rights. Beyond working as a physician, she also was an associate professor and worked as an associate professor of medicine at Albert Einstein College of Medicine and Yeshiva University.

Major Contributions

Dr. Rodriguez-Tiras did more than speak out for women and children that were discriminated against based on sex, race, disability, and economic status. She took charge



and was a co-founder of many foundations and committees that affected the United States, Central and South America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. These included the Committee to End Sterilization Abuse, the Women's Caucus of the American Public Health Association, and the

Committee for Abortion Rights Against Sterilization Abuse. She advocated heavily for reproductive rights at multiple conferences. Most notably, at the 1974 Boston Conference on a panel on sterilization abuse, she recalled an impactful story, "We brought up the Relf suit, brought on behalf of 2 Black, allegedly retarded girls, Minnie Lee Relf, age 12, and Mary Alice Relf, age 14, who had been sterilized without their knowledge or consent in a federally funded program in Montgomery, Alabama" (*Changing the Face of Medicine / Helen Rodriguez-Tiras*, n.d.). The girl's mother was attempting to get them contraceptives and signed the form with an X because she was illiterate. This shocking but true story brought light to the sterilization abuse that was taking place, and the government was subsidizing some of it. This called action to the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to review guidelines. She was a part of the Boston Women's Health Collective that created the Our Bodies, Ourselves guidelines, which, before sterilization, required a woman's written



consent in a contract that was offered in a language she understood and that there was a waiting period between signing and procedure. Near the end of her life, Dr. Helen Rodriguez-Trias shared her perspective on how the fight for equity is not over. She stated in an interview with the National Institute of Health that “we still have a system that excludes, underserves, and even misses serves all too many people. The latest census tells us that there are over 44 million Americans without health insurance. That is inexcusable.” She believed that the gap between rich and poor continues to grow and that the discrimination has not disappeared but has become more subtle, and unfortunately, she is no longer around to advocate for the underrepresented.

Timeline

1929 - Born in New York and moved back to Puerto Rico

1938-1968 - $\frac{1}{3}$ of women of child-bearing age were experiencing sterilization without consent in Puerto Rico

1939 - Moved back to New York

1948 - Arrived at the **University Of Puerto Rico** in San Juan for undergraduate

- Became a **student activist** and spoke out for freedom of speech and Puerto Rican independence

1957 - **Graduated** from undergrad and went into Medical School

1960 - **Graduated** from the **University of Puerto Rico School Of Medicine** (age 31)

- Gave birth to her fourth child
- Completed her residency at the University Hospital in San Juan

1970s

- **Returned to NY** and worked as **Head of Pediatrics** at Lincoln Hospital

- Served largely the Puerto Rican Section of South Bronx, which was among the **lowest income populations** in the US



- Advocated for underrepresented voices in administrative and patient care issues
- Worked as an **associate professor of medicine** at Albert Einstein College of Medicine and Yeshiva University
- Worked as an active member of the **Women's Health Movement**
- Attended **conference on abortion at Barnard College** - began to fight for reproductive rights
 - Joined efforts to stop sterilization abuse
- **1970** - Founding member of the **Committee to End Sterilization Abuse**
- **1971**
 - Presented on sterilization in Puerto Rico at the APHA meeting in Minneapolis
 - Founding member of the **Women Caucus of the American Public Health Association**
- **1979**
 - Founding member of the **Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse**
 - Participation in the **Boston Women's Health Collective**
 - **Created the Our Bodies, Ourselves guidelines**
 - Required a woman's written consent, offered in a language she understood, with a waiting period between signing and procedure
 - Testified before the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare for the **passage of federal sterilization guidelines**
- 1988** - Became the **Medical Director** of the NY State Department of Health - AIDS Institute
 - Focused on women with HIV
- 1990s**
 - Attended **International women's Conferences** in Cairo and Beijing - voiced for health and reproductive issues

- **1993** - was named the **first Latina President of the American Public Health Association**
- **1996 - 1999** - Co-director of the **Pacific Institute for Women's Health**
 - a non-profit based research and advocacy group that improved women's health worldwide
 - Focused on health policy, access to care, and integration of all aspects of reproductive health

January 2001 - President Clinton awarded her the **Presidential Citizen's Metal** for her work on behalf of women, children, people with HIV/AIDs, and the poor

December 27, 2001 - Died due to complications of lung cancer

Sources

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FamPlan: Yep, we got this. (2021, March 10).

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