Documentary on forced sterilization of Latina women is a must-see in election year

by Sr. Rose Pacatte

"No Más Bebés" (no more babies) tells a little-known but powerful story about a group of Latina women who banded together in a class-action lawsuit in 1975, *Madrigal v. Quilligan*, over their forced sterilizations at the Los Angeles County General Hospital in the 1960s and '70s.

It airs Feb. 1 on PBS.

However, limiting poor and ethnic populations was already a government-supported effort, and there was plenty of federal funding to be had. Walter Cronkite reported the story of how shocked the people in Virginia were to learn of a forced sterilization program carried out against thousands of persons between 1922 and 1972. But this was a national issue that 30 states participated in. California accounted for nearly a third of the total of forced sterilizations, with seven Midwestern states and Alabama and North Carolina following in terms of numbers.

David Brinkley reports that Donald Rumsfeld, then serving Counselor to the President had said that, "Washington eventually will have to do something about this country's rapidly growing population; for example, it would have to decide about persuading or coercing its citizens to have fewer children."

This documentary film focuses on the population control lobby and forced sterilizations carried out in Los Angeles in the late 1960s through the mid-1970s, "a statewide birth control program to limit or space out children born to the poor," it says.

The film follows several Spanish-speaking women who, when in labor and awaiting cesarean-section
operations, were coerced into signing forms allowing doctors to sterilize them through tubal ligation, a term they did not even understand. They were often told their babies might die if they didn't sign -- because the doctors could not proceed without the signed papers.

A young resident, Dr. Bernard Rosenfeld, blew the whistle, wrote letters, and then when a class action lawsuit was filed in federal court, faced denial by everyone, from the top of the OB-GYN department, including Dr. James Quilligan (who claimed he knew nothing of what went on downstairs), down to his fellow residents.

A young Latina lawyer, Antonia Hernandez, heard that some women committed suicide and continued to suffer with what today we call post-traumatic stress as well as the cultural stigma of learning they had been sterilized. She convinced 10 of them to sue under the precedent of *Roe v. Wade*, of all things, because its ruling guarantees reproductive freedom. The narration in the documentary notes that white feminists, who had petitioned for abortion and sterilization on demand, had no understanding of or sympathy for Latina women who wanted the right to bear children.

It is interesting that there's no mention in the film about the Catholic church's response to the situation or the lawsuit.

This riveting, heart-breaking documentary is a must-see in an election year in which race is a key issue. It is a film about human reproductive justice and what can happen when no one is looking and transparency is lacking.

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