

WOMEN & IMMIGRATION

There are an estimated 21 million immigrant women living in the United States, 5 million of whom are undocumented. Although immigrant women are a vital part of many economic, cultural, and political communities in the U.S., no concrete legal framework exists to protect their rights or address the unique abuses they face. The needs of immigrant women, who often face multiple forms of discrimination based on sex, racial identity, undocumented status, and religion are often ignored in spaces of institutional power. As the Trump Administration pursues even more aggressive policies against immigrants and refugees, we must bring the issues of immigrant women to the forefront.



On February 20, 2017 the Department of Homeland Security released two memos expanding the scope of deportation of undocumented Mexican immigrants within the United States. Both memos entail a targeted plan to remove undocumented immigrants through extreme and often violent tactics, affecting over 11 million people. The expansion of Trump's deportation policy falls in line with his campaign promise to deport Mexican immigrants. Trump's initiative rests heavily on xenophobia, racism, and fear mongering among the American public. Trump's expanded deportation plan includes immigration sweeps on private homes, the additional hiring of 10,000 Immigration and Customs Enforcement Officers and 5,000 additional Customs & Border Protection Agents, the creation of detention centers for undocumented immigrants around the Texas-Mexico border, publicizing the crimes of undocumented immigrants, and the expedited removal of undocumented immigrants--bypassing the courts.

Gender-Bias In The Immigration Process

For undocumented women, entering into the U.S. remains a consistent challenge. According to a study done by the Asian Pacific American Legal Center, 70% of immigrant women gain residence in the U.S. through family-based visas. This is primarily because U.S. work visas are provided to those working in 'high demand' STEM fields. Because these fields are heavily--and disproportionately--occupied by men, women who apply for work visas are consistently denied. The 'merit based' system of visa allocation negatively affects women as nearly 60 percent of undocumented women work in the informal economy including domestic work or caregiving. Furthermore, women are routinely hurt by caps and bans on refugee admittance into the U.S. A study by the Council on Foreign Relations reported that in 2016, 72 percent of all refugees admitted into the U.S. were women and children. Many of the women and children entering into the U.S. as refugees are survivors of war or physical and sexual violence. The ban on the admittance of refugees makes it nearly impossible for women to enter into the U.S. safely and legally.

Undocumented Women & Gender-Based Violence

Sexual abuse of immigrant women is a longstanding issue. For immigrant women who are survivors of violence in the U.S., the backdrop of rising deportation fears leaves them with an impossible choice: to report their abuse and risk arrest or continue to live with violence. In March of 2017, Houston Police Chief Art Acevedo disclosed that the number of Hispanic individuals reporting sexual assault in Houston was down 42.8% from last year, and those reporting other violent crimes had registered a 13% drop. This same trend has now been seen in Los Angeles and Denver as well.

Another concern for immigrant women is the amount of unchecked violence from people in spaces of power. Dozens of women have already recounted stories of sexual abuse and assault from immigration officers. In March 2017, the ACLU filed a complaint on behalf of two sisters who said they were sexually assaulted and falsely imprisoned by a U.S. border agent. These issues only get worse: a complaint filed by the Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement (CIVIC), says that the Department of Homeland Security received 14,693 complaints of sexual and/or physical abuse against ICE between January 2010 and July 2016—but investigated less than one percent of them.