

NCRW Big Five: Under the Radar—Immigrant Women and Violence

Violence against immigrant women is nearly impossible to estimate with any precision. Immigration status, cultural and language barriers, and economic hardship intersect and often prevent women who experience violence from coming forward. The two most common forms of abuse experienced by immigrant women are intimate partner violence and exploitative work conditions.

Domestic violence and sexual assault commonly occur in the home, at immigrant detention centers, and on the job.

Exploitative work conditions include, but are not limited to: poor wages, unlimited work hours with no rest days and limited breaks, lack of health benefits, isolation from the outside world, and substandard physical environments. Immigrant women might also experience sexual, physical, emotional, or psychological abuse at the hands of their employers.

Quick Facts

- A recent study in New York City found that 51% of intimate partner homicide victims were foreign-born.ⁱ
- 48% of Latinas reported that they had suffered increased partner violence since immigrating to the United States.ⁱⁱ
- In the U.S., the median workday for domestic workers with special visas was 14 hours and their median wage was \$2.14 an hour, including room and board.ⁱⁱⁱ

TAKE ACTION

First Find Your Representative: Who represents you in your state legislature and at the local level? Who represents you in Congress? Go to these links to find out!

For your Representative:

<https://www.house.gov/writerep/>

For your Senators: <http://www.senate.gov/>

For your local and state representatives:

<http://www.votesmart.org/>

Now, write a letter urging your elected officials to support laws and measures that promote the humane and fair treatment of women, children, and families in immigrant detention centers. Refer them to our website so they can get the facts. In particular, recommend they strengthen protections for immigrant women in the Violence Against Women Act and support the passage of the International Violence Against Women Act (I-VAWA).

I-VAWA would systematically integrate efforts to end gender-based violence into foreign assistance programs. It would apply U.S. diplomacy and foreign aid totaling \$1 billion over five years to prevent the abuse and exploitation of women and girls. An estimated one out of three women is abused, raped, or assaulted in her lifetime.

Get People Talking: Are women's issues or the impact of public policies on women's lives part of the national conversation? Not enough! Help get the conversation started. Tell people the facts about women's lives. Send these fact sheets to your email list. Join with a local community or women's organization to hold a town hall meeting on what's at stake for women in the 2008 elections and beyond. Share this information with your city or county office on women's issues.

Labor and Work Exploitation

The possibility of employment opportunities and higher wages often brings immigrant women to the United States. However, once they arrive, women often find that their immigration status, language barriers, and lack of marketable skills, make securing employment that is fair and pays a living wage often unattainable.

Immigrant women without proper documentation are often relegated to occupations that leave them vulnerable to exploitation. These jobs include domestic cleaning or child care in private homes; working in restaurants or salons; or working in factories.

Most of the aforementioned jobs take place beyond the public eye and are unregulated or unmonitored by state and/or federal authorities. These jobs usually lack security, health benefits, and fair wages.

Violence Against Immigrant Women

Language and cultural barriers, immigration status, and the lack of rights make immigrant women vulnerable to domestic violence and sexual assault. A survey of immigrant Korean women found that 60 percent had been physically abused by their husbands.^{iv}

Abused immigrant women often have trouble accessing services, obtaining legal representation, and remaining in the country, once their undocumented status has been exposed. All of these issues are major considerations for women weighing whether or not to report violence or abuse.

The Violence Against Women Act includes provisions for immigrant women, however, because communities are often isolated or insular, finding out about laws and protections available to immigrant women can be difficult. U.S. immigration officials detain nearly 300,000 immigrants each year, many of whom are women and children.^v

Fear of deportation and losing custody of children are often significant barriers to reporting violence or

abuse for immigrant women, especially if immigration status is tied to their spouse's.^{vi vii}

Language barriers and the ability to negotiate reporting and accountability systems is a significant challenge for immigrant women. In one study, nearly three-quarters of abused Latina immigrants spoke little or no English and less than one-third of police responders to domestic violence calls spoke Spanish or were accompanied by an interpreter.^{viii} More than one-third of women experiencing intimate partner violence in the U.S. are Latina.^{ix}

Conclusion

Immigrant women are particularly vulnerable to violence and abuse because of cultural, economic, and legal barriers. Immigration policies and programs need to recognize the special challenges they face and develop solutions that protect their safety and well-being.

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The NCRW Big Five Campaign

The National Council for Research on Women is raising awareness about the status of women in the United States by focusing on the *Big Five* issues of importance to women and girls, namely: economic security, health, immigration, violence, and education. Although these issues are critical to the lives and well-being of women and girls, they are particularly acute for those living in poverty, immigrants and women of color.

For more information, please contact the National Council for Research on Women: ncrw@ncrw.org or visit our website: www.ncrw.org.

Barriers: A Complete Guide to Legal Rights and Resources for Battered Immigrants, ed. Leslye and Kathleen Sullivan, pp. 1-23. From Legal Momentum, Immigrant Women Program, available at http://www.legalmomentum.org/site/DocServer/www1_1_Dynamics_of_Domestic_Violence_in_Immigrant_Families.pdf?docID=3581.

^{vii} *ibid*

^{viii} *ibid*

^{ix} Weed, Rosa Bramble. 2008. "Immigrant Women with HIV." *The Body*. From the AIDS Community Research Initiative of America, available at <http://www.thebody.com/content/legal/art45494.html>

ⁱ "Femicide in New York City: 1995-2002." 2004. From the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, available at www.nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/ip/femicide1995-2002_report.pdf.

ⁱⁱ Morrison, Adele. 2006. "Changing the Domestic Violence (Dis)Course: Moving from White Victim to Multi-Cultural Survivor." *University of California, Davis Law Review* 39(1061): 1061-1120. Available at http://lawreview.law.ucdavis.edu/issues/Vol39/Issue3/DavisVol39No3_MORRISON.pdf.

ⁱⁱⁱ Greenhouse, Steven. 2001. Report Outlines the Abuse of Foreign Domestic Workers. 14 June 2001.

^{iv} Tjaden, Patricia and Nancy Thoennes. 2000. "Extent, Nature and Consequences of Violence Against Women: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey." From The National Institute of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, available at <http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/nij/183781.pdf>.

^v American Civil Liberties Union. 2008. "ACLU Welcomes Immigration Detention Medical Treatment Legislation." Available at <http://www.aclu.org/immigrants/detention/35234prs20080505.html>.

^{vi} Orloff, Leslye and Olivia Garcia. 2004. "Dynamics of Domestic Violence in Immigrant Families." *Breaking*