



1237 Ralph David Abernathy Blvd. SW
Atlanta, Georgia 30310-1731
Tel: 404.756.2680
Fax: 404.756.2684
Email: info@SisterSong.net
Website: www.SisterSong.net

Ningún ser humano es ilegal
Immigration Reform, Human Rights and Reproductive Justice
© Laura Jiménez, Deputy Coordinator, SisterSong
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Ningún ser humano es ilegal, no human being is illegal. This is one of the declarations made by immigrant communities and their allies at the protests, rallies, and marches throughout the United States in the last two months. In response to the proposed immigration reform measures being debated in both Houses of Congress, millions of people have participated in these actions, voicing their opposition to increased militarization of the border, as well as the more stringent and repressive enforcement of current immigration laws and harsher penalties for breaking them.

Although this newest set of legislation targeting immigrants appears to have set off the events and activities of the last two months, it is really only the most recent in a long history of attacks against immigrant communities in the United States. These recent protests are also linked to the 500-year history of social justice activism by Latinos and other immigrants that are ignored by the mainstream media. The real catalyst for the people's outrage is the everyday tension and indignity of having to survive under what amounts to blatant (and legally sanctioned) human rights violations.

SisterSong's Reproductive Justice framework understands that women make their reproductive health decisions within the context of their family's and community's life and circumstances. This is a perfect example of how an issue, such as immigration reform, will not only affect immigrant women of color, but also their families and their whole communities.

If Congress passes any repressive legislation, then we can expect that women will experience this debate played out on their bodies and in their realities. As stated in ACRJ's Reproductive Justice Agenda: "During a war, a woman's body is treated synonymously to the land: as a battleground where women and resources are exploited, and as a site where victors establish dominance by reproducing themselves in the population through women's bodies, as well as reproducing their values, culture, religion, language, and traditions."¹

Immigrant women already have less access to reproductive health services for various reasons, including cultural and linguistic barriers, lack of health care coverage, poverty or low formal educational levels (which have been associated with under-use of medical services).² If legal barriers are also erected, there

¹ *Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice. A New Framework for Advancing a Social Justice Movement for Reproductive Health, Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Justice*, 4-5 (2005).

² *Foulkes R., Donoso R., Fredrick B. Opportunities for Action: Addressing Latina Sexual and Reproductive Health Outcomes. American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology*, S37-42 (2003); *Vines A, Godley P. The Challenges of Eliminating Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities, NC Medical Journal*. 341-349 (2004).

would be the systematic, institutionalized and deliberate denial of the humanity of the people who are affected. In addition, other barriers include lack of economic resources to access medical services, and legislation that has already been enacted, such as the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which prohibits the states from using federal funds to provide Medicaid coverage for immigrants who have resided in the country for less than five years.

All of the immigration reform legislation currently being proposed in both Houses of Congress include tighter restrictions on services and benefits that could be accessed by immigrants. States including Arizona, Georgia and Virginia have already enacted such laws. It is critical to understand that, as this legislation is pending approval, the amount of public debate that is created by these proposals also trigger different types of behaviors from different groups of people:

- Undocumented immigrants who fear removal from the country stop trying to access services, causing medical conditions to go untreated, become emergency situations and create gaps in preventive strategies;
- Pregnant women do not access pre-natal services, causing poorer birth outcomes; and
- US citizens who work in institutions such as schools, hospitals, and banks among others, feel empowered to request immigration documents inappropriately, without guidelines and without legal authorization. This was the case immediately after California voters authorized the passage of Proposition 187 in 1994 (a law that denied social services, health care and public education to illegal immigrants and was subsequently struck down by the federal court).

In addition, we are concerned about the women who will continue to make risky attempts to enter the United States. According to the Committee of Indigenous Solidarity, “Rape has become so prevalent that many women take birth control pills or shots before setting out to ensure they won’t get pregnant. Some consider rape ‘the price you pay for crossing the border.’”³ More women than ever are attempting such crossings with the full knowledge that rape and death are possible consequences. What will be their fate with the new beefed-up border security and the proposed 700-mile wall between the US-Mexico borders? What about the women who make the perilous journey in their last weeks of pregnancy with the desperate hope that their child will be born a US citizen? And what about the children and families that they leave behind who are depending on them for economic support?

These are all issues of extreme concern to the Reproductive Justice movement. SisterSong has supported and will continue to support the great numbers of immigrant communities and their allies that have come out in these recent events, and we support the movement for fair comprehensive immigration reform that recognizes and respects the human rights of all people. This recent public outcry has been a perfect example of an instance in which a unified Reproductive Justice movement has aligned itself with allies of other social justice and reproductive health movements to declare, “Citizenship, reproductive health, and the benefits that accompany it are not privileges; they are human rights!”

Most importantly, SisterSong encourages the communities of Indigenous women and women of color across the United States to stand together with our immigrant sisters in opposition to these repressive immigration measures. The key to winning this fight is to do collectively what we cannot do individually.

The following documents were also of great assistance in writing this piece: National Asian Pacific American Women’s Forum (Chappell, C). Reclaiming Choice, Broadening the Movement: Sexual and Reproductive Justice and Asian Pacific American Women. 2005. National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health. The Reproductive Health of Latina Immigrants. December 2005.

³ Committee of Indigenous Solidarity. “Mexico Week in Review”. April 27, 2005.