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Women Raise Heat on Immigration Debate

By Cynthia L. Cooper, WeNews correspondent

(WOMENSENEWS) – In preparation for the march for immigrant rights that drew tens of thousands to Chicago’s streets on May 1, 2007, Anita Rico stenciled T-shirts with the face of the woman who most inspires her: Elvira Arellano.

Since last August Arellano, an undocumented immigrant, has been holed up in a small Chicago church with her U.S.-born 8-year-old son Saul to avoid an order of deportation back to Mexico.

“She gave a face to the crisis that is going on,” said Rico, a youth coordinator at Centro Sin Fronteras, a community advocacy group in Chicago. “The way the government is treating people, especially women, is very inhumane. She’s taking a stance. It’s how Rosa Parks took a stance. We’re literally turning the pages of history.”



Anita Rico, right, and friend Rita Pineda.

Arellano, named one of the People Who Mattered in 2006 by Time magazine, co-founded the Chicago-based United Latino Family, which lobbies to keep together U.S.-born children and undocumented parents. Before taking sanctuary, she spoke from the podium at an immigration reform march in Chicago. Arellano’s recognition level was so high during the 2006 elections that photos of her and Saul were used to get out the Latino vote.

Before her legal problems Arellano worked out in the open, earning \$6.50 an hour cleaning airplanes until she was arrested for using a false Social Security number in a sweep of the airport where she worked.

Olga Vives, executive vice president of the National Organization for Women, says, unlike Arellano, many female immigrants are working behind walls – as domestics, nannies, health care workers and hotel cleaners – and are therefore kept in the policy shadows.

Red-Hot Issue

Vives and others have been grafting gender issues onto immigration politics and raising the temperature of an already red-hot issue among feminist scholars, service groups, researchers and advocates.

In March, Vives' NOW and three other national women's organizations in Washington, D.C., formed the National Coalition on Immigrant Women's Rights to promote "fair and just immigration policies that will protect the rights of immigrant women."

"With all of the anti-immigrant sentiment and all the talk about deportation, we were very concerned. We want to make sure that the issues affecting women are heard," said Vives.

In March, the annual Feminist and Scholar Conference at the Barnard Center for Research on Women in New York focused on the worldwide issues of gender and migration. "A great deal of thought has been given to immigration, but there needs to be more time and space to gender," said Janet R. Jakobsen, director of the Barnard Center for Research on Women.



Janet Jakobsen

U.S. immigration reform has simmered in Congress for the past year as Democrats and Republicans sparred over the best approach to the annual arrival of about 850,000 undocumented immigrants. A compromise bill intended to ease the path toward legalization for many immigrants was negotiated by the White House and lawmakers this week and has been introduced in the Senate.

Laying the groundwork for the debate, the National Coalition on Immigrant Women's Rights--created with the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum and Legal Momentum -- set up meetings with members of Congress. On May 8, it held a phone conference to share top priorities with groups across the country.

Seeking Reforms

The coalition seeks a legalization program allowing undocumented migrants to apply for residency without excessive fines or re-entry requirements; enforcement of existing labor laws; improvements in reunion opportunities for families; child and reproductive health care; and more safety for victims of sexual and domestic violence.

Women are 50 percent, or 14 million, of the foreign-born U.S. population, according to the Migration Policy Institute, a Washington think tank. Women are 48 percent of legal migrants and 42 percent of unauthorized migrants to the United States, according to a July 2006 report of the Washington-based Pew Hispanic Center. Two-thirds of the undocumented were born in Latin America, 13 percent in Asia, 6 percent in Canada or Europe, and 3 percent in Africa or elsewhere.

Immigrant women are caught in a double bind. Like other women, they often face inadequate wages, higher family caretaking demands, reproductive health care needs, domestic violence, sexual harassment and gender stereotyping.

“Migrant women are more vulnerable to violence and rape and poverty because of patriarchy and the reasons for abuse of women in general,” said Gabriela Flora, a Colorado regional organizer for Project Voice, an immigrant assistance program of the American Friends Service Committee. “It’s a symptom of much larger issues of abuse and misogyny in our culture today, but they are much less likely to be able to defend themselves.”

The gender issues, however, sit atop a mountain of universal concerns: labor protection, health care, anti-immigration sentiment, social service support, family separations, limited paths to legal status, dangerous border crossings, racial hatred and mass deportations.

Of particular and immediate concern to advocates are the mass roundups of immigrants at workplaces and even shopping malls, which U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement has mounted since Dec. 12, 2006, when 1,300 people in 12 states were detained.

‘Tearing Families Apart’

“It’s tearing families apart,” Flora said. “They have devastating effects on women and children and a huge impact on communities.”

Children are left to fend for themselves, unaware of their parents’ whereabouts. One 16-year-old girl in California is trying to support two younger siblings now that their parents were deported, said Flora.

In addition to the raids, Melinda Lewis, director of policy, advocacy and research at El Centro in Kansas City, Kan., an organization that provides direct services to 15,000 individuals, is also focused on restricted benefits, predatory lending, housing needs and family reunification. “The situation is so bad for everybody. We’re looking at crises day after day,” said Lewis.

Women who live with abusive partners also fear deportation and even some immigration lawyers offer little help, said Jorgelina Karner of the Colorado Coalition Against Domestic Violence in Denver.

“In rural areas, if a client comes in and says ‘I can’t take it anymore,’ lawyers have said, ‘Just stay; you’re just three to four months away from a green card,’ which is the same as saying, ‘Just stay and take the punches, stay and be killed,’” said Karner.

Women in domestic employment have little recourse against abusive employers, said Melissa Nalani Ross, research analyst at the Center for New Community, a training,

research and community organization in Chicago. “They have no way of fighting back, they are alone; they are stuck in conditions that are horrific.”

Ross, who researches the anti-immigration movement, sees women used as pawns. For example, she said, anti-immigration activists point to the oppression of women in their home countries and argue that permitting immigration brings these same cultural attitudes into the United States.

Such groups also object to the high reproductive rate of immigrants because it produces children who are born in the U.S. and have citizen status. “They’ve come up with a term, ‘anchor babies.’ It’s the equivalent of the N-word, used in a very derogatory way,” said Ross. “It’s definitely an ethnic and sexist attack.”

Cynthia L. Cooper is an independent journalist in New York City.

For more information:

“U.S. Challenged on Immigrant Women’s Legal Limbo”:

<http://womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/3110/>

“Women’s Groups Differ Over Immigration Strategy”:

<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2715/>

American Friends Service Committee, Immigrants’ Rights:

<http://www.afsc.org/immigrants-rights>

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