

# *Women's eNews*

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## **Women's Groups Differ Over Immigration Strategy**

**By Allison Stevens, Washington Bureau Chief**

WASHINGTON, D.C. (WOMENSENEWS) – Often assumed to be young and male, the face of the unauthorized immigrant is morphing as more and more women enter the United States without legal documents.

Some women come to work, and others to raise families in a country known for its economic strength. Most face different, and sometimes greater, financial and emotional challenges at home and in the workplace, advocates say.

An undocumented immigrant woman is more likely to find herself in an “exploitative work situation,” said Joanne Lin, a staff attorney who focuses on immigrant women at Legal Momentum, a legal advocacy group with offices in New York and Washington, D.C. She is “not getting paid adequately, more likely to be sexually exploited or harassed, and not able to pursue redress.”

Lawmakers have been considering immigration legislation that will directly affect these women, who are estimated to number 4 million by the Pew Hispanic Center in Washington, D.C.

Some women's rights activists say immigrant women would be better off if Congress skipped the subject and turned to the next item on their agenda.

“Frankly, it is our position that any kind of reform under this administration and under the Republican Congress is dangerous,” said Olga Vives, who migrated to the United States from Cuba in 1961 and now serves as a vice president at the National Organization for Women, an advocacy group in Washington, D.C.

Other experts on immigrant women say the time is right to enact a deal that would provide a path toward legalization for at least some of the 11 to 12 million undocumented immigrants who are estimated to be living in this country.

“We are at a pivotal time in the immigration reform process,” Amanda Baran, a Legal Momentum staff attorney and expert on immigrant women, said at a March 28 news conference. “Now is the time to fix the system before more immigrant women suffer.”

## ***Compromise Stalled in Congress***

Legal Momentum applauded the Senate Judiciary Committee for approving a bill at the end of March that would provide a pathway to citizenship for millions of undocumented workers and create a guest worker program for new workers, but it objected to some enforcement provisions. Support for that bill, and a subsequent agreement hailed as a “breakthrough” compromise, imploded before Congress left town two weeks ago.

The House of Representatives, meanwhile, passed a far more stringent immigration bill last December that did not include a guest worker program and would criminalize unlawful presence. It also would fund construction of a 700-mile security fence along the Mexican border and encourage arrests of people who violate immigration law.

But officials at Legal Momentum have not lost hope that legislation can be enacted to provide unauthorized immigrants with a path to legal status, and over the two-week recess the group urged lawmakers to keep working toward that goal.

Doris Depaz, an organizer who oversees women’s issues at Casa de Maryland, a Latino rights organization in the Maryland suburbs outside Washington, D.C., shared that sentiment in a telephone interview. She said she will spread the message on El Dia de Trabajo on May 1, also known as May Day, the international day dedicated to recognition of workers. Rallies are planned around the country, and boycotts and strikes are possible.

“We are working because we need some people to represent us, the people that nobody can hear, nobody have time to hear,” Depaz said.

Senate leaders have not given up on resolving their differences and passing a bill. The Senate Judiciary Committee is scheduled to begin another round of immigration hearings on Tuesday, and Chair Arlen Specter, R-Pa., said he hopes to reach a procedural agreement with Senate leaders that will allow a vote on the issue on the Senate floor.

Other issues are competing for Senate floor time, however, such as additional spending for the war in Iraq, tax cuts, health care and gay marriage – an issue that conservatives hope will fire up the base in the months before the November midterm elections.

## ***A Larger Divide***

Differences among women’s groups over the timing of the bill reflect a larger divide within the immigrant rights community over whether to seize the moment and push for a compromise or whether to just call the whole thing off and wait until a new Congress is elected to office.

“There’s a tension in the movement about whether you go for what you can get or whether you say, ‘You know what, not like this,’” said Andrea Lee, co-director for development and administration at Mujeres Unidas y Activas, a Latina immigrant rights organization in San Francisco. “Those are questions that people who care about immigrant rights are still trying to answer.”

But all agree that immigration is a woman's issue, even if it isn't always portrayed that way in dominant print and broadcast media.

"The stereotypical face of an immigrant is probably a young man probably sending money home" to relatives, said Ingrid Tischer, a spokesperson for ERA, a legal women's rights group in San Francisco. "The demographics are changing," she said.

Indeed, the 5.4 million undocumented male immigrants comprise less than half – or 49 percent – of all undocumented immigrants, according to the Pew Hispanic Center.

There are another 4 million undocumented female immigrants, or 35 percent of the population, according to Pew. And there are about 1.8 million undocumented child immigrants of both genders, about 16 percent. In addition, there are another 3 million children who are U.S. citizens that are part of families headed by an unauthorized-migrant parent.

### ***Unique Barriers***

Undocumented women, however, face unique barriers.

Less likely than their male counterparts to work outside the home, women often have less financial independence than men and are often saddled with raising children, some of whom are U.S. citizens because they were born here. Many live in poverty and lack full access to public and government support services that provide aid in the areas of health care, housing, child care, reproductive health and economic development programs.

This lack of equal access to services is especially problematic for immigrant women who suffer sexual harassment, assault and domestic violence, Lin said.

Women also face difficult emotional terrain when migrating to foreign countries, said Yifat Susskind, a spokesperson for MADRE, an international women's rights organization in New York City.

Whether or not they work outside the home, women in most cultures – especially in Latin America, birthplace to a majority of immigrants in the United States – are responsible for food preparation, child care, health care, education and other aspects of life in their communities. They often lose those roles – and part of their identity – when they move to the United States, Susskind said.

"Women in a different way than men face a kind of unraveling of who they imagine themselves to be," Susskind said. "That kind of loss of identity can be just very, very destabilizing for people."

*Allison Stevens is Washington bureau chief at Women's eNews.*

For more information:

Legal Momentum Immigrant – Women Project:

<http://www.legalmomentum.org/issues/imm/index.shtml>

Mujeres Unidas y Activas: <http://www.mujaresunidas.net/>

Pew Hispanic Center: <http://pewhispanic.org/>

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