

Women Face Additional Hardship when Crossing US-Mexico Border

United States immigration policy cannot be understood or worked out in isolation from the worldwide movement of people and the driving economic forces behind this movement.¹ The number of worldwide international migrants has doubled to 200 million since 1980. Increasingly, women's international migration is a growing and complex phenomenon raising human rights concerns. Following from this is the disproportionate impact of migration and globalization on the lives of women, who now constitute 51 percent of migrants and who are increasingly migrating without male accompaniment. Most women are driven to migrate out of economic necessity. True reform of immigration policy must broaden to include the root causes of migration.

Here in the United States, demand for Mexican labor is not new and is well-documented as far back as the 1890s with Texas cotton growers. Yet, today's labor demand is distinctly marked by two new aspects: 1) the intensified demand for labor brought on by the forces of globalization, and 2) the associated growing presence of women crossing the border. While the 1994 *North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)* is not the sole reason for the increase in Mexicans crossing into the United States to find work and a living wage, it must be considered one of the main factors contributing to the more than 3,500 deaths from failed attempts to cross this border since 1993. Today, despite the fact that the U.S.-Mexico border is the most militarized border in the world between two nations not at war, the U.S. Border Patrol estimates that between 900,000 to 1.2 million people attempt to cross the border annually. While it is hard to know in real numbers how many unauthorized people are coming into the United States, it is known that women are increasingly choosing to cross this border despite the many risks involved to them and their children. In 2003, the United States Department of Homeland Security reported that women constituted 55 percent of immigrants to the United States. Today, of the more than 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States, it is estimated that 3 million, or 29 percent, are women between the ages of 18-39 years.

¹ There are 60 countries today that are poorer than they were 30 years ago due to failed structural adjustment policies and forced liberalization of their economies. Instead of these nation's funding social safety nets, education and healthcare services, they are compelled to use national wealth to service external debt obligations owed to donor countries and international financial institutions. The poorest countries of the world account for 0.4% of international trade, yet they lose an estimated \$700 billion annually through trading with wealthier nations. Nearly half of the world's people (2.8 billion) live on less than \$2 per day. Source: www.educationforjustice.org

Women crossing the U.S.-Mexico border have to worry about more than the harsh physical demands of crossing a vast desert. With the increase in women attempting to cross has come an increase in women's physical and sexual assaults, deaths and murder. It is believed that 1 in 3 women crossing the border is physically and sexually assaulted. It is harder to know the number of women murdered, as this is not a category investigated or counted by the U.S. Border Patrol. However, a composite picture pieced together through county coroner reports, local newspapers, and nonprofit organizations like 'No More Deaths' is providing clearer information on the fate of many women. Likewise, women who survive their attempt to cross are slowly coming forward to tell their traumatic experiences. Accounts of these ordeals are being told to Border Patrol officers, detention staff, including Sisters of Mercy, humanitarian aid and service providers, and relatives. Perpetrators are most likely to be gangs on either side of the border, U.S. vigilantes, or 'coyotes' who migrants pay to help them cross. Women migrants do not report crimes against them as often as crimes happen. U.S. immigration law must be crafted so that women are not left vulnerable by the pressures to migrate, and further, are protected by law if they do become victims.

Current immigration law and policies are not adequate, making vulnerable people, especially women, more vulnerable. Law-makers must consider what the personal and economic pressures are that push people to take such risks in crossing a border without the protection of governments. Law-makers are morally obligated to ask what the effects of their laws will be on the most vulnerable. On May 4, 2006, the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas called on the U.S. Congress to address the root causes of migration with special consideration of the pressures put on women to migrate. It is time for the inclusion of a gender perspective in all countries' national immigration policies and practices in order to promote and protect the human rights of women. Immigration law and policies need to address societal gender inequalities that are amplified when women migrate.

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