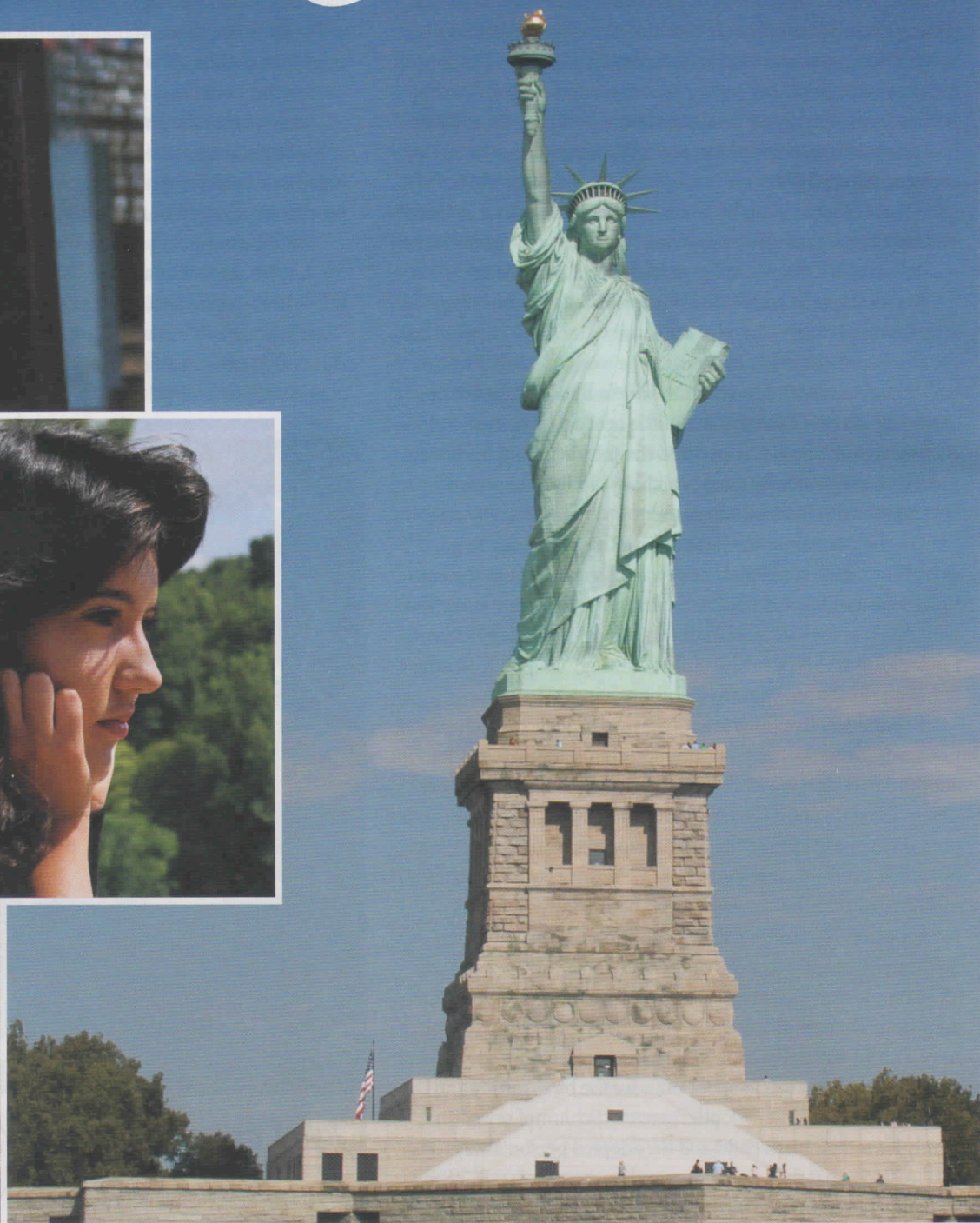


“When you put the child first, it’s not about…”

Real faces of *immigration*



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Three quarters of undocumented immigrants in this country are women and children. These struggling families bear the brunt of our broken immigration policy.

by Laura Fletcher

In her new hometown in New Jersey, 9-year-old Ana Bonilla-Martinez cried herself to sleep every night.

She could communicate with almost no one at her new elementary school and had to learn English quickly. Noticing her aptitude, her teachers encouraged her to “pursue the American dream.”

“I felt like nobody understood my situation and that it was senseless and wrong to tell a student this,” Bonilla-Martinez says. “In reality, [my teachers and I] weren’t the same.... The American dream isn’t true for everybody.... It may be true for you, but not for me.”

Two years earlier, in 1997, Bonilla-Martinez’s father, a farmer in Mexico, was hit and killed by a bus. Her mother, a young widow with only a sixth-grade education, decided the best thing she could do was move to New Jersey, where her sister had already “made it.” Bonilla-Martinez and her brothers stayed behind in Mexico with their paternal grandparents, farmers who started raising livestock after the North American Free Trade Agreement rendered

their agricultural crops unmarketable. One day Bonilla-Martinez’s mother came and spirited them away in secret.

Her mother’s plan was far from ideal. She soon lost her full-time job in the United States and was forced to enter the network of underground temp agencies that employ undocumented immigrants throughout the country. She moved from one crowded sweatshop job to the next and was subject to sexual harassment, exploitation, and abuse. Her children had little hope of pursuing higher education in the United States, because undocumented immigrants are barred from obtaining federal need-based financial aid.

Bonilla-Martinez’s situation of being trapped between forces of fate and geography, family and opportunity, is emblematic of the dilemmas undocumented immigrants in the United States face today. But as women’s rights activist Gloria Steinem and immigration activist Pramila Jayapal argued in their 2010 essay, “Surprise! Immigration Is a Woman’s Issue,” Bonilla-Martinez’s

circumstances are even more indicative of the plight faced by undocumented women.

“Close your eyes and conjure up the image of an ‘illegal immigrant.’ If you see a male farmworker, petty criminal, or even a drug dealer and potential terrorist, you’re not alone,” wrote Steinem and Jayapal. “Threatening and always-male images are the most common not only in anti-immigrant rhetoric, but in mainstream news media and movies.... The reality is that immigration is, in large part, about women and children.”

Women and children first

As Steinem and Jayapal pointed out in their piece, 51 percent of undocumented immigrants in the United States are women, while a full 75 percent are either women or children. They are driven to the United States by poverty, violence, and limited opportunities in their home countries—situations that are

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often, if not always, worse for women than for men.

And they are rooted here by their children: 73 percent of undocumented immigrants in the United States have children who were born here. Concern for children drives women to stay in the States and work through the arduous process of attaining legal residency in greater numbers than men.

Women also come because they fear being abandoned: In some countries it is not uncommon

national immigration policy that strongly favors high-paid, high-tech workers. Such workers are mostly men. Women frequently have difficulty accessing the education needed for technology work in their home countries. Only 27 percent of working visas are held by women.

And so, most women who would like to come to the United States legally are dependent on a male relative in order to do so—which is sometimes a dangerous situation. These women must join

have been a good excuse to give up on school. But something in her would not break. She managed to cobble together enough private scholarships to attend her local community college and obtain an associate degree in chemistry, graduating with highest honors.

Shortly before her graduation, Bonilla-Martinez joined Wind of the Spirit, an interfaith group that works toward immigration reform. She decided to take the next few years off

Martinez had a simple reply: “It was really here that I established my moral values, my ideas about democracy, about women’s rights.”

Although her grandparents in Mexico taught her a lot, Bonilla-Martinez conceded, women in their farming village lived in total submission to their husbands. Domestic abuse and sexual assault were common, as they are for many women in rural communities throughout the developing world. Higher education can seem impossible for women in such places.

Women began to overtake men in their rate of immigration to the United States in the late 1970s. Prior to that time, the only major immigrant group that was mostly female was the Irish, who in the 19th century were singular for thinking their women “powerful” enough to succeed on their own. Mexico has now surpassed Ireland and every other country in its contribution of women to the American population.

For women in Mexico, violence outside—and inside—the home is a serious threat. A 2012 report by the Nobel Women’s Initiative found that police and government officials were the most frequent perpetrators of rape and other sexualized violence in Mexico. Femicide, or the systematic, targeted murder of women, often including sexual violence, has gone up 40 percent in Mexico since 2006.

Bonilla-Martinez and her activist cohort were able to get the New Jersey Legis-

“If we’re going to build a movement that supports reform, we have to make it relevant to everybody.”

for a father to depart for the United States in search of work, and then later stop sending money home because he has found a new wife and new children to support in America.

The industries that prey specifically on illegal immigrants in the United States are overwhelmingly female: Nationwide, women make up 85 to 90 percent of sweatshop workers, more than one fifth of migrant farmworkers, and 90 to 95 percent of domestic workers. Ninety percent of those who are forced to immigrate to the United States as sex slaves are women.

While the employment market hungrily snatches up these women, it leaves them vulnerable to terrible exploitation and abuse. This situation is facilitated in part by a

the notorious backlog of 4.3 million visa applicants seeking residency with family in the United States.

“It takes on average about 20 years for the application for family members to process,” explains activist Sally Velasco-Richmond of the Alliance of Filipinos for Immigration Rights and Empowerment (AFIRE). “That is too long to wait to see your family.”

It is especially long to wait if you live in a place that is desperately poor and plagued by gender-based discrimination and violence. This is frequently the plight of women who choose to come to the United States illegally.

Daring to dream

For Bonilla-Martinez, her undocumented status would

from school to campaign for the New Jersey DREAM Act—officially called the New Jersey Tuition Equality Act. This proposed legislation would offer in-state tuition at public colleges for undocumented residents who had come to the States as children.

On January 7, 2014, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie signed the act into law, but he used the power of conditional veto to strike the portion offering undocumented “DREAMers” state financial aid. Since New Jersey’s in-state tuition is among the highest in the country, this rendered the act virtually pointless.

When asked if it would be possible for her to attend college in Mexico—where tuition at public universities is as low as \$550—Bonilla-

lature to introduce a new bill that would offer DREAMers financial aid in September 2014. If Christie seeks the presidential nomination in 2016, Bonilla-Martinez says they are hopeful the next New Jersey governor—regardless of party affiliation—will support their cause. Time will tell whether the path to higher education is cleared for them.

A new kind of women's movement

Since Steinem and Jayapal called attention to the significance of immigration reform for women, women's groups both inside and outside the immigrant community have galvanized for change. Spearheading the movement is the umbrella activist organization that Jayapal leads, We Belong Together.

The organization was launched in 2010 in a partnership between the National Domestic Workers Alliance and the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum. "For us, it was also about trying to bring forward stories of immigration that would resonate across different ethnicities," says Jayapal. "If we're going to build a movement that supports reform, we have to make it relevant to everybody."

Stories of women being deported, separated from their children, suffering rampant wage theft and sexual harassment, and fleeing the terror of violence and oppression in their home countries resonated strongly. In addition to groups such as AFIRE and Wind of the Spirit, We

"Historically, we [U.S. citizens] have always resisted each new wave of immigrants, but they represent the hope of our future."

Belong Together has drawn the support of high-level civil rights organizations including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the National Organization for Women, and the national Catholic social justice lobby group NETWORK.

"We've been redefining what it means to be part of the women's movement, who sets the agenda," Jayapal says. "It's not just about our reproductive organs, but also about our legal status and how much we earn in our jobs."

Key reforms urged by We Belong Together include a broad and clear road map to citizenship for undocumented female workers and homemakers, better procedures for identifying and protecting human trafficking victims, stricter enforcement of due process on deportation proceedings, and better funding of English classes to help immigrants adapt to the United States.

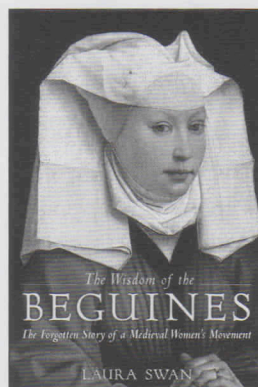
We Belong Together's numerous member groups have been pressuring politicians for immigration reform the old-fashioned way: by raising public awareness through media and demonstrations, by approaching political leaders in person and in writing, and by registering sympathetic U.S. citizens from their

communities to vote. Many undocumented women have courageously allowed themselves to be arrested.

NETWORK made immigration reform the focus of its 2013 Nuns on the Bus tour. "Historically, we [U.S. citizens] have always resisted each new wave of immigrants, but they represent the hope of our future," says Sister of Social Service Simone Campbell, executive director of NETWORK. She pointed out the important advocacy for immigrants being under-

taken by women's religious communities throughout the United States and south of the border. "[A church without frontiers that considers itself mother to all]"—we're just doing what the pope calls us to do," she says.

The collaboration of We Belong Together's member organizations culminated in a 48-hour fast from March 8 through March 9, 2014 on the National Mall in Washington. Various women civil rights leaders, including Sherrilyn Ifill of the NAACP

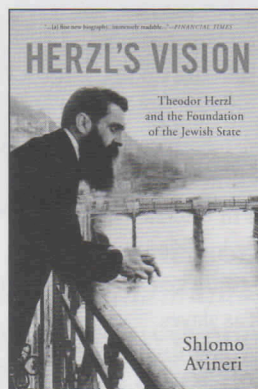


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Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Laura Murphy of the ACLU, and Sister Campbell joined the fast.

The group was successful in introducing a number of pro-woman amendments in the comprehensive immigration reform bill that passed in the U.S. Senate in June 2013, including an amendment securing additional working visas for domestics. But the bill is stuck in the House of Representatives.

In November, President Obama bypassed Congress

male relative doesn't have the right to abuse them or steal their wages, even when they are not legal residents, can be a major feat.

Activist Jesusa Rivera is chair of the Civil Rights for Immigrants committee for Transforming Action through Power (TAP), a faith-based organization that leads social actions with five churches in South Bend, Indiana. She also works as a case manager for the labor nonprofit Proteus, Inc., overseeing training and social ser-

ment and sexual assault. Like the men, they typically had no medical care if they were injured or sick.

Rivera said that although the laws protecting migrants have improved, not much has truly changed since she was a girl. "We try to help them understand that they don't have to live like this," she says. "It's not so much of a reality for them, the moral grounds. They don't understand that it's a problem that they don't have running water.... Their experiences in previous environments were so similar."

Rivera's father had only a sixth-grade education, and her mother could not read or write. "My mom's the more passive one," she says. "She would always say, 'It doesn't matter,' and just smile and turn the other cheek."

One new factor that has enabled many undocumented women to speak up is concern for the more than 90,000 children detained on the southern U.S. border since October 2013.

When Gov. Mike Pence of Indiana discovered that 245 of the migrant children had been relocated to his state, he sent a formal letter asking President Obama that the children "be returned expeditiously to their home countries."

But experts on human trafficking have warned that acting hastily could cause officials to miss those children who have been victims of trafficking and could obtain refugee status. The *New York Times* has already related the stories of some girls who claim to have been forced into sexual slavery by gangs.

There is also the specter of hell the children would be returning to in their home countries—primarily Honduras, but also El Salvador and Guatemala—where the Salvadoran American Mara Salvatrucha and 18th Street Gangs, which originated in Los Angeles, have literally overrun local governments, unleashing terrible violence on the local people. This is especially the case in Honduras, where the United States supported a military coup in 2009.

Rivera convinced a group of migrant worker families in her parish, including some border children who had already been reunited with relatives in Indiana, to accompany her to the state capitol to confront the governor in person about his position.

The group made the three-hour trek to Indianapolis by bus, passed through security at the Indiana Statehouse, and lined up outside the governor's office. They learned he was not available. Two of Governor Pence's staff members came out to meet them.

One of the children, a little boy, read aloud a prayer that South Bend Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades had written in honor of the children. Then one of the little girls stepped forward and asked, "Why does [the governor] want to send us to a country where we will be raped, murdered, possibly be forced to join a gang?"

The staff members didn't answer, but one of them put his head down in shame. The families left the governor a rosary, saying they would pray for him. **USC**

"Why does [the governor] want to send us to a country where we will be raped, murdered, possibly be forced to join a gang?"

by announcing an executive action to prevent the deportation of 4.7 million undocumented immigrants. But the new Republican-controlled Congress has vowed to combat the president's move, leaving the issue far from settled.

"You have rights"

Before many women immigration activists can challenge political leaders, they must take a much smaller but much more difficult step: convincing undocumented women that they have rights. Many undocumented women come from extreme poverty and are used to seeing life as a daily struggle for survival. Frequently they have low levels of education. Convincing them that an employer or

vices for agricultural workers in seven Indiana counties.

Rivera grew up in a family of migrant farmworkers and witnessed her parents being called derogatory names and compared to pigs and horses by the farm managers they worked for. Farmers would occasionally fail to pay her parents, pay them late, or forget to send a truck to pick them up in the fields after work. Living quarters on the farms sometimes were filthy and had no running water or electricity. Pay was always low. Some workers were trafficked and forced to work as slaves.

Women, who were outnumbered four to one by men in the fields, lived with the reality of sexual harass-