

National Organization for Women

Kim Gandy
President

Olga Vives
Executive Vice President



Melody Drnach
Action Vice President

Latifa Lyles
Membership Vice President

March 7, 2007

Dear Member of Congress,

NOW's bottom line for *all* people is that they be treated fairly and with respect and that their hard work is recognized and their families thrive. Our members and supporters, in your community and state and all across this nation, respectfully request that you conduct the upcoming debate around legislation dealing with immigration and undocumented workers with the fairness and respect that you expect for yourself, your family, staff and constituents. ***Congress must not support an immigration bill that builds walls and prisons, criminalizes workers without papers, separates families and promotes fear and that does not provide a path to permanent residency and citizenship.***

NOW is part of an important new collective of advocates, The National Coalition for Immigrant Women's rights. We are concerned with the rights and needs of immigrant women and their families and hope that you will look carefully at the economic, cultural, and legal challenges and barriers these women face as they defend themselves from family violence, workplace harassment and exploitation. Immigrant women are attempting to provide a healthy and safe environment for their children. Everyday, immigrant women and their families get up ready to tackle challenges and to take advantage of opportunities. In our barrios, in the fields, in the factories, in the service industries – restaurants, hotels, retail stores – in the cleaning industry, computer rooms, customer service centers, government and community service agencies, charity organizations and home businesses – all across our nation, there is an immigrant woman working hard and making a difference in our nation's economic health and community well-being.

For the over 3 million undocumented women immigrants life is especially grueling. They often migrate as part of a young family and are likely to have little or no education or work experience and even less likely to gain that schooling, job training or work experience once they are in the U.S. They are most often the home and family caregivers, isolated and often in hiding. When they do work, they have multiple part-time jobs, face a gender wage gap and rarely earn the minimum wage. They are prone to exploitation and abuse and their undocumented status precludes them from speaking out, asking for decent wages, time off for illness or family crises.

Their economic survival is precarious, due to their undocumented status as well as linguistic, cultural and legal barriers. They do not have access to social services and regular health care and are not covered and protected by labor laws. They live in substandard, crowded housing and have little access to public or personal transportation. They do not have a license to drive a car and work for pittance wages paid under the table and in cash. They do not have bank accounts or charge cards. Their children may be in school, but often do not have vaccination records, so are prevented from attending public schools.

Undocumented immigrant families are not eligible for welfare support, food stamps, Medicaid health coverage (including prenatal care), and most public services and benefits. Their children born here do have the right to one year of Medicaid benefits, but applying for and collecting these benefits may expose them to authorities and subject them to criminal penalties or deportation.

National Organization for Women

Kim Gandy
President

Olga Vives
Executive Vice President



Melody Drnach
Action Vice President

Latifa Lyles
Membership Vice President

Undocumented immigrants are tax payers, when they buy gas, pay a phone bill, purchase sundries and even food, depending on the state where they live. Their rent reflects the owner's property tax expenses, and their public travel includes transportation taxes. In fact, it has been estimated that all immigrants, regardless of status, will pay on average \$80,000 per capita **more** in taxes than they use in government services over their lifetime.

Please do not promote nor vote for any legislation that fails to provide economic and family supports for immigrant women and their families, including improved working conditions and preserving existing Violence Against Women Act provisions that relate to immigrant families. A path to residency and citizenship must be provided so that responsible, hard working immigrant families can be rewarded for their labors and their contributions. In addition, please include: 1) A legalization program where an estimated 8 to 8.5 million undocumented immigrants will be able to come out of the shadows and be put on a path to permanent residence; 2) Ag JOBS where a million undocumented agricultural workers would be put on a path to permanent residence; 3) DREAM act, where undocumented immigrant students will be put on a path to citizenship and will be able to continue on to college along with their classmates; 4) Significant increase in family visas where a family-based immigration system will be updated to speed family unification; 5) Significant increase in employment visas; and 6) A new temporary worker program that allows persons to come legally each year and take jobs that are not being filled by American workers. This program includes worker protections, gives workers the ability to change employers, and provides a path to permanent residence for those who want to stay; and 7) WISH act, providing a safe harbor and safety-net benefits to immigrant victims of sexual and domestic violence.

Immigration is very much an issue that affects women, as more than half of the almost 12 million undocumented immigrants are women and children. Providing a way for these women to become legal workers in the United States would improve their lives and the lives of their families through better paying jobs with benefits, family reunification and a pathway to citizenship.

Our call to you and this nation is for fair reform that doesn't make felons out of undocumented immigrants and the people and institutions who provide services to them. Reform must not build walls or promote hatred, vigilante tactics and servitude. Instead, it must value the work and contributions of immigrants working and raising families here. The majority of immigrants come to this country in search of a better life, in search of an opportunity to work and prosper, for political reasons in search of democracy and freedom, or for economic reasons in search of food, shelter, a job, or for educational opportunities to obtain a degree and skills to prepare for a better life, or to escape religious and ethnic persecution in search of freedom to worship openly and express their faith.

This has been the story of immigration in the United States since the beginning, and continues to this day. This country was built on the backs of immigrants from all over the world and NOW hopes that you will support a bill that continues our nation's commitment to honoring and protecting the principles of hard work, responsibility, fairness and decency.

Sincerely,

President

1100 H Street, NW • Third Floor • Washington, DC 20005 • (202) 628-8669 • Fax (202) 785-8576
website: www.now.org • email: now@now.org