

National Coalition for Immigrant Women's Rights

The National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health (NLIRH)
The National Organization for Women (NOW)
The National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum (NAPAWF)

June 25, 2007

Dear Senator,

Our list of supporters has grown, so we are resending this to you today as organizations who are working to promote and protect the rights and basic needs of immigrant women and their families. We encourage the U.S. Senate to enact comprehensive immigration reform legislation that includes an earned path to citizenship, fair and just working conditions, and the preservation of family immigration categories.

We applaud the efforts of Senators who proposed amendments that furthered the goal of passing just and humane immigration reform. However, we have serious reservations about amendments that restrict opportunities and impose punitive measures against hard-working immigrants. Moreover, although the Kennedy-Kyl compromise contains some promising reforms, we believe that there is more work to be done to protect immigrant women and children. For example, because the Senate bill does not expand family-based immigration and fails to recognize the work of undocumented women, we are concerned that such gaps will expose immigrant women to numerous economic, social and reproductive health disparities.

The Senate bill increases the risk of harm to immigrant women and children and does not effectively address their needs. The Senate proposal replaces our current family-based immigration system with a merit-based system that severely restricts the ability of U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents to reunite with their families. The current Senate proposal also increases immigrant women's vulnerability to abuse by cutting off many victims from the protections offered to them by the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA). Further, the bill establishes a "merit-based" system of entry for new immigrants and undocumented immigrants that fails to value work largely performed by immigrant women, such as caring for our children and maintaining our homes.

Family unification has been a cornerstone of our immigration system since 1965. Historically, the U.S. immigration system impacts men and women differently. Women rely more heavily than men on family-based immigration and are 38% more likely to attain legal permanent residency through family-based immigration visas than men. The plan to eliminate most family-based immigration categories will reduce legal immigration avenues through which immigrant women can reunite with their loved ones. The result will be continued undocumented immigration and increased exploitation of immigrant women. When immigrant women do not have legal paths in which to enter the country and re-unite with their children, they are left vulnerable to the sexual, physical and mental exploitation of traffickers, smugglers and employers. Such abuse can result in unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections, like HIV.

Immigrant women are also much less likely to enter through our employment-based system as principal visa holders (only 4%). Rather, they are much more likely to enter as dependent spouses and children of men who receive employment-based visas. A 'merit' based system will only make

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this disparity worse. In their home countries, immigrant women often do not have access to the same educational and professional opportunities as men. They also have less access to family economic resources and less control over family decision making around important issues such as which spouse or child should apply for work related visas to the United States. Immigrant women will be disadvantaged by an immigration system that awards points for educational achievement and technical work experience. Replacing our family-based immigration system with a system that rewards the already privileged will have a devastating impact on immigrant women. The lack of legal immigration avenues for women will enhance power and control by others over women's immigration status, fostering immigrant women's susceptibility to abuse.

Moreover, under the proposed merit system, most specialty occupations, and 80% of the high demand jobs favored with high point values, require a college degree and/or are in male dominated professions (e.g. construction). Only 23% of high demand jobs are in female dominated occupations, and those jobs are low or very low paying, such as home, health and personal care workers. Barred by lack of access to university degrees, by lack of access to family economic resources, and by low paying jobs in the U.S., few hard-working undocumented immigrant women will be benefit from the Senate's proposed legalization program.

Our groups will work with the House as it takes up the debate over comprehensive immigration reform. We hope that a fair and just immigration bill will pass that protects hard working immigrant families, that men and women can equally access, that does not cut women off from paths to citizenship based on class, and provides for the health and safety of immigrant women and children. Because we believe that immigrant women deserve the same rights and opportunities as all women, comprehensive immigration reform must:

- Provide a path to citizenship;
- Protect immigrant victims of violence;
- Reunite immigrant families;
- Improve immigrant women's access to family-based immigration; and
- Provide immigrant women with access to essential reproductive health care services.

We respectfully ask that Senators, Members of the House, and all those who believe in the human right to dignity and respect, work together to accomplish the goals of family unity, fair treatment of all immigrant workers and protection for immigrant victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and trafficking. Any other approach will be harmful to immigrant women and children, and to the nation as a whole.

Sincerely,

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List in formation:

Americans for Democratic Action, Inc.
Asian Law Caucus
Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance, AFL-CIO,
Center for Ethics in Action
Chaya
Equal Rights Advocates, Inc.
Family Planning Advocates
Hispanos Unidos de Buffalo, Inc.
Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project
International Immigrants Foundation
Japanese American Citizens League
Maine Civil Liberties Union.
Ms. Foundation for Women
National Abortion Federation
National Advocates for Pregnant Women
National Association Social Workers
National Institute for Reproductive Health
National Network of Abortion Funds.
National Peace Foundation
National Women's Conference Committee
National Women's Health Network
NETWORK: A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby
New Immigrant Community Empowerment
New Voices Pittsburgh: Women of Color for Reproductive Justice.
Planned Parenthood Federation of America
Planned Parenthood of Metropolitan Washington DC
Pro-Choice Public Education Project
Rural Family Development or the Migrant Clinicians Network
South Asian American Leaders of Tomorrow (SAALT)
Stop Family Violence
United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society
United Methodist Church, General Commission on Religion and Race
Womens Information Network
Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press