



## How the Reproductive Justice Movement Benefits Latinas

Rocío R. García, Arizona State University-Tempe

In early September 2015, Blanca Borrego, an undocumented Latina immigrant accompanied by her two daughters, arrived at a women's health clinic in Texas for a routine gynecological exam. Sitting in the waiting room for nearly two hours, Blanca's anxiety and impatience grew to the point where she almost walked out of the office. Eventually, Blanca was met by local law enforcement officials who escorted her out of the clinic in handcuffs for allegedly using a forged driver's license during patient intake. Blanca's eight-year-old daughter watched in tears while her mother was taken away and a deputy told Blanca's eldest daughter that their mother would face deportation. Blanca remains in county jail on a \$35,000 bond.

Scenarios like Blanca's – highlighting the impact of race, class, and immigration status on reproductive rights – are not always brought to the fore. Although reproductive rights activists say they advocate for *all* women, difficulties faced by white, middle-class, heterosexual women get more attention than those experienced by women of color, immigrant or transgender women, or those with disabilities. However, a movement for reproductive justice has emerged by and for women of color that offers new possibilities to bring previously neglected issues to light. Key challenges include tackling the reproductive experiences of Latinas – and looking for ways to do more to address their needs in reproductive health care and policy.

### Latina Realities

Understanding Latinas' reproductive lives requires understanding how many forms of disadvantage intersect and create reinforcing disadvantages.

- Poor migrant women often flee interpersonal and institutional violence and poverty in their home countries, only to become susceptible to sexual assault at the hands of border officials, human traffickers, and others.
- Transgender Latinas are more likely than heterosexual Latinas to leave their home countries to escape interpersonal violence and economic disenfranchisement.
- Undocumented Latinas simultaneously face dangers of family separation through deportation and, because of their low-income status, have difficulty getting access to abortion services. There are too few abortion providers and many health care providers lack the language and cultural skills to help these women. Fears about seeking medical help can leave immigrant Latinas subject to deportation or life-threatening crises. Increasingly, anti-abortion "crisis pregnancy centers" pose as legitimate medical clinics in order to pressure Latinas to continue unwanted pregnancies.
- Both immigrant and U.S.-born Latinas are more likely than other women to lack health insurance coverage and live and work in unhealthy environments where they are exposed to air pollution, unsafe drinking water, agricultural pesticides, and lead and mercury contamination.
- According to a 2016 policy report by the organization California Latinas for Reproductive Justice, Latinas are the group of women least likely to attain basic or higher college degrees, making it difficult for them to attain well-paying, stable employment. Employed Latinas in California, specifically, earn 43.6 cents for every dollar earned by white men.
- While Latina/o communities have higher rates of young families compared to whites, many of these families experience stigma and poverty and suffer shortfalls in resources all parents need in order to raise their children safely.

### When Abortion "Choice" is Not Enough

Latinas' experiences shed light on the inadequacy of any approach to reproductive rights that emphasizes abortion access above all. The "choice" framework that undergirds much reproductive rights advocacy in the United States assumes that women face few constraints in raising healthy families and so are mainly concerned about access to abortion when they choose not to have babies. But this perspective is grounded in white middle-class experience and ignores the pressures many poor women face. When poor and working-class women of color choose to continue a pregnancy rather than seek abortion, for example, they are often criticized for choosing a less economically sustainable path. Yet for many poor women, including immigrant and native Latinas, parenthood may signify a powerful means for self-determination, including resistance to pressures from public agencies to limit reproduction, such as coerced sterilization. At its core, the reproductive justice movement advocates for the right for poor women and women of color to have children or not have children as they see fit. Rather than only advocating for expanding access to abortion and contraception, the movement advances policies to help all people raise the children they want in safe and healthy environments.

## **Advancing Reproductive Justice for Latinas**

Research by California Latinas for Reproductive Justice shows that many in Latino communities support every woman's right to choose an abortion, but also believe that advocating for abortion access is only one way to empower Latinas. In California, the movement works to repeal family cap limits on family welfare grants and supports a bill that would give parents extra benefits to pay for diapers. Both steps would help many Latinas in the state. Currently California limits on family grants prohibit extra financial support to children born while their families are receiving basic needs grants from the state's welfare program. This limit is based on the racist and classist notion that poor women of color have children only to receive aid – and this denies poor women the right to choose to have more children.

U.S. reproductive politics is rife with controversy – and most public attention focuses on issues of access to abortion. But full reproductive justice for less privileged women and families, including Latinas' families, requires socioeconomic support for raising children as well as further steps to ensure access to a full range of reproductive health services. Beyond the clash of pro-choice and pro-life advocates lies the goal to which we all should aspire: people's right to parent when they choose and raise children in safe and healthy conditions.

[www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org](http://www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org)

**May 2016**