Gendered Assaults: The Attack on Immigrant Women

by Syd Lindsley

If you opened a newspaper in Iowa this spring, you might have come across an advertisement stating: “How do you feel about paving over the amber waves of grain, the purple mountain majesties and the fruited plain?” If you read the small print, you found not the anticipated environmental message, but a proposal to drastically reduce immigration to the U.S. to 200,000 people a year. The ad states: “…every year in America we pave an area equal to the state of Delaware... Why? Because our nation’s population is growing at an unprecedented rate, due primarily to an immigration policy that’s changing the landscape of America.”

Iowa isn’t the only state besieged by anti-immigrant media campaigns. Local and national anti-immigrant groups, such as Negative Population Growth (NPG), the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), ProjectUSA, and the California Coalition for Immigration Reform (CCIR), are erecting billboards and placing print, TV, and radio ads in locales across the nation.

This resurgence of anti-immigrant organizing began in the 1990s, as many politicians, organizations, and individuals cast blame on immigrants as the source of the nation’s social, economic, and environmental problems.

While deepening economic inequality in the U.S. has set the stage for the resurgence of anti-immigrant scapegoating, economic matters alone are not enough to explain the force with which anti-immigrant opinion has taken hold in the public arena. The recent revival of nativism is also motivated by white U.S. residents’ anxieties about the changing racial demographics caused by the sustained immigration of non-white foreigners. In the last three decades, the majority of immigrants have been non-white; the majority of today’s immigrants are either Asian or Latino.

The migration of so many non-white individuals to the country threatens to destabilize the core connection between whiteness and “American”-ness that comprises the mythology of a homogenous “American” national identity, a prospect that has put many white U.S. residents on edge. Indeed, the “threat” of a non-white
majority in the United States has sparked major outcry. In 1994, presidential candidate Pat Buchanan warned, “A non-white majority is envisioned if today’s immigration continues.” Given this prediction, he argued that the U.S. needed a “time out” from immigration.³

In this wave of anti-immigrant sentiment, politicians and immigration “reform” groups are taking aim at immigrant women and children in particular. As mothers, immigrant women are especially dangerous in the eyes of today’s nativists because of their capacity to give birth to non-white citizen children. Of course, most anti-immigrant politicians and organizations deny such racist and sexist motives, preferring more palatable economic and environmental arguments.

Immigrant women and children are also targeted for a second reason. The U.S. government and employers rely on a low-cost temporary labor reserve of migrant men and women to whom they have no obligation to provide education, health insurance, or other services. The settlement of immigrant families, including children, shifts the cost of reproduction (both biological and social) from the sending country to the U.S. While government and employers want to obtain profits from immigrant labor, they don’t want to bear the costs of reproducing the labor force.

The so-called “environmental” anti-immigrant perspective claims that immigration and the higher fertility rates of immigrants are causing overpopulation and thus environmental degradation. The “green” attack on immigrants is lodged securely within a population control framework which maintains that halting population growth is the key to stemming poverty, environmental degradation, and even war. U.S. anti-immigrant rhetoric blames immigrants and their children for perpetuating poverty, increasing scarcity, and destroying the environment. For example, a 1996 advertisement from NPG reads:

Immigration is the driving force behind the population growth that is devastating our environment and the quality of our lives. Primarily because of immigration we are rushing at breakneck speed toward an environmental and economic disaster [emphasis included].

FAIR’s The Environmentalist’s Guide to a Sensible Immigration Policy evokes the threat of immigrant women’s reproduction in a section heading: “Immigration’s Invisible Multiplier: Offspring.”⁴ FAIR and other anti-immigrant organizations often refer to the danger of so-called “chain migration,” a.k.a. immigration through family reunification laws. FAIR warns that “a single immigrant who is admitted for needed job skills, or out of humanitarian concerns, or for some other reason, can become the link in an unbreakable chain of family migration.”⁵ FAIR and other groups are lobbying for laws that would restrict family reunification. Women would be the primary victims of such legislation, since the vast majority of women immigrants come through family-based immigration laws. Furthermore, such reforms would create unnecessary hardship by prolonging the separation of immigrant families.

In the economic realm, immigrants and their children are blamed for depleting social services budgets, especially in areas where there is a concentrated population of foreign-born residents, such as California. In the 1990s, many immigration “reform” proponents began suggesting legislation aimed at decreasing the availability of social services to immigrants, especially undocumented ones. Although undocumented immigrants were never eligible for most types of welfare and Medicaid, recent legislation has attempted to reduce the few services available to all types of immigrants even further. Much of this legislation directly targets and affects immigrant women and children.

For example, early in the 1990s, California Rep. Elton Gallegly suggested a constitutional amendment that would deny citizenship to children born in the United States to undocumented parents, a proposal that some anti-immigrant organizations currently endorse.

In another example, California’s Proposition 187, which appeared on the 1994 ballot, would have prohibited local and state agencies from
providing publicly funded social services, education, welfare, and non-emergency health care to any person whom they do not verify as a U.S. citizen or lawfully admitted alien. Proponents of Prop 187 stressed the bar on public support for prenatal care for undocumented women. The phrase, “Two out of three babies delivered at Los Angeles county hospitals were born to undocumented women,” became a rallying cry of the Prop 187 campaign, even though this statistic is highly questionable. 

Clearly, Proposition 187 proponents placed little value on the reproductive health of undocumented women and their children. Proposition 187’s proposed ban on public education funds for undocumented children was also an attempt to permanently exclude these children from integration into U.S. society.

Just two years following Proposition 187’s assault on undocumented immigrants in California, the US Congress passed a bill that accomplished many of the same goals, this time on a national level. The bill was the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), popularly known as the welfare reform act. The Act had a significant impact on the way both documented and undocumented immigrants may use public services. The Act imposed restrictions on “legal” immigrants’ use of services, and banned “illegal” immigrants’ use of most public services altogether. The Act also gave states greater ability to deny state and local assistance to undocumented immigrants. Immediately after the enactment of PRWORA, former California Governor Pete Wilson made prenatal care the first target of his campaign to enact the federal law’s ban on state and local assistance to “illegal” immigrants.

Although Proposition 187 was declared unconstitutional, and Wilson’s ban on undocumented women’s access to prenatal care was eventually overturned by his successor, Gray Davis, these measures continue to have a very real effect on immigrant women’s reproductive health and access to services. A recent Urban Institute study points to a noticeable “chilling effect” on immigrants’ willingness to access health care and other benefits. The authors find that the nationwide decline in immigrants’ access to such programs is due less to actual eligibility changes than to immigrants’ fear and suspicion around using these programs—the “chilling effect” of welfare reform.

In fact, the attacks on immigrant women’s ability to reproduce and maintain their families form the root of the recent assault on immigrants. Attacks on legal and illegal immigrants’ rights to public services, including prenatal care, schooling for immigrant children, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and non-emergency health care are all attempts to regulate and control immigrant women’s reproductive work.

The right to choose whether to have or not to have children is a fundamental reproductive and human right for all women. Contemporary anti-immigrant politics attempt to place governmental restrictions on immigrant women’s ability to make their own reproductive choices.

Furthermore, in the context of a nationalistic, anti-immigrant social and political climate, the assault on immigrant women’s reproduction is fundamentally an assault on their right to contribute to the next generation of citizens. It is an attempt to control who may be considered “American” and to exclude undocumented immigrants, particularly Latinos and Asians, from the rights bestowed on citizens.

Although California was a hotspot for anti-immigrant activism and legislation during the 1990s, campaigns to foster anti-immigrant feeling and drastically cut immigration are well underway in all regions of the nation. More and more often, the message they are sending relies heavily on population control ideology, and perpetuates racist ideals of a homogenous white “America.”

The implications are clear: there are too many “outsiders” in this country, and “we” must do everything we can to keep their numbers down. In anti-immigrant propaganda, references to the “higher fertility” of recent immigrants suggest that immigrants’ fertility rates are
something to be tightly monitored and controlled. Such messages not only have dangerous consequences for immigrant women’s reproductive health and rights, they also clearly state that recent Latino and Asian immigrants are unvalued members of U.S. society.

Contemporary attacks on immigrants are dangerously eroding immigrants’ civil rights, including immigrant women’s reproductive health and rights. The nation that sings the praises of “liberty and justice for all” clearly fails to ensure immigrants’ access to these basic entitlements.

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Footnotes

2 See the following websites. Negative Population Growth: www.npg.org; Federation for American Immigration Reform: www.fairus.org; ProjectUSA: www.projectusa.org; California Coalition for Immigration Reform: www.ccir.net.


5 Ibid, p. 22.


FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES


Committee on Women, Population and the Environment (CWPE), c/o Population and Development Program, Hampshire College, Amherst, MA 01002. Visit CWPE on the web at www.cwpe.org or email at cwpe@hampshire.edu.


Political Ecology Group (PEG), Campaign to End the Greening of Hate. 965 Mission St., Suite 218, San Francisco, CA 94103, Phone: 415-777-3488, Fax: 415-777-3443. Visit PEG on the web at www.igc.org/peg, or email at peg@p-e-g.org.