

2023

Intersections of Violence Against Immigrant Women on the United States-Mexico Border

Holland Morgan
West Chester University, hsmorgan114@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/ramifications>



Part of the [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), [Legal Commons](#), [Migration Studies Commons](#), [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Morgan, Holland (2023) "Intersections of Violence Against Immigrant Women on the United States-Mexico Border," *Ramifications*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/ramifications/vol3/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ West Chester University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Ramifications* by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ West Chester University. For more information, please contact wcrestler@wcupa.edu.

The idea of a person being ‘illegal’ within the United States and other industrialized countries has not always appeared in our culture the same way it does currently. Accounting for the nativist ideologies that inherently came with the spread of colonialism, the idea of an illegal person and the strategies border police employ to “protect” American soil and citizens has transformed. Looking at the United States/Mexico border, racist and sexist rhetoric diminishes the image of immigrant women down to immoral and dehumanized individuals. Mexican immigrant men and LGBTQIA+ individuals also experience border and state violence, but immigrant women are the focus of this paper because their history and the ways they experience violence are unique. How immigrant women are made vulnerable is going to be explored in terms of intimate gendered violence, targeting from the border police, and silencing by the state. Using the disciplines of history, sociology, and women’s and gender studies, the intersections of border violence are analyzed in connection to the attempts by communities to fight for recognition of immigrant women’s humanity as well as practical systemic responses.

Beginning with the history of immigration enforcement, the Border Police was created in the United States by the Immigration Act of 1924. Their original purpose was to exclude ‘illegal aliens’ but it marked the creation of a police force with the specific goal to enforce who was a legal resident and who was not (Vera 2013). The idea of what the border police is needed for, both in the eyes of American culture and the state, has shifted since 1924. After the 9/11 terrorist attack, what was once just Immigration and Naturalization Services, was extended to three total units under the department of Homeland Security. These entities focus on citizenship and immigration (CIS), customs enforcement (ICE), and border protection (CBP). The border protection unit has the main

goal of preventing terrorists, drugs, or any weapons from entering the country. Since that has become the focus of the border, the CBP pursues and recruits agents that want to ‘protect’ the country from undocumented immigrants as well as illegal cargo (Vera 2013).

Seeking out agents that have these goals and using nativist ideologies to mark anyone that is perceived as a threat simply because of where they came from, puts immigrant women at great risk. The current state of border control does not reflect how the negative perception of Mexican or South American women predates the increased security at the border during the Bush administration. Beginning in the 1980s under the Immigration Reform and Control Act, the ability of immigrant mothers to utilize state aid for their children that were United States citizens was greatly restricted. Mary Romero of Arizona State University explained that this specific policy was “shaped by the belief that immigrants are a drain on the welfare system and public benefits. Consequently, immigrant women as mothers and their children are constructed as undesirable” (Romero 2011). The time period of this ideology was parallel to the ‘welfare queen’ popularized under the Reagan administration.

The welfare queen put forward a stigmatizing idea that poor women of color, often more specifically single Black mothers, are having children just to take advantage of welfare systems, at the loss to the American taxpayer. The term ‘anchor baby’ has been used to describe a similar idea, as immigration increased across the U.S./Mexico border, there was growing panic of the ‘hyperfertility’ of immigrant women and loss of state funding and taxpayer money (Foster 2017). This not only puts into question the morality of undocumented immigrant mothers, but also labels them as a threat to American citizens. The controlling image of Mexican and South American women being ‘hyperfertile’ feeds

into the fear that they will come to the United States and have so many children that it will push white populations into the racial minority. These images support the false narrative that we need the state and border police to control specifically immigrant women and their bodily autonomy (Collins 2000). All of these ideas of immigrant women lead to the bolstering of hate-based violence carried out by border officials as well as a justification for the systemic silencing of these women by the state.

In the *International Affairs Review*, Valeria Vera explains how the expansion of the border patrol and the militarist ideologies that come with it, has directly led to increases of gendered violence towards immigrant women. She states, “patriarchy establishes masculinity, masculinity establishes dominance, dominance justifies violence as a method of domination and therefore normalizes it”. In times when national guard troops are sent to border states in attempts to regulate immigration, incidents of hate-based and sexual violence increase. These troops are not trained in international or civil relations, they are trained in combat with the goal of stopping the ‘enemy’ (Vera 2013). The sociological concept of the ‘social body’ can be used to analyze how border militarization specifically puts women at risk. The social body refers to the physical body with all of the socially constructed factors connected to it (Angulo-Pasel 2019). Immigrant women are put at risk because with the social identity of ‘illegal’ being placed on them, undocumented status allows for border officials to hold the threat of deportation over them. The inherent devaluing of their humanity overall and ‘hyperfertility’ labels them as sexual objects, and border officials use their power to carry out hate-based violence with no repercussions, perpetuating the brutal assertion of dominance as well as racist and nativist beliefs.

It has been shown that the state supports violence carried out either through policy

or border officials, but it is also important to account for other socio-economic factors that can impact immigrant women and intimate violence they experience. In terms of women traveling through Mexico from South American countries to reach the United States border, or eventually living as undocumented immigrants in an American border state, there are many policies and state systems that limit their mobility. In terms of employment opportunities, undocumented women have few options that restrict them to gendered positions in manual labor jobs such as domestic work, food service, child care, etc.

Especially in border cities, American employers know they do not have working papers so that leaves these women without any legal protection from exploitation or unfair job loss (Angulo-Pasel 2019). Since they are vulnerable economically, many undocumented women rely on their family and kinship systems for job opportunities and social support.

As immigration from Mexico and South American countries boomed in the 80's and 90's, the family networks across both sides of the border increased as well. It can be beneficial for immigrant women to have strong family ties when arriving in a new country, although it can place a lot of familial pressure. In a study done on the experiences of Mexican and Mexican American women with family on both sides of the border, there were reports of family members taking their pay completely or restricting their autonomy over the money they earned. Also, since they can not freely travel between the borders, even if they are unhappy with the choice to emigrate and would like to go back, the social and economic obligations to family are prioritized over their own personal desires (Bastida 2001).

It can be beneficial for many undocumented women to have access to supportive kinship networks, although the cases where these women cannot access state or familial

support need to be considered as well. This can be in cases of intimate gendered violence within the family or lack of family systems on both sides of the border. Using Women's and Gender Studies and the analytical framework of intersectionality, the specific holistic needs of immigrant women as individuals can be accounted for. Mexican immigrant women's undocumented status impacts the rest of their identity, it holds meaning in how they are perceived sexually, their economic opportunities, access to state aid, and protection from intimate or hate-based violence. In a study done at the University of Texas on the contributing factors and needs of homeless women in U.S./Mexico border communities, it was stated that resources for childcare, job opportunities, violence prevention, and medical services were the main needs amongst the women interviewed (Perez et al. 2021). All of the previous factors analyzed such as anchor baby rhetoric, lack of economic opportunities, as well as state and hate-based violence are contributing to the neglect of immigrant women.

In response to all the ways immigrant women are impacted, the discipline of Women's and Gender Studies can also be used to look at effective resistance. Since it has been shown that the United States government sees these women as a threat, and dismisses violence carried out by agents of the state, the majority of resistance in recent years has been started by grassroots organizations run by family members and border communities (Blancas 2010). One of the most dangerous border cities for immigrant women in Mexico is Ciudad Juárez, near El Paso, Texas. There is a general lack of research on violence towards women in border cities, although Ciudad Juárez has been the subject of more studies because of its high crime rates paired with an inadequate legal system to support immigrant women. There have been increases in women traveling to this city for

economic opportunities close to the border but when they arrive and are living without any kin or state support, they are vulnerable (Domínguez-Ruvalcaba, Corona 2010).

In response to this issue, an organization has been started to address increases in femicide in border cities. Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa (Our Daughters Back Home - NHRC) is an organization started by mothers of victims of sexual violence to not only give voice to the family members they have lost but also the pain their community feels. Outside of increasing visibility, they also attempt to find those committing these crimes since they recognize that they cannot currently rely on the state to take action against this issue. They released a chart from the National Human Rights Commission outlining all the femicides accounted for in each major Mexican city in 2021. Many with the highest reports were cities along the border including Ciudad Juárez, Nuevo León, Chihuahua, and Sonora (“Cartografía del Femicidio en México”). The rhetoric of hyperfertility and anchor babies plays a role in how this issue is addressed.

The militarization of the border police and the apathetic reaction of the state is sustaining and concealing the violence Mexican immigrant women are experiencing. Grassroots organizations are able to work against these stereotypes and hold the Mexican and United States government accountable, and also help to meet the immediate needs of immigrant women. It does need to be considered that currently their social body can still dictate their housing or job opportunities and feeling of safety in border cities and beyond. Although complex issues offer no quick or easy solutions, these organizations can begin to unravel the perpetuation of violence by helping to create a humanized image of immigrant women in the eyes of the state and citizens.

Grassroots organizations such as the NHRC are a prime example of work that

wants to bring attention to this violence as well as justify their community's reactions. Patricia Ravela Blancas and her piece 'We Never Thought It Would Happen to Us', highlights how showcasing emotions such as anguish, fear, and insecurity can be incredibly powerful in bringing humanity back to the victims. Blancas and the NHRC actively critiqued responses to this growing issue, the Mexican government's and media attempts to portray it as isolated incidents or just another name being added to a list. Since the most attention is offered to Ciudad Juarez, women that have been targeted by this violence are called "Las Muertas de Juárez" (The Dead Women of Juárez). The mothers of these victims refuse this label because it plays into the cycle of victimization and puts more power of depiction in the hands of the media rather than community-led organizations (Blancas 2010).

Reflecting on the work of grassroots organizations and their critiques of state responses to this violence showcases the desperate need for integration between emotion or humanity and state responses to gendered violence. Currently, both the Mexican and United States governments are silencing survivors and victims' families by prioritizing the protection of physical borders and upholding nativist images to enforce immigration regulation. The actions of these mothers and organizations are not limited to a local scale; their work and stories can be shared on an international scale that can impact policy. It could be argued that the emotion of ethics and international politics typically challenge each other, because many facets of government and international politics currently and historically violate human rights. It can be difficult to integrate emotion and humanist ideas into many state systems because they have been designed to run efficiently in the pursuit of economic profit and protection of the nation, rather than its people. We can start

with giving more voice and funding to grassroots organizations that offer an accurate perspective of these issues and address the underlying socio-economic issues that put immigrant women at risk.

It has been shown historically that gendered violence against immigrant women is not a new issue, it is simply evolving. There are long-standing state ideologies that are embedded within our culture, so relying only on drastic policy change is not realistic in certain cases. Instead, it is essential to support organizations such as Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa and others that can address the immediate needs of Mexican immigrant women and shift narratives. If this can be paired with policy that does not demonize and restrict immigrants, major change could be achieved. The violence that women currently face on the border is paired with state restrictions on their economic opportunities, which in turn leaves many with only family or community to rely on for their survival. There are millions of immigrants from all over the world that live in the United States, but the position of undocumented Mexican women is unique because of their relation and distance to both sides of the border. That is why doing the work to restore their humanity and increase access to resources is absolutely necessary.

Works Cited

- Angula-Pasel, Carla. "The Categorized and Invisible: The Effects of the 'Border' on Women Migrant Transit Flows in Mexico." *Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute: Social Sciences*, vol. 8, no. 5, 2019, p. 144., doi:10.3390/socsci8050144.
- Bastida, Elena. "Kinship Ties of Mexican Migrant Women on the United States/Mexico Border." *Journal Of Comparative Family Studies*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2001, pp. 549–569.
- Blancas, Patricia Ravelo, et al. "We Never Thought It Would Happen to Us." *Gender Violence at the U. S. - Mexico Border: Media Representation and Public Response*, 1st ed., University of Arizona Press, 2010, pp. 37–57.
- "CNDH Cartography of Femicide in Mexico." *Nuestras Hijas De Regreso a Casa*, 6 Dec. 2021, <https://nuestrashijasderegresoacasa.blogspot.com/>.
- Collins, Hill Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge, 2000.
- Domínguez-Ruvalcaba, Héctor, and Ignacio Corona. *Gender Violence at the U. S.-Mexico Border: Media Representation and Public Response*. 1st ed., University of Arizona Press, 2010.
- Foster, Carly Hayden. "Anchor Babies and Welfare Queens : An Essay on Political Rhetoric, Gendered Racism, and Marginalization." *Women, Gender, and Families of Color*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2017, pp. 50–72., doi: 10.5406/womgenfamcol.5.1.0050.
- Perez, Lourdes M, et al. "Interpersonal and Structural Complexities among Women

Experiencing Homelessness in a U.S.-Mexico Border Community.”

Ehquidad International Welfare Policies and Social Work Journal , vol. 16,

July 2021, pp. 13–38.

Romero, Mary. “Constructing Mexican Immigrant Women as a Threat to American

Families.” *International Journal of Sociology of the Family*, vol. 37, no. 1,

2011, pp. 49–68.

Vera, Valeria. “Border Patrol’s Not-So-Secret: The Normalized Abuse of Migrant

Women on the U.S.-Mexico Border.” *International Affairs Review:*

University of San Francisco, 2013.