

# **Policies and Practices as Obstacles to Success for Local Organizations and Congregations that Help Latina Immigrants in Three New-Destination Sites**

Jane Henrici, Ph.D., Study Director  
Institute for Women's Policy Research

Presentation based on the forthcoming IWPR research report, "Organizations Working With Latina Immigrants: Resources and Strategies for Change" by Cynthia Hess, Ph.D., Jane Henrici, Ph.D., Claudia Williams, and Frances Zlotnick

*Please attend the report's release, with speakers' comments concerning its subject matter and a keynote presentation by Sara Manzano-Díaz, Director of the Women's Bureau, United States Department of Labor, March 25<sup>th</sup> at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, co-hosted with the National Council of La Raza. To RSVP, please go [here](#) and for more information about the project please go [here](#).*

Presentation prepared for the Roundtable, *Lifting the Shadows from Immigrant Women*, Wednesday, March 16, 2011, Washington, DC, at the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, organized in honor of Women's History Month by the National Coalition of Immigrant Women's Rights

**Attached please find maps prepared for the report showing the location of nonprofits and congregations that help Latina immigrants in three new-destination sites, relative to the population density and location of Latina immigrants, prepared by Claudia Williams, Research Analyst, IWPR.**



NOVA.pdf



Atlanta.pdf



Phoenix.pdf

**The immigrant population in the United States has experienced rapid growth in the last few decades, especially among new immigrants from Latin America. Within this context, hundreds of organizations and agencies right now work to help immigrants, including with their integration into US communities and society. Nonprofit organizations and religious congregations play an active role in this process.**

To understand better the process that these groups and the immigrants being helped are going through, the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) just completed a two-year study with funding from the Ford Foundation. **The IWPR project explores how nonprofits and congregations help Latin American immigrants—the largest and most rapidly growing segment of the immigrant population in the United States—and especially low-income Latina immigrant women, whose interests and concerns often get marginalized in the immigration debates.**

IWPR's study explores the challenges faced by Latina immigrants and the groups working to help them in three areas with rapidly growing immigrant populations: Atlanta, Georgia; Phoenix, Arizona; and Northern Virginia, a region within the Washington, District of Columbia (DC), metropolitan area. **On March 25<sup>th</sup>, IWPR, the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, and the National Council of La Raza will co-host a speakers' forum and release of the study's report at the Wilson Center here in Washington, DC.** Today, I'll present just **one** aspect from the report, to focus **away from** a reversal of an amendment to the US Constitution and **toward** the ideal of integration.

First of all, some background: it's important to understand that, between 1990 and 2009, the proportion of **legal** immigrants coming to the United States who were women rose, from 47 to 55 percent (see U.S. Department of Justice 2002 and U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2010, respectively) and the number of female **undocumented** immigrants also increased in recent years, especially from Mexico (Fry 2006; Passel 2006). Second of all, while it's true that many women migrate to the United States to join family members already here, **women are not just dependents who follow their husbands, fathers, and sons** (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003; Kelson and DeLaet 1999; Pedrazza 1991; Zlotnik 1995). **Women come to the US for a variety of reasons and with a broad range of goals:** they want to further their education, escape political turmoil, and achieve greater social independence (Kelson and DeLaet 1999; Pearce 2006). A growing number of immigrant women also come to find work to support themselves and their families (Pearce 2006).

Immigrant women come from all over the world, with the largest group from Mexico (26.7 percent), followed by the Philippines (5.2 percent), India (3.9 percent), China (3.8 percent), Vietnam (3.2 percent), Korea (3.1 percent), El Salvador (2.7 percent), and Cuba (2.6 percent) (Batalova 2009). Immigrant women hold varying levels of education, occupy a range of socio-economic positions, work in many different jobs, and participate in a variety of family arrangements (Batalova 2009; Pearce 2006). **In their multiple roles as spouses, caregivers, students, professionals, volunteers, and workers, immigrant women make important contributions in the US to local communities, the economy, and society.**

**But, we know that low-income immigrant women in particular face vulnerabilities that can impede their full participation in social, economic and political life.** Immigrant women are less likely than immigrant men to have education beyond high school, and 52 percent of immigrant women speak English less than very well (Batalova 2009). Immigrant women are often targets of public anti-immigrant sentiment and stereotyping: immigrant women are associated—erroneously—in the public mind as limited in their contribution to the US in terms of reproduction and in with consuming social services (Chang 2000). At the same time, immigrant women experience higher poverty rates than both their male counterparts and US-born women (Batalova 2009). This is partly true because **immigrant women who are able to work full-time make less than native-born women, as well as less than immigrant and native-born men** as we document in our analysis within our forthcoming report.

And, although some immigrant women work in the formal economy in jobs with adequate salaries and benefits, still others are employed in the informal sector—often doing private paid domestic work—in positions that generally come without contracts and other protections to ensure workers' rights (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1998). As this group here today in particular is aware, women who hold these jobs often receive substandard wages and lack the freedom to pursue employment opportunities with better pay and working conditions (Chang 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1998; Marchevsky and Theoharis 2006).

**The three research sites in which IWPR conducted its study over the past two years, Atlanta, Phoenix, and Northern Virginia, were selected in part because Latina immigrants now constitute a significant portion of the foreign born female population in each of these metropolitan areas.** The rapid growth in the immigrant population, both male and female, in these areas has created a range of needs that nonprofit organizations struggle to meet, and given women's particular needs, the groups can face added challenges. At the same time, IWPR research found a number of obstacles facing the nonprofits and congregations trying to assist low-income Latina immigrants: many of these obstacles may be created by restrictive and conflicting local and state policies. **Combined with intensified immigration enforcement in recent years, local policies and misinformation seem to be contributing to a context in which immigrants, especially women who are undocumented, are cast as unwanted and placed at risk.**

**A key point to remember is that religious groups and nonprofit organizations are critically important right now for serving and empowering immigrant women in new destinations**

(Millard and Chapa 2004; Warner and Wittner 1998). For example, some churches provide resources such as legal guidance, financial assistance, and access to medical care and housing (Menjívar 2003). Others offer educational programs such as English language and citizenship classes (Kniss and Numrich 2007). In addition, local nonprofits and religious congregations have practices, narratives, and symbols that can help immigrants negotiate the difficulties of resettlement and facilitate their collective mobilization (Foley and Hoge 2007; Williams, Steigenga, and Vásquez 2009). Some studies also suggest that congregations and grassroots' groups activism may enable the development of immigrants' public leadership skills, especially among women (Lorentzen and Mira 2005; Marquardt 2005). **And, despite policy and enforcement barriers and the fears those can create for people trying to help and for those being assisted, nonprofits and congregations are operating across the US as part of the process through which integration for immigrant women can happen.**

At the same time, the rise in anti-immigrant sentiment and proliferation of anti-immigrant policies puts **additional** pressure on these organizations, to not only offer services that help immigrant women, but also to strive to transform the social and political climate. **A strong advocacy movement to help immigrant women is needed, and it's not built-up to capacity yet.** We at IWPR argue that, within immigrant advocacy work, the circumstances of immigrant women demands greater attention. Policy changes to assist immigrant women are essential to developing a well-functioning immigration system. At the same time, any attempt to change the current system that does not take into account immigrant women's circumstances, and involve immigrant women, will remain incomplete and ineffective—but that change needs to happened and toward integration that helps local communities rather than harms women, children, and families.