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Family Life Complicated by Vulnerable Status

Many undocumented women assume the role of breadwinner when they arrive in the United States. They frequently serve as the linchpin that holds together families spread across different countries.

And not only are these women helping to feed Americans through their labor, they're raising a generation of Americans.

No less than 4 million U.S.-born children are living in households with at least one undocumented parent. Because they were born here, these children are U.S. citizens. Another 1.5 million children came to the United States with their parents and are undocumented. Many have spent much of their lives here and have only dim memories of their native countries.

Mainly because of their relatively young age, undocumented immigrants are more than twice as likely as U.S.-born residents to live in what some would call a "traditional" family—a couple and their children. Forty-seven percent of undocumented immigrant households consist of a couple with children, compared with just 21 percent of U.S. citizen households.

As these undocumented women pursue a brighter future for their children and take on more responsibility as providers, their families are subject to stresses unlike any other sector of American society.

The women interviewed for the SPLC report spoke, often while choking back emotion, of the fear they felt of being separated from their children; of the pressures to pay back loans used to secure passage to the United States; and of the heartache of being unable to visit ailing, elderly parents and other family members back home.

Women like Maria Concepcion, 27, carry the constant fear of losing their children as they go about their daily activities. Her daughter is a U.S. citizen, but she has only a Mexican identification. If she is detained, she wonders: "What would happen to my daughter? Would they take her away from me? Would they let me take her?"

Many also said their children are used as leverage against them. Abusive managers and other predators use the threat of deportation and the resulting separation from children to squelch complaints about pay or working conditions, or to keep women from reporting sexual harassment, assaults or other crimes.

Simona, a farmworker in Florida, said she doesn't speak up about mistreatment in the workplace, because to draw attention to herself would put her children in jeopardy.

"I'm afraid for my children, because I want to continue giving them a good life," she says. "That's why I haven't tried to report anything. Here, you have to keep quiet and put up with everything."

Mabel, a farmworker in New York, articulated a frequent lament among the women: the constant fear of arrest and its corrosive effect on family life.

"I can't do anything," she says. "I can't take my daughter out for a walk, to stroll around, go to McDonald's, take them to eat where they want to go. They have to be locked in the house. I can't even take them to the store, because immigration is always around."

Rosa, who worked at the infamous Agriprocessors Inc. slaughterhouse in Postville, Iowa, said she has been left to care for two children after her husband was detained in a workplace raid and ultimately deported.

"It was very sad, because he wanted to see his daughters, but we couldn't hug him or be close to him," she says.

For women who have left children behind in their country of origin, the separation can be wrenching. But they are, essentially, faced with choosing between providing for their children's basic needs or allowing them to drown in poverty.

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Even as they endure separation from their relatives, alienation in their new country and some of the worst conditions the U.S. labor market can offer, these women fight to elevate their families.

Pablo, a high school student, is proud of his mother, a meatpacking worker in North Carolina, and understands the sacrifices that his parents have made to provide a brighter future for him.

“They [have given me] an opportunity, not just to find out about who I am, but what’s out there,” Pablo says. “I’m just proud of what they’ve done.”