





Invisible yet Essential

Immigrant women in America

By Maria Echaveste

The presence of immigrant men standing on street corners looking for work too often serves as the flashpoint for confrontation in communities across the country. Anti-immigrant groups, but also just concerned residents, focus on the perceived health and safety risks posed by the “eyesore” of day laborers and agitate for “controlling illegal immigration.” Yet these very same people easily walk or drive by other immigrants (both documented and undocumented) who are present in public spaces: the nannies taking care of children and the elderly, maids entering families’ homes, laborers working on farms, or cleaners working in office buildings at night.

Immigrant women are seen in communities across the country pushing strollers, feeding children, and playing in city playgrounds. An Asian face, a Caribbean accent, or the echo of Spanish reveals that millions of Americans entrust their most precious treasures—their children—to immigrants who are often undocumented.¹ Many Americans entrust these same women, who sometimes have limited training and difficult-to-understand accents, with the care of their aging parents.² They entrust their homes as well—thousands of housekeepers take public transportation across the country to dust, clean, and sweep for working individuals and families who are too exhausted to handle the burden of cleaning their own homes.

Immigrants also make up a substantial part of the countless workers who harvest fruits and vegetables across the country, who ensure a steady supply of milk and dairy products, and who slaughter chickens and cows for nightly dinner tables.³

A significant number of those workers are immigrant women, who often risk sexual harassment from male supervisors and endure arduous physical labor in an effort to provide for their own families.⁴ Many are indigenous people, able to communicate more easily in Mixtec than in Spanish.⁵ And then there are the countless office cleaners who descend upon downtown buildings in cities across the country, ensuring that all the crumbs from a lunch eaten over the keyboard are vacuumed up and the trash can is empty when office workers return in the morning.⁶

What is it about this work—child and parental care, home maintenance, food production, cleaning—that allows society to treat the workers in these occupations as invisible, or at least less important than the software developer, insurance adjuster, or any of the countless other occupations that have greater status in our society? If we measure status, or the lack thereof, by income, working conditions, benefits, and simple respect, then the above-described occupations clearly have very little.⁷ Is it that nurturing children and maintaining homes has been undervalued for decades, if not centuries?

The critical role that child care providers and housekeepers play in maintaining or enhancing many middle-class families' quality of life has been greatly overlooked.

In a society where knowledge workers are the most highly compensated, it is not surprising that those who work with their hands or engage in physical labor are undervalued. Or was the work once valued, but now easier to underappreciate or ignore since it is increasingly performed by immigrants, legal and otherwise? Such an attitude ignores their significant role in the American labor force—the increase in the American workforce over that past decade is due to the levels of immigration, legal and otherwise.⁸

Each of these occupations is essential to a well-functioning society. Take, for example, all those nannies. One area not fully explored in the raging economic debate over immigrants' cost and contributions to the U.S. economy, particularly of those not authorized to work in this country, is the extent to which the



CLEANING UP BEHIND YOU. Housekeepers, many of whom are immigrants, invisibly power our service economy. {MARK PETERSON}

availability of low-cost child care and housekeeping services has allowed middle- and upper-middle-income people, especially women, to participate in the workforce. Women today, including married women with children, have the highest workforce participation in our nation's history.⁹ That is possible only because of invisible workers.

The critical role that child care providers and housekeepers play in maintaining or enhancing many middle-class families' quality of life has been greatly overlooked. Why is it that work as critical as the care of children should be so undervalued?

We should also consider that these workers are mothers, wives, and working women themselves. The lack of affordable child care impacts these families as well. Immigrant women are on average both younger than the native born and have higher birth rates.¹⁰ Who is minding their children? The lack of health insurance for these women and their families, for example, means that critical preventative care is being delayed or ignored, and when problems occur, the local emergency room becomes the family's health care provider, at greater cost to taxpayers and local communities.

Our 21st-century economy is increasingly based on a growing service sector economy, which is why we need to challenge ourselves to value the work of women, and especially the work of immigrant women.

Even now, in the debate over health care reform, many lawmakers propose excluding both documented and undocumented immigrants from any government subsidies. Their exclusion from national health care reform, if enacted, will make it that much harder to reduce health care costs, including those stemming from preventable diseases.

The U.S. economy over the past several decades has experienced the flight of millions of manufacturing jobs with good benefit packages overseas—many of which are unlikely to come back. Our 21st-century economy is increasingly based on a growing service sector economy, which is why we need to challenge ourselves to value the work of women, and especially the work of immigrant women. Such work will still be necessary regardless of how high tech our economy becomes. It must not remain invisible.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Delia Furtado and Heinrich Hoch, "Immigrant Labor, Child Care Services, and the Work-Fertility Trade Off in the United States" (Bonn, Germany: Institute for the Study of Labor, 2008), available at <http://ftp.iza.org/dp3506.pdf>.
- 2 See, for example, MetLife Foundation and Schmieding Center, "Caregiving in America" (2007). This study describes a "caregiving crisis" in the growing need for elder and other long-term care in the United States. More than 12 million people in the United States, including 6 million people over 65, need long-term care; the need for long-term care is expected to grow as much as 56 percent between 2004 and 2014. Low-wage workers, almost always women and often immigrants, are filling this gap in caregiving. Ninety percent of nursing home aides and home care aides are women. Immigrants officially account for 21.8 percent of home care aides and just over 12 percent each for home care aides and hospital aides. These numbers exclude undocumented immigrants and so are undoubtedly artificially low, especially for home care aides.
- 3 Seventy-eight percent of hired farm workers in the United States are foreign-born. See Department of Labor, "National Agricultural Workers Survey" (2002), available at <http://www.doleta.gov/agworker/report9/toc.cfm>.
- 4 Ninety percent of farm worker women in California cite sexual harassment as a major work problem. See "Harvesting Justice: The Bandana Project" (2009), available at <http://www.harvestingjustice.org/index.php/farmworkers-in-the-us> (last accessed August 2009).
- 5 Department of Labor, "National Agricultural Workers Survey" (2002), available at <http://www.doleta.gov/agworker/report9/toc.cfm>.
- 6 Seventeen percent of all workers employed in cleaning and 22 percent of maids and other household workers are unauthorized migrants. However, this does not account for authorized migrant laborers in these professions. See Jeffery Passel, "The Size and Characteristics of the Unauthorized Migrant Population in the U.S." (Washington: Pew Hispanic Center, 2006), available at <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/61.pdf>.
- 7 For agricultural workers, the average income in 2002 was between \$10,000 and \$12,500 per year. See Department of Labor, "National Agricultural Workers Survey" (2002). For careworkers, the 2004 median wage for home care aides, not including undocumented workers, was between \$8.18 and \$8.92 per hour. See MetLife Foundation and Schmieding Center, "Caregiving in America" (2007), p. 28, available at <http://www.ilcusa.org/media/pdfs/CaregivinginAmerica-Final.pdf>.
- 8 New immigrants accounted for 60 percent of the growth in the U.S. labor force between 2000 and 2004 and half of the growth in the 1990s. "Employment and Workforce," available at <http://www.migrationinformation.org/integration/workforce.cfm> (last accessed August 2009).
- 9 Heather Boushey, "Women Breadwinners More Important Than Ever" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2009), available at http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/06/breadwinners_interactive.html. For further information, see Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Women in the Labor Force: A Databook" (December 2008), available at <http://www.bls.gov/cps/wlf-databook-2008.pdf>.
- 10 U.S. Census Bureau, "Fertility of American Women, 2006" (2006), available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2008pubs/p20-558.pdf>; Pew Hispanic Center, "Statistical Portrait of the Foreign-Born Population in the United States, 2007" (2007), available at <http://pewhispanic.org/factsheets/factsheet.php?factsheetID=45>; Felisa Gonzales, "Hispanic Women in the United States, 2007" (Washington: Pew Hispanic Center, 2008), available at <http://pewhispanic.org/files/factsheets/42.pdf>.