

# CSWS

## *Research Matters*

### **Citizenship and Welfare: Drawing the Boundaries of (Un)Entitlement for Immigrant Women**

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Rapid global economic expansion has led to the displacement of women, the feminization of migration into the United States, and increasing numbers of women and children immigrants living in poverty. In turn, a nativist racism has been targeting such individuals, perceived as a threat to the nation's homogeneity and stability, resulting in extremely mean-spirited legislation. The specter of poor women of color crossing the U.S. border to have children at taxpayers' expense and leading to a fearsome nonwhite majority in short order helped carry anti-immigrant legislation such as Proposition 187 in California in 1994. This xenophobia and hostility, expressed with particular wrath against what were imagined to be irresponsible and pathological women "aliens," would also feed into the so-called welfare "reform" of 1996. This law removed the possibility of public assistance for even elderly, disabled, or blind immigrants. On September 11, 2001, the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York further exacerbated the situation, blocking rational discussion and intensifying a scapegoating of immigrants for the nation's ills.

My new book, *Sanctioning Immigrants*, slated to reach bookstores by fall 2007, provides a close racial and gendered analysis of Asian immigrants and refugees in the context of welfare reform and the politics of citizenship that have been shaping social policy in recent times. Undocumented immigrants pay approximately \$90 billion in taxes annually and only draw about \$5 billion in social services, yet they are perceived to serve as a major burden for U.S. taxpayers, according to a report from 1997. The unfair perception of immigrant and refugee women as abusers of the welfare system resulted in massive cuts to people in serious need. Nearly half a million lost supplemental security income after 1996, and 72 percent of these people were women. Nearly one million immigrants lost food stamp benefits, leading to a corresponding increase in hunger in the United States. Immigrants have also faced more restricted access to Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, a cash-assistance program that replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children. I call attention to the special deprivation faced by children of immigrants. Furthermore, the cuts and provisions have been haphazard, obscure, and brutal, leaving many immigrants confused, panicked, and despairing. Arguably, economic rights have been placed above human rights, and single women with children have been suffering inordinately.

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A “model minority” myth that historically constructed Asian immigrants as entrepreneurial with successful economic integration has resulted to some degree in their invisibility and a lack of awareness among policymakers and the public of the seriousness of their situation. Asians are expected to behave as a transnational elite professional class, even when their reality shows otherwise, leading to their falling off the radar as human beings struggling with economic constraints, racism and discrimination, or domestic violence. Contradicting popular narratives of “Asian success,” Asian-Pacific American families saw their poverty increase from 11.9 to 13.5 percent between 1990 and 1994, and certain groups have suffered even more disproportionately. The 1990 census showed a general rate of poverty at 10 percent, and yet 47 percent of Cambodians, 66 percent of Hmong, 67 percent of Laotians, and 34 percent of Vietnamese Americans were living in poverty, defying the myth of their successful assimilation. In the early 1990s, therefore, public assistance was essential for keeping these families out of complete destitution. In fact, assistance had been integral to their resettlement process and then was stripped due



to their citizenship status, which I theorize as a serious betrayal, particularly for refugees. As awareness grew of Asian immigrants’ prolonged poverty and need for assistance, nativist opposition to their presence and the prospect of their welfare dependency also mounted, galvanizing the anti-immigrant campaign. Some twelve million women and children were receiving public assistance at the time of the so-called “reform” of welfare in 1996. The new law not only erased a sixty-year-old safety net, it also distinguished between citizen and noncitizens, portraying immigrants (the majority, people of color) as categorically undeserving. In

*Sanctioning Immigrants*, I show how citizenship, as a formal demarcation of belonging (and exclusion), places Asian immigrants outside of entitlement through a particularly gendered foreigner racialization process that deems them, along with other immigrants, as fraudulent, welfare-dependent, and beyond assimilation. Citizenship is not only legally but socially constructed.

I feel an urgency to reverse this discrimination through feminist activism, and through action informed by research. I have worked alongside immigrant organizers to restore welfare benefits lost to non-U.S. citizens after the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. Through lobbying efforts, community-based citizenship drives, and organized demonstrations, I have been able to gain a firsthand understanding of the trauma and fear immigrants have faced at the hands of U.S. social policy. By August 1997, these massive mobilization efforts and the outpouring of support resulted in the restoration of some of the harshest cuts. My book will, I hope, further inform the thinking of Americans to see our citizenship as multilayered, with racial, gender, and class implications that threaten our cherished dictum “with liberty and justice for all.”