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Immigrant Justice

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Atrocities Committed against Women on U.S. Soil: A Call to Action

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In September of 2020, a brave nurse working at a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention center in Georgia made disturbing allegations of medical neglect and forced sterilization performed on detained Latina women at the center (Project South, 2020). Detainees have been denied medical treatment, not offered preventive measures to stop the spread of COVID-19, and worst of all, sterilized without their consent (New York Lawyers for the Public Interest, 2020; Project South, 2020; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2020). These horrific allegations spurred the SCRA Immigration Justice Special Interest Group to speak out, writing letters to the editor of our local newspapers. We encourage other community researchers and practitioners to take action with us.

Unfortunately, the United States has a long dark history of committing atrocities against women of color, as well as women with disabilities, women living in poverty, and incarcerated women (Alonso, n.d.; Treisman, 2020). Abuses against women’s bodies and reproductive rights in the United States go back to mass sexual violence, genocide, and mass sterilization of Native American women, with sterilization promoted as the best method for contraception (Torpy, 2000). By the late 1970s, 25% of Native American women were sterilized by the U.S. government through Indian Health Services (Pemberton, 2018). The reproductive rights of Black women have also been violated in similar ways. Black women were not only exposed to forced sterilization, but were also subject to experimental surgeries conducted by the “father” of gynecology (Prather et al., 2018). Young Black women were often sterilized without their consent after giving birth. This secret procedure was so common that it was referred to as the “Mississippi appendectomy” (Rol, 2018). These abuses were fueled by the eugenics movement at the turn of the 20th century that sanctioned abuses against those considered “undesirable” by the White majority society. This notion of a “desirable race” not only resulted in atrocities committed by the Nazis during World War II, when forced sterilization in concentration camps to prevent non-Aryans from reproducing was common practice, but also continued in the U.S. when the government engaged in forced sterilization of individuals with mental health, cognitive, and physical disabilities and incarcerated women.

The United States also has a long history of committing these atrocities against Latina women. For example, in 1937, Law 116 was enacted in Puerto Rico, which supported a population control program that promoted sterilization as a method of birth control. This law was not repealed until 1960 (see Mass, 1977). Between the 1930s and 1970s, mass sterilization was performed on Puerto Rican women without their consent, most commonly after the birth of a child. Women who had “la operación” (as it was commonly referred to by Puerto Ricans in rural communities) were later surprised to discover that they could no longer have children (Lopez, 2008). The Puerto Rican and U.S. governments, who initiated and carried out this practice, argued that the island was overpopulated, poor, and in need of intervention to achieve economic success and reduce poverty. With grant money from USAID, factories in Puerto Rico hosted “family planning clinics” wherein women were sterilized and served as “experimental subjects” without their consent. At these clinics, sterilization was promoted as a method of contraception and often deceptively announced as a procedure that could be reversed. Through this program, Puerto Rican women also “became guinea pigs for U.S. pharmaceutical companies who were developing the modern-day birth control pill” (Andrews, 2017). The U.S.-sponsored campaigns to promote sterilization targeted women with limited education and health literacy, and many women feared losing their children or federal benefits if they did not comply (Andrews, 2017).

Mass sterilization of Latina women was also common in California. Between 1920 and 1945, California’s sterilization program disproportionately targeted Latina women, particularly those of Mexican descent (Novak et al., 2018), and these efforts intersected with the state’s efforts to curb immigration (Sánchez, 1995). Again in the 1960s and 1970s, Latina women of Mexican heritage in Los Angeles were sterilized without their consent, or under immense pressure from healthcare providers insisting that the procedure could be reversed or obtaining consent under duress while women were in labor. These abuses were fueled by stereotypes centering White, mainstream preferences for smaller nuclear families, racist efforts to slow down the proliferation of people of color, along with stereotypes of Mexican women as hyperfertile and dependent on welfare. Although a small group of Latina survivors of the coercive sterilizations filed a lawsuit, the judge did not rule in their favor, citing cultural misunderstandings (informed consent was not
legal protection at the time). We encourage you to watch the documentary, No Más Bebes, based on this case (Tajima-Peña, 2016).

Unfortunately, atrocities against immigrant women continues to be perpetrated today. Our country’s leaders have systematically criminalized immigration and dehumanized immigrants, labeling those arriving at our country’s border as murderers and rapists, fueling acts of hatred and abuse. Currently, women in U.S. detention centers are being denied their basic human rights. Violence against women such as forced sterilization is a painful reminder of the oppression and racism experienced by the most vulnerable women – those who are of color, low-income, undocumented, seeking asylum, and being detained by ICE. Besides the inhumane and unhygienic conditions of these detention centers, many of these women have also been sexually assaulted while in ICE custody or detention (Human Rights Watch, 2018; Kassie, 2018). Several women have spoken out in anonymity to corroborate these claims, but women are afraid to speak up for fear of losing their right to request asylum, prolonging the separation from their children, or losing their children permanently.

The reproductive rights of women in situations of vulnerability have been violated across history and women continue to experience oppression, placing them at risk for poor wellbeing and health outcomes. One of the core principles of social justice is the protection of women’s basic human rights. Morally and philosophically, sterilizing women against their will, with no opportunity to consent, is wrong. Women have the right to autonomous decision-making. As psychologists, we can play an important role advocating for the rights of all women calling attention to practices that support their human rights, denouncing practices that violate them, and advocating for reproductive justice policies. All women should be free from any type of oppression, including marginalization, violence, cultural imperialism, exploitation, powerlessness, and a culture of silence and domination (Young, 2004).

As community researchers and practitioners, we believe that is time to change the landscape of social injustices toward women. We must ask ourselves, “How is it that forced sterilization of women still exists in 2020?” It is clear that our code of ethics demands that we not stand idly by or allow the report of these atrocities to be lost in the news coverage of the pandemic or the recent presidential election. As concerned citizens, we need to call attention to the issue, write to our Members of Congress, and hold our governmental agencies responsible for wrongdoing. We must strive for a society in which women’s rights are protected, and our human diversity is celebrated instead of quashed through government-sanctioned violence, coercion, or sterilization. Those of us in proximity to power must use our skills, voices, and power to act.

We hope you will join us in action. You can write your own letter to the editor in your local newspaper to call for justice. Read one of our letters here for inspiration: https://www.vcstar.com/story/opinion/readers/2020/10/11/letter-oppression-latinx-women/5942489002/ and find tips on writing letters to the editor here: https://www.communitypsychology.com/writing-an-op-ed/.
References


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