



**Democratic Women's Caucus Hearing entitled:
"The Assault on Women by Trump's ICE and CBP"**

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I would like to begin by thanking the Democratic Women's Caucus for inviting me here to speak today, and a special thanks to Representative Jayapal and Representative Salinas for organizing this important event. My name is Zain Lakhani, and I direct the Migrant Rights and Justice Project of the Women's Refugee Commission. For more than 30 years, WRC has been a leading voice advocating for the health, safety, and rights of immigrant and displaced women and girls, from monitoring conditions for women in detention facilities, to ensuring that parents and children separated by zero-tolerance family separation could be reunified.

Perhaps no time in our 35-year history has been more disruptive, more transformative, more destructive to immigrant women, girls, and families, than what we have seen over the past 16 months. 2025 witnessed unprecedented changes to the policies and practices governing immigration enforcement, with catastrophic human impact. We have witnessed firsthand the [decimation of government oversight bodies](#); the [elimination of policies](#) that would allow a mother, a pregnant woman in labor, or a domestic violence survivor go to a hospital or domestic violence shelter without risking arrest; [data sharing policies](#) that frighten immigrant parents from obtaining healthcare for their US citizen children; and a disregard for the policies intended to [protect pregnant women](#) from abusive detention conditions and allow [immigrant parents to make decisions](#) about what happens to their children when they are deported.

In my brief time today, I want to focus on two specific issues that WRC has been tracking closely—that of pregnant, postpartum, and nursing women in immigration detention (despite US policy that places strict limits on when this should occur), and the devastating crisis of family separation occurring in large part through violations of longstanding policy designed to protect family unity. Over the past year, we have pursued a wide variety of innovative strategies to collect information, when previous methods became inaccessible. When we no longer got [reporting from the Department of Homeland Security](#) on the number of pregnant, postpartum, and lactating women in immigration custody, we launched a [Detention Pregnancy Tracker](#) to collect information from lawyers, healthcare providers, community members, and family members about the number and treatment of these women in immigration enforcement. When we could no longer access detention centers to speak directly with detained parents about their parental rights, we started [traveling to reception centers](#) across [Mexico](#) and [Central America](#) to speak directly with reception center workers, service providers, and deportees themselves to learn about their experiences and shine a light on family separation.

I will share some of what we have learned from those initiatives with you today, but first I want to make clear that it does not have to be this way. Immigration enforcement does not have to violate the rights and dignity of immigrants; detained and deported parents can decide what happens to their children, pregnant women bound up in immigration enforcement do not need to be detained, and if they are, they can have access to the healthcare and nutrition necessary to support their pregnancies, nursing mothers can remain with their infants, and domestic violence survivors can be protected from additional exploitation by their abusers. The same is true of prevention; ICE and CBP officers can be vetted and trained to promote the safety and dignity of immigrants and US citizens alike, meaningful oversight to ensure compliance with our laws and policies can be enacted, and there can be real accountability when human and civil rights are violated. We know how to do this better. *We have, on the books right now*, laws and policies that require us to do this better. And it is not too late to establish meaningful guardrails to protect against the worst of what we are seeing.

The new crisis of family separation provides a devastating case in point. For the past year, WRC has been tracking a significant increase in the number of parents who are detained, and subject to deportation without being given an opportunity to decide what will happen to their children—in violation of longstanding US policy to prevent family separation and protect parental rights.

In the first seven months of 2025, at least [11,000 U.S. citizen children](#) experienced the arrest and detention of an immigrant parent. This means that, on average, 50 US citizen children experienced the arrest or detention of a parent *every day*. The effect on mothers has been especially stark – during this same period, the number of [detained mothers increased more than 300%](#). A [recent report by the Brookings Institute](#) places the possible number of US citizen children who may have experienced the arrest or detention of a parent at an estimated 145,000.

But these numbers cannot begin to convey the catastrophic cost to human life. Earlier this year, [WRC and Physicians for Human Rights released a report](#) based on dozens of interviews conducted last November with reception center workers, healthcare providers, and deported parents at the La Lima Reception Center in Honduras – providing some of the first concrete evidence on how family separation was occurring and surfacing the voices and experiences of those impacted.

Our interviews found routine and frequent violations of the [Detained Parents Directive](#), the second Trump administration's parental interest policy. Although [weaker than its predecessor policy](#), the Biden-era [Parental Interest Directive](#), it nonetheless [requires that ICE](#) allow parents facing deportation to decide whether they want their children to come with them, or whether they want to make arrangements for their children to remain safely in the United States. Repeatedly, [parents told us about how these requirements are not being followed](#); how ICE never even asked them if they had children ([as they are required to do](#)) and ignored them if they pleaded to make arrangements for their children's safety ([as they are also required to ensure](#)). One mother we spoke to reported begging her ICE to allow her to call someone to take care of her four children, who were home alone at the time of her arrest; her pleas fell on deaf ears, and her children were left entirely alone until her mother could travel from another state to look after them. Another father, detained outside his home, pleaded with ICE officers to be allowed simply to call the babysitter looking after his three-year-old, to ask her to stay with his child. His pleas were also ignored, but the babysitter in a beautiful act of compassion stayed with his daughter for 11 days.

Perhaps of deepest concern, the overwhelming majority of parents we spoke to reported that they were never given an opportunity to bring their children with them when they were deported—a finding that the reception center workers and social service providers echoed from their

experiences with the roughly 40,000 Hondurans deported to Honduras last year. We spoke with mothers who had been separated from infants, a pregnant and terrified 22-year-old separated from her toddler, and dozens more who were arrested without warning outside hospitals or while dropping their kids to school—deported within days and with no idea of how to reunify with their children.

Once deported without their child, the barriers to reunification are steep. Receiving countries like Honduras lack the necessary resources, infrastructure, or expertise to begin reunifying families at scale. As importantly, the US does not currently have established law or policy on international reunifications; there are no guidelines, required forms of cooperation between federal agencies or federal and state agencies, little required information sharing between DHS and receiving country consulates, and no established US government procedures for navigating an immensely complicated legal and bureaucratic process. As a result, parents and receiving country governments alike are left operating largely in the dark, with little to no information on how to reunify or establish safe legal care for their children in the United States.

And at the center of this violence are children—children left in precarious or potentially unsafe situations, children in the care of neighbors or siblings and without a legal guardian who can enroll them in school or get them healthcare, children who have been ripped from their parents with little warning and no knowledge of when they will see them again.

The condition of pregnant, postpartum, and nursing women in immigration custody, as my colleagues on this panel will also speak to today, is another area of catastrophic harm around which we can, and must, intervene. Since 2021, we have had an [ICE policy that strongly counsels against the detention of pregnant, postpartum, and lactating women, absent](#) exceptional circumstances. And, if they must be detained, [the policy] imposes strict requirements on detention facilities to monitor them closely, house them in suitable facilities, and provide appropriate care. Yet, [WRC and others](#)—on this panel, in the Democratic Women’s Caucus, and in both chambers of Congress—have [gathered substantial evidence](#) that this policy is not being followed, to the [extreme detriment](#) of [mothers](#) and their [babies](#).

WRC has heard reports of pregnant women, detained for months, being fed nothing but a handful of beans and one cup of chlorinated water a day. We have heard numerous stories of women being denied access to medical care, for urgent and even life-threatening medical conditions; and, if they are taken to a medical facility, [being shackled and surveilled by ICE officers even in the examination room](#). We have also seen systemic violations not only of the policy to prevent the detention of these women, but also the requirement that if they are detained that they are monitored regularly and that there are clear lines of oversight from the detention facility up to ICE’s medical division, the ICE Health Services Corps.

In our question time I will happily talk more about what we are seeing, and how our [reports have been supported](#) by the [first data we have received from ICE](#) about the number of pregnant women in ICE custody, issued to your colleagues [Senators Murray and Blumenthal](#). And I would also welcome to share with you some of our concrete, evidence-based recommendations for how you can help reverse this tide, claw back the critical loss of safety, and prevent further separations. But there is one final story I want to share with you, from our research in Central America. Her experience reveals the profound dangers of this breakdown in monitoring and oversight, and serves as a canary in the coalmine of where we are headed if we continue to detain pregnant women—vulnerable to high-risk and even life threatening complications that can occur with shocking speed—without proper treatment and care.

[From medical providers in Honduras](#), we learned of a pregnant woman detained by ICE who experienced a missed miscarriage. But despite receiving a diagnosis of a pregnancy complication that requires monitoring and possibly medical intervention, this woman was returned to detention and received no medical care or monitoring for almost two weeks. When she was placed on a deportation flight to Honduras, she was in acute sepsis and near death, her life only saved because the reception center staff rushed her immediately to the hospital.

Behind detention center doors, this woman was invisible. The joy of her pregnancy and the grief of her loss unseen. And, perhaps most importantly, the fact that pregnancy for many is a time of great happiness but also great danger was not attended to. This knowledge—that throughout the centuries pregnancy complications have been [one of the primary causes of death](#) for women, that the United States still has the [highest maternal mortality rate among high income nations](#), that [racial disparities](#) in maternal mortality *and* high-risk pregnancy complications are extreme—was not considered. They took her body, but she was not seen.

I welcome the committee's questions.