

Immigrants on front lines of reproductive and bodily autonomy

written by Lizz Toledo
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Whistleblower Dawn Wooten (left) at a protest at the Irwin County Detention Center

in Georgia, where immigrant women were subjected to forced sterilization.

Based on remarks at the Socialist Unity Party national plenum on Aug. 13.

Black women, Indigenous women, women of color and trans people have always fought for reproductive and bodily autonomy.

A man reported that a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agent asked him to engage in oral sex and then threatened him with deportation after he refused. The ICE cop said he would be deported to Haiti, even though he is from the Bahamas.

In Texas, a Border Patrol agent was driving detainees between detention centers. After a woman performed oral sex on him, he let her go.

Many women and men in immigration detention centers all over the U.S. reported that routine searches turned into groping and fondling incidents. Many reported being propositioned, subjected to sexual innuendo, and threatened with retaliation if they reported anything.

These are only a few of the hundreds of complaints of sexual and physical abuse in immigration detention. Many of course go unreported and fewer get prosecuted. Reports obtained [by The Intercept in 2018](#) included 1,224 complaints filed, but only 2% were investigated and less than that were prosecuted.

Despite serious obstacles for filing complaints and getting complaints investigated, the information that has been gathered by immigration advocates is that sexual assault and harassment in immigration detention is not only widespread but systemic and enabled by an agency that regularly fails to hold itself accountable.

Forced sterilization, blocked abortions

Over the course of a long history of abuses, both public and private actors in the U.S. target the poor, the disabled, immigrants, and racial minorities for forced sterilization.

The eugenics movement popular at the turn of the 20th century was largely responsible for states enacting laws beginning in 1907 that authorized the sterilization of the “feebleminded.” More than 60,000 coercive sterilizations were performed throughout the U.S. pursuant to these eugenics laws.

It was not until Nazi Germany adopted U.S. eugenic theory and practice that public opinion shifted away from this anti-poor and anti-working-class policy in the United States.

But even though support for these eugenics-based sterilization laws started to decline, new justifications for coerced sterilization came into the consciousness of the ruling class. In the 1960s, sterilization abuse once again targeted the poor, the immigrant community, and people of color.

Many cases revealed how discrimination along intersectional lines of gender, race, poverty and immigration status coalesced to result in sterilization abuse.

[A 2020 report about coerced sterilizations](#) of immigrant women at the Irwin County Detention Center (ICDC), a private detention center in Georgia, is a perfect example. In this case, immigrant women were taken to a physician who sterilized them without informed consent.

A whistleblower, nurse Dawn Wooten, described multiple forms of medical abuse, from failures to protect patients against COVID-19 to forced hysterectomies. The reports of forced hysterectomies and other unwarranted gynecological procedures at ICDC were also intertwined with a pattern of lack of informed consent to medical treatment.

In connection with the hysterectomies, Ms. Wooten explained: “These immigrant women, I don’t think they really, totally, all the way understand this is what’s going to happen depending on who explains it to them.”

Coerced sterilization in ICE detention is far from the only form of [reproductive injustice](#) inflicted upon immigrant women and men. Trump appointee Scott Lloyd attempted on several occasions to [block teen migrants](#) from accessing abortion care, even when their pregnancies were the result of rape.

And of course, the Trump Administration’s “zero tolerance” policy forcibly [separated parents from their children](#), including children under the age of 5.

As activists for reproductive justice, we have to continue to emphasize that the fundamental civil rights to abortion, procreation, bodily autonomy and parenting are deeply linked. All reproductive autonomy is simultaneously under attack, especially in the context of the poor, Black, Indigenous, migrants, trans people and people of color.

Reproductive justice advocates must work even more urgently to protect the reproductive and bodily autonomy of all marginalized people.

