



# MIGRATION INFORMATION SOURCE

FRESH THOUGHT, AUTHORITATIVE DATA, GLOBAL REACH

## Immigrant Women

**By Jeanne Batalova**  
**Migration Policy Institute**

December 14, 2009

Throughout much of US immigration history, "migrant" equaled "working-age man" and "migrant families" largely referred to "wives and children."

Although academic research over the last 30 years has revealed the unique needs, challenges, and opportunities of female migrants, immigration policy debates have paid little attention to immigrant women (with the exception of a few laws that protect them from domestic violence).

The 18.9 million immigrant women in the United States in 2008 made up 12 percent of all women in the country. They represent a diverse group in terms of origin, labor force participation, and socioeconomic status.

This Spotlight provides statistics on immigrant women in the United States, drawing on data from the US Census Bureau's 2008 American Community Survey (ACS), October 2007 and 2009 Current Population Survey (CPS), and the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Immigration Statistics (OIS) for fiscal year 2008.

Click on the bullet points below for more information:

- Immigrant women made up approximately 12 percent of all women in the United States in 2008.
- The total foreign-born population was evenly split between men and women in 2008 although the sex ratio varied considerably by country of origin.
- Mexican immigrants accounted for about a quarter of all immigrant women but a third of all immigrant men in 2008.
- Overall, immigrant women were older than their native-born counterparts.
- Nearly four out of five immigrant women in 2008 were of working age (18 to 64).
- A greater proportion of foreign-born women were over age 65 in 2008 than foreign-born men.
- In 2008, foreign-born women were twice as likely as foreign-born men to be widowed, divorced, or separated.
- While the majority of immigrant women had a high school degree or higher, they were less likely than immigrant men to have a bachelor's or advanced degree.
- About 52 percent of immigrant women reported speaking English less than very well.
- Immigrant women were more likely than immigrant men to be US citizens.
- Fifty-six percent of immigrants who became US citizens in 2008 were women.
- Immigrant women were less likely to be in the labor force than native-born women as of fall 2009.
- Immigrant women in fall 2009 were less likely to be unemployed than their male counterparts.
- Nearly a third of immigrant female workers in fall 2009 were employed in service occupations.
- Foreign-born women who were full-time, year-round workers in 2008 made 14 percent less than their native-born counterparts.
- The median income of family households (with no husband present) headed by immigrant women was 4 percent less than that of households headed by native-born women.
- Immigrant women were more likely than immigrant men to live in poverty.
- More than half of new lawful permanent residents (LPRs) were women in 2008.
- In 2008, about 29,000 women arrived as refugees.

"Foreign born" and "immigrants" are used interchangeably and refer to persons with no US citizenship at birth. This population includes naturalized citizens, lawful permanent residents, refugees and asylees, persons on certain temporary visas, and the unauthorized.

- [Adult women made up about a third of unauthorized immigrants in 2008.](#)

### **Immigrant women made up approximately 12 percent of all women in the United States in 2008.**

According to the 2008 American Community Survey, there were 18.9 million immigrant women who accounted for 12.3 percent of the 154.2 million women in the United States. Immigrant women represented approximately 6.2 percent of the total population of the United States. Overall, approximately 12.5 percent of the total population in 2008 was foreign born.

- Read our [Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration](#) for more information about immigrants in the United States.

[Back to the top](#)

### **The total foreign-born population was evenly split between men and women in 2008 although the sex ratio varied considerably by country of origin.**

Of the 38 million foreign-born in the United States in 2008, approximately 18.9 million, or 49.8 percent, were female. Among the Mexican foreign born, the largest of all immigrant groups, the sex ratio was 126 males to every 100 females.

The highest sex ratios were among immigrants from Senegal (284 males to 100 females) and Saudi Arabia (208 males to every 100 females).

The lowest sex ratio was among immigrants from Finland, with 45 males to every 100 females.

- View the sex ratio of the foreign-born population in the United States between 1870 and 2008 [here](#).

[Back to the top](#)

### **Mexican immigrants accounted for about a quarter of all immigrant women but a third of all immigrant men in 2008.**

Of the 18.9 million immigrant women in 2008, 26.7 percent were born in Mexico, followed with a large gap by women from the Philippines (5.2 percent), India (3.9 percent), China (3.8 percent), Vietnam (3.2 percent), Korea (3.1 percent), El Salvador (2.7 percent), and Cuba (2.6 percent). Together these eight countries accounted for 51.2 percent of all immigrant women residing in the United States in 2008.

The top countries of origin for immigrant men were somewhat similar, although the order and magnitude differ. Of the 19.1 million immigrant men in 2008, 33.5 percent were from Mexico. About 4.7 percent came from India, 3.6 percent from the Philippines, 3.2 percent from China, 3.0 percent from El Salvador, and 2.9 percent from Vietnam. These six countries accounted for 50.9 percent of all immigrant men residing in the United States in 2008.

[Back to the top](#)

### **Overall, immigrant women were older than their native-born counterparts.**

The median age of foreign-born females (42 years) in 2008 was higher than that of native-born females (37). Immigrant women were also older than foreign-born males (39) and native-born males (34).

The foreign-born population, with a median age of 40 years, is older than the native-born population, with a median age of 35 years.

- View the median age of the foreign born in the United States between 1870 and 2008 [here](#).

[Back to the top](#)

### **Nearly four out of five immigrant women in 2008 were of working age (18 to 64).**

Of all foreign-born women, 78.2 percent were of working age (18 to 64) compared with 59.8 percent of all native-born women (see Figure 1).

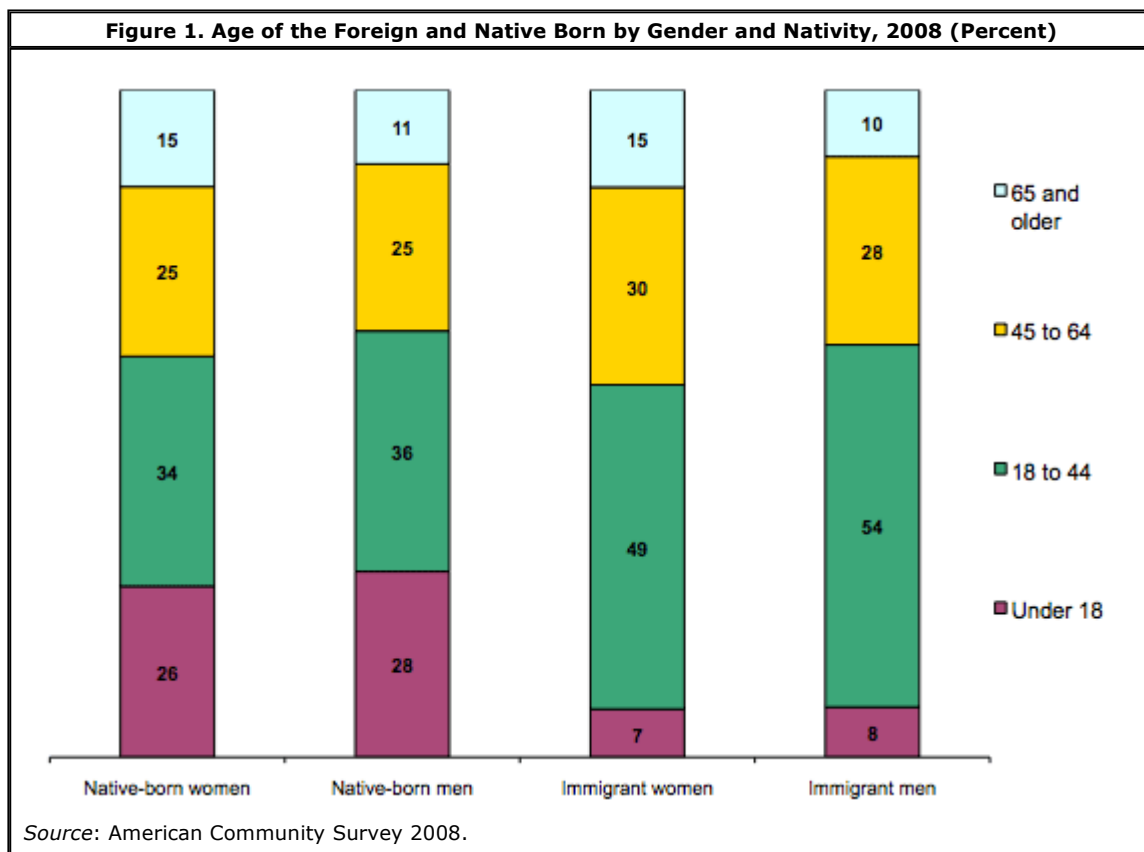
#### **How Sex Ratios Are Calculated**

One method demographers use to measure the relative number of males and females in a population is the sex ratio.

The male-to-female sex ratio is calculated by dividing the number of all males (regardless of age) by the number of all females and multiplying by 100. A value above 100 means there are more males than females in the population, and a value below 100 means there are females than males. A sex ratio of 100 means there are an equal number of males and females

For example, a sex ratio of 115 means there are 115 males to every 100 females; a sex ratio of 90 means there are 90 males to every 100 females.

A higher percentage of foreign-born men (82.5 percent) than native-born men (61.0 percent) were also in this age category.



[Back to the top](#)

**A greater proportion of foreign-born women were over age 65 in 2008 than foreign-born men.**

In 2008, 14.6 percent of immigrant women were age 65 and over, compared with 10.0 percent of immigrant men. Among the native born, 14.5 percent of all females were age 65 and over, while 11.1 percent of all males were in this age category.

- View the age-sex pyramids for the native and foreign-born populations (including the five largest immigrant groups) [here](#).

[Back to the top](#)

**In 2008, foreign-born women were twice as likely as foreign-born men to be widowed, divorced, or separated in 2008.**

Immigrant women were slightly less likely to be married (57.8 percent) than immigrant men (61.5 percent) in 2008. However, the percentage of foreign-born women who were widowed, divorced, or separated (21.3 percent) was over twice as high as the percentage for foreign-born men (9.8 percent). Also, a lower percentage of foreign-born women (20.9 percent) than foreign-born men (28.7 percent) have never been married.

Regardless of gender, immigrants were more likely to be married than their native-born counterparts. More native-born men (50 percent) than native-born women (46.1 percent) were married. Like the foreign born, more native-born women (24.6 percent) than native-born men (14.4 percent) were widowed, divorced, or separated.

[Back to the top](#)

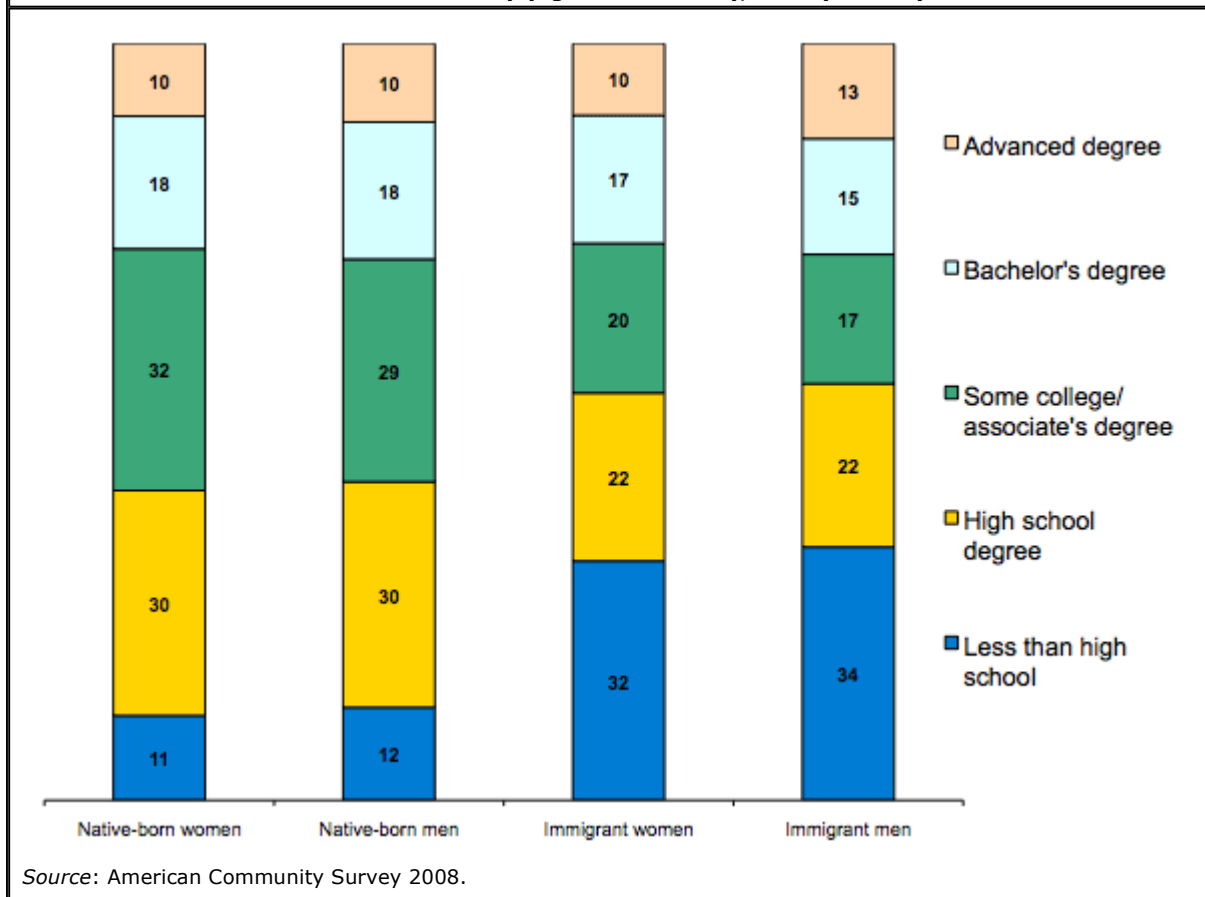
**While the majority of immigrant women had a high school degree or higher, they were less likely than immigrant men to have a bachelor's or advanced degree.**

In 2008, approximately 68.4 percent of all foreign-born women over the age of 25 had at least a high school degree, which is slightly higher than the 66.6 percent rate for foreign-born men.

However, only 9.5 percent of all foreign-born women had an advanced degree compared to 12.6 percent of all foreign-born men.

Native-born men (87.7 percent) and native-born women (88.7 percent) over the age of 25 were about equally likely to have at least a high school degree. Similarly, native-born men and women were equally likely to have an advanced degree (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Educational Attainment of the Foreign and Native Born by Gender and Nativity (Age 25 and Older), 2008 (Percent)**



[Back to the top](#)

#### **About 52 percent of immigrant women reported speaking English less than very well.**

In 2008, 51.6 percent of the 18.8 million immigrant women age 5 and older were limited English proficient, compared with 52.6 percent of the 18.9 million immigrant men.

*Note:* The term limited English proficient refers to any person age 5 and older who reported speaking English "not at all," "not well," or "well" on their survey questionnaire. Individuals who reported speaking only English or speaking English "very well" are considered proficient in English.

[Back to the top](#)

#### **Immigrant women were more likely than immigrant men to be US citizens.**

Of all foreign-born females in 2008, 46.3 percent were naturalized US citizens compared to 39.6 percent of all foreign-born males.

[Back to the top](#)

#### **Fifty-six percent of immigrants who became US citizens in 2008 were women.**

According to OIS, of the 1,046,539 immigrants who naturalized in 2008, 56.3 percent or 589,427 were women.

- Find more data on naturalization in our [Spotlight on Naturalization Trends](#).

[Back to the top](#)

The labor force participation rate is the percentage of persons age 16 and older in the labor force (i.e., employed and unemployed but actively looking for

### Immigrant women were less likely to be in the labor force than native-born women as of fall 2009.

According to the Current Population Survey (CPS), of all foreign-born women, 56.1 percent were in the labor force compared with 59.4 percent of native-born women in October 2009.

Men, regardless of nativity, had higher labor force participation rates: 80.2 percent for immigrant men and 69.8 percent for native men.

The labor force participation rate of immigrant women increased slightly between fall 2007 (before the recession began) and fall 2009 (see Table 1).

work) among the total population age 16 and older. Persons not in the labor force include homemakers, retirees, students who do not work, and others who are neither working outside the home nor looking for work.

The unemployment rate is the percentage of persons age 16 and older who are unemployed (but actively looking for work) among the entire labor force.

**Table 1. Labor Force Participation (LFP) Rate and Unemployment Rate among the Civilian Population (Age 16 and Over) by Nativity and Gender, October 2007 and October 2009**

	October 2009				October 2007		
	All	Native born	Immigrants		All	Native born	Immigrants
<b>Total</b> (in thousands)	236,550	201,000	35,550		232,715	197,250	35,465
LFP rate	65.0	64.4	68.2		66.3	65.9	68.6
Unemployment rate	9.5	9.5	9.8		4.5	4.5	4.2
<b>Women</b> (in thousands)	122,020	104,330	17,690		120,096	102,529	17,567
LFP rate	58.9	59.4	56.1		59.7	60.6	55.0
Unemployment rate	8.5	8.4	9.3		4.5	4.5	4.7
<b>Men</b> (in thousands)	114,530	96,670	17,860		112,619	94,721	17,898
LFP rate	71.4	69.8	80.2		73.2	71.6	81.9
Unemployment rate	10.4	10.5	10.2		4.4	4.6	3.9

Source: US Census Bureau, Basic Current Population Survey, October 2007 and October 2009.

[Back to the top](#)

### Immigrant women in fall 2009 were less likely to be unemployed than their male counterparts.

In October 2007, before the onset of the recession, immigrant women were more likely to be unemployed than immigrant men (4.7 versus 3.9 percent, respectively). Two years later, this trend has reversed: even though the rates of unemployment rose dramatically for both men and women, 9.3 percent of immigrant women and 10.2 percent immigrant men were unemployed in October 2009.

Among native-born adults, unemployment rates were almost the same in October 2007 for women (4.5 percent) and men (4.6 percent). But more native-born men were unemployed (10.5 percent) in October 2009 than their female counterparts (8.4 percent).

- View trends in unemployment for the native and foreign-born populations [here](#).

[Back to the top](#)

### Nearly a third of immigrant female workers in fall 2009 were employed in service occupations.

In October 2009, of the nearly 9 million immigrant female workers, 32.9 percent were employed in service occupations (e.g., food preparation and health-care support occupations), 22.2 percent in professional and related occupations (e.g., education and health-care practitioner occupations), and 12.2 percent in office and administrative support (see Table 2).

Compared to fall 2007, the share of immigrant female workers rose in the service, management/business, and professional occupations but dropped in production occupations (by 1.6 percentage points) and in office and administrative support (by 1.4 percentage points).

Among the 12.9 million immigrant men, 51.1 percent were working in the top three occupational groups: service occupations (19.5 percent), professional and related occupations (16.8 percent),

and construction and extraction occupations (14.8 percent). Two years earlier, nearly 20 percent of immigrant men worked in construction.

## **Table 2. Occupations of Civilian Employed Persons (Age 16 and Older) by Nativity and Gender, October 2007 and October 2009**

[Back to the top](#)

### **Foreign-born women who were full-time, year-round workers in 2008 made 14 percent less than their native-born counterparts.**

According to the 2008 ACS, the median earnings for foreign-born women age 16 and over who were year-round, full-time workers was \$30,850. This was 14.4 percent lower than the median earnings for native-born women (\$36,043), 13.2 percent lower than those of foreign-born men (\$35,558), and 34.9 percent lower than those of native-born men (\$47,412).

[Back to the top](#)

### **The median income of family households (with no husband present) headed by immigrant women was 4 percent less than that of households headed by native-born women.**

The median income of family households headed by foreign-born women with no spouse present (\$30,312) in 2008 was 3.7 percent less than the median income of households headed by native-born women (\$31,487). But immigrant-women-headed households had a median income that was 27.3 percent less than those headed by foreign-born men (\$41,540) and 32.4 percent less than those headed by native-born men (\$44,856) with no spouse present.

Married-couple households with a native-born head of household had a median income of \$77,451, which is 26.1 percent higher than the median of \$61,429 earned by married-couple households with a foreign-born head of household. Overall, the median income of all family households headed by an immigrant (\$52,449) is 19.8 percent lower than that of family households headed by a native-born person (\$65,417).

[Back to the top](#)

### **Immigrant women were more likely than immigrant men to live in poverty.**

Approximately 18.3 percent of all female immigrants lived below the poverty line in 2008, compared with 15.8 percent of all male immigrants in 2008.

Among the native born, 15.9 percent of all females and 14.2 percent of all males lived in poverty in 2008. Overall, 17.1 percent of all foreign born lived in poverty, while 15.1 percent of the native born lived in poverty.

[Back to the top](#)

### **More than half of new lawful permanent residents (LPRs) were women in 2008.**

According to OIS, among the 1,107,126 persons who obtained lawful permanent resident status in 2008, 600,555 (54.2 percent) were women.

- Learn more about LPRs in our [Spotlight on Legal Immigration to the United States](#).

[Back to the top](#)

### **In 2008, about 29,000 women arrived as refugees.**

In 2008, 60,108 refugees arrived for resettlement in the United States of which 48.5 percent (29,169) were women, according to OIS. While two-thirds of the 25,355 principal applicants were men (16,807), 85.9 percent (8,935) of spouses were women.

- Read more about refugees in our [Spotlight on Refugees and Asylees](#).

[Back to the top](#)

### **Adult women made up about a third of unauthorized immigrants in 2008.**

According to Pew Hispanic Center estimates, there were about 11.9 million unauthorized immigrants residing in the United States in March 2008. Of this population, 6.3 million were adult men (53 percent), 4.1 million were adult women (34 percent), and 1.5 million were children under age 18 (13 percent).

- Read the Pew Hispanic Center [fact sheet](#) on unauthorized immigrants.

The government fiscal year runs from October 1 to September 30. All OIS figures here are for the 2008 fiscal year (October 1, 2007, to September 30, 2008).

**Further resources:**

Department of Homeland Security, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics 2008* (Washington DC: DHS, 2009). **Available online.**

Copyright © 2009 Migration Policy Institute. **All rights reserved.**

MPI • 1400 16th St. NW, Suite 300 • Washington, DC 20036

ph: (001) 202-266-1940 • fax: (001) 202-266-1900

[source@migrationpolicy.org](mailto:source@migrationpolicy.org)