

# A Trans Woman's Death Emphasizes Why LGBTQ+ People Need to Fight Against ICE

As we mourn the loss of Roxana Hernandez, it's important for the LGBTQ+ community to support undocumented people and detained queer immigrants.



BY JOHN PAUL BRAMMER

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Roxana Hernandez, a transgender woman from Honduras who was seeking asylum in the U.S., died last week after being detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), according to a **press release** from the federal agency. The release, which **deadnames** Hernandez, says the 33-year-old died of “symptoms of pneumonia, dehydration and complications associated with HIV.” She is the sixth detainee to die in ICE custody in the fiscal year 2018, which began Oct. 1, 2017.

The press release also made sure to include any details on Hernandez’s past that might make her seem less sympathetic to the general public. It gave an overview of her past with sex work, theft, and her multiple attempts to enter the U.S. She entered ICE custody on May 13 in San Diego, and on May 16 she was transferred to the for-profit Cibola Correctional Facility in Milan, New Mexico, which contracts with ICE. This would be the final leg of her journey.

Hernandez was part of the **refugee caravan** organized by Pueblo Sin Fronteras (People Without Borders) that formed in March, months after President Trump signed an **executive order** that suspended refugee admissions until “extreme vetting” could be implemented. The majority of the members of the caravan were Hondurans, and they embarked on a journey of over 2,000 miles to the U.S. border.

In **an interview** with BuzzFeed News last month, Hernandez said she fled Honduras due to violence against trans women in the country. She said four months before she joined the caravan, she was attacked by MS-13 gang members who called her slurs and gang-raped her. “Four of them raped me and as a result I got HIV,” she said. “Trans people in my neighborhood are killed and chopped into pieces, then dumped inside potato bags.”

Her community, including the people she journeyed with from Central America to the U.S., is now in mourning. “Her last days were spent in cold rooms, filling up paperwork, undergoing hunger, fear, and intimidation,” reads a **memorial post** for Hernandez on the Facebook group Diversidad Sin Fronteras (Diversity Without Borders). “We honor her life

Other LGBTQ+ groups have also called for transgender detainees to be released. “It is alarming that transgender communities continue to face transphobic violence outside and inside of detention walls,” says Flor Bermudez, Legal Director at Transgender Law Center in a scalding **press release**. “This is why TLC’s Trans Immigrant Defense Effort (**TIDE**) has organized to demand the liberation of transgender women from detention and the end of all detention and deportations. ICE has shown time and again it is incapable of protecting transgender women in detention. Transgender people should not be detained by ICE, at all.”

In a statement emailed to them., Isa Noyola, the deputy director of the Transgender Law Center, said that paired with the abuse trans people suffer in ICE detention, the death of Hernandez “sends the message that transgender people are disposable and do not deserve dignity, safety, or even life.”

After being reached for comment, ICE spokeswoman Danielle Bennett directed them. to the official press release on Hernandez’s death. When asked what conditions Hernandez was being kept in, she says: “The decision of where to place a particular detainee is made on a case-by-case-basis, taking into account several factors including the transgender individual’s preference, and the safety and well-being of the detainee and others.”

One of the fears, however, is that Hernandez was being held in a freezing holding cell, often referred to as *hieleras* or “freezers.” Given she was suffering from pneumonia when she died, and given that detained undocumented people **have reported** the *hieleras* as being used for punishment, it may not be ruled out as a possibility. The *hieleras* were also the subject of a **2015 report** by the American Immigration Council, which revealed numerous reported instances of low temperatures, overcrowding, sleep deprivation, and insufficient food in Customs and Border Protection facilities.

Other groups, like Human Rights Watch, **have documented** substandard medical care in these facilities and asserted that indifference from ICE has led to deaths. For LGBTQ+ detainees, the outlook is even worse. The Center for American Progress obtained nearly **200 reports** of abuse of LGBTQ+ people in ICE custody from 2008 through 2013, and that's only counting the number of detainees who managed to submit an official complaint.

Transgender people in custody of ICE are at the highest risk of all. Reports of sexual assault while confined reached such high numbers that ICE **released a memo** in 2015 vowing safeguards for trans detainees against harassment and sexual assault. The National Center for Transgender Equality notes, however, that little has changed for undocumented trans detainees, and continues to call for their immediate release from ICE custody.

It's important to note that undocumented queer people were fighting these battles against ICE during the Obama administration, where families were routinely torn apart by deportation. Under a presidency that's keen on **empowering agencies** like ICE, however, it's more important than ever that we all join the fight against acts of wanton cruelty against our community. The federal government wanting to strengthen an institution that has been called out again and again for harassing the marginalized ought to frighten queer people and spur us to action regardless of our documentation status.

Our strength as a community is measured by how willing we are to protect the most vulnerable among us. Undocumented transgender women and other undocumented queer people exist at a dangerous intersection where sexual assault and murder at the hands of a **"rogue agency"** is far too common. To let it go unopposed is to fail the people who need us most.

No matter the circumstances of her death, as undocumented trans people mourn the loss of Hernandez, it's important for the broader LGBTQ+ community to support undocumented people and detained queer immigrants. Not only that, but it's time for

**them.**

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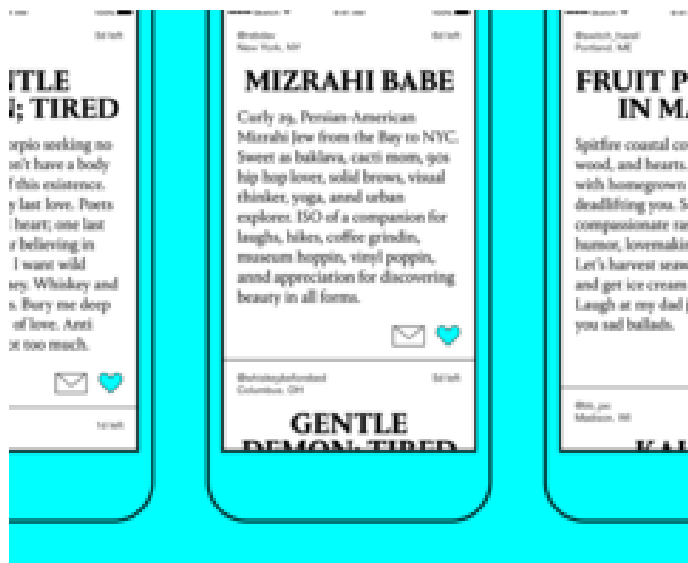
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