

Vilma's Story



In May 2018, Vilma Carrillo Carrillo and her then 11-year-old daughter, Yeisvi, arrived at the southern border of the United States, seeking protection under U.S. law. Vilma risked the perilous journey from Guatemala to flee from the severe domestic abuse she experienced at the hands of her daughter's father. At one point, he hit her with such force that he knocked out her front four teeth. The abuse was so severe that Yeisvi was worried her father would kill her mother. With the increasing frequency and intensity of the abuse, Vilma decided to flee with her daughter in order to save both their lives.

Upon arrival at the border, Customs and Border Patrol agents separated Vilma and Yeisvi from each other. The new "zero-tolerance" policy was in effect and the practice of separating children from their parents as a deterrent to migration was well underway.

When a federal judge ordered the government to reunify separated families in July, Vilma watched mothers reunite with their children and waited her turn. Her turn never came. Vilma and Yeisvi's case differed from other separated families in an important way: Yeisvi is a U.S. citizen, born in Georgia, but her family moved back to Guatemala shortly after. Agents refused to reunify Vilma with her daughter because the judge's order did not explicitly cover U.S. citizen children, only migrant children. Yeisvi was put in foster care in Arizona and Vilma was sent to Irwin Detention Center in Georgia, more than 2,000 miles away.

Then, Vilma's asylum case was denied by an immigration judge because her documents were in government custody and she could not understand the interpreter, who spoke a different dialect. On top of that, because of her detention, the state of Arizona began dependency hearings against Vilma, putting her in jeopardy of losing her parental rights permanently. The Tahirih Justice Center, who is representing Vilma in her asylum case, collaborated with allies across the U.S. to advocate for Vilma's release and reunification with Yeisvi. Collectively, they accomplished the following:

- Rallied public support for Vilma with media coverage from [The New York Times](#), [HLN](#), [NBC](#), [Teen Vogue](#), [Upworthy](#), [Pacific Standard](#), [NPR Atlanta](#), and [El Pais](#);
- Demanded that Immigration and Custom Enforcement (ICE) Atlanta immediately release Vilma with [this petition](#), which was signed by almost 15,000 individuals;
- Coordinated a robust social media campaign by publicizing the visit of actor and musician, Penn Badgley, to Irwin Detention Center to visit Vilma and hear her story first-hand;
- Filed a [federal habeas petition](#) challenging the constitutionality of Vilma's detention;
- Filed a [complaint](#) to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties asking for an investigation into the arbitrary refusal of ICE Atlanta to release Vilma; and
- Coordinated an organizational [sign-on letter](#) to ICE Atlanta's Field Office Director on behalf of 75 national, state, and local organizations.

Finally, after 246 days apart, Vilma was finally released from detention and reunited with her daughter.

The celebration of Vilma's release and reunification with Yeisvi is bittersweet – Vilma still has a long road ahead as she pursues her asylum claim before the Atlanta Immigration Court, where only 2% of asylum seekers are successful. Her legal team at Tahirih, along with partners at the law firm Crowell & Moring, continue to represent Vilma in her pursuit of protection under U.S. asylum law, hoping that a victory will set mother and daughter on their path toward freedom and safety in the U.S.