

United States Court of Appeals

For the Seventh Circuit
Chicago, Illinois 60604

Argued March 3, 2026
Decided March 17, 2026

Before

DORIS L. PRYOR, *Circuit Judge*

JOSHUA P. KOLAR, *Circuit Judge*

NANCY L. MALDONADO, *Circuit Judge*

No. 25-2202

NORMA SANTOS-MENJIVAR, et al.,
Petitioners,

Petition for Review of an Order of the
Board of Immigration Appeals.

v.

Nos. A209-418-577, A209-418-605,
A209-418-606, A209-418-607

PAMELA J. BONDI,
Attorney General of the United States,
Respondent.

ORDER

Norma Santos-Menjivar, a Honduran citizen, petitions for review of an order of the Board of Immigration Appeals upholding the immigration judge’s denial of asylum and withholding of removal (based on social-group membership) for herself and her three children. In relevant part, the immigration judge (IJ) ruled that she did not show a nexus between her proposed particular social groups and the future harm she feared. Because substantial evidence supports that determination, we deny Santos’s petition.

In 2018, the Department of Homeland Security initiated removal proceedings against Santos and her three foreign-born children, charging each as inadmissible noncitizens present without being admitted or paroled. *See* 8 U.S.C. § 1182(a)(6)(A)(i). Through counsel, Santos and her children conceded the charges of removability and

applied for asylum and withholding of removal. *See* 8 U.S.C. §§ 1158(b)(1)(A), 1231(b)(3)(A). She asserted that she has a well-founded fear of future persecution because gang members in Honduras had demanded money from her under threat of death, purportedly on account of her membership in three particular social groups: (1) Hondurans who have opposed or resisted criminal gangs; (2) single Honduran women living without male partners; and (3) women in Honduras.[†]

The IJ made the following findings of fact. Before coming to the United States, Santos lived in Honduras with her three children and mother. Santos had a domestic partner who came to the United States in 2015 and sent money to Santos to help pay for a “nice car” and phone. In August 2016, three men—one of whom Santos had heard was part of a gang—visited Santos at her home and asked about her son. Upon learning that Santos’s son was not home, the men left. Later that evening, after her son returned home, Santos received a telephone call from an unknown caller, who told her that she must pay a “rent tax” or she and her children would be killed.

Santos did not report the threat. She testified that the “police [are] in agreement with the gangs” and that people had died for not giving in to a gang’s extortion demand. She knew one man, for example, who was murdered in a nearby alley after being taken from his home by people dressed as police. She also knew a young woman who was “disappeared” by the gangs (for reasons Santos did not say). Because of these fears, Santos fled Honduras a week or two after she was threatened. After her flight, unidentified people asked her partner’s family where she had gone. The questioners asked nothing further and did not harm or threaten the partner’s family.

An IJ denied petitioners’ applications. The IJ first concluded that Santos had not established a nexus between the extortion and any of her proposed particular social groups. Despite finding Santos’s account of mistreatment credible, the IJ determined that Santos was targeted based on her perceived wealth—relying on her testimony that she had a nice car and a phone—rather than her gender and living situation, or her resistance to gangs. By Santos’s own admission, another man had been killed for failing to pay a “rent tax,” making it difficult to draw any connection between her gender and

[†] Santos advanced several other theories that she no longer pursues on appeal: that (1) she was entitled to protection under the Convention Against Torture, (2) she was persecuted for belonging to the social group of “single Honduran women living alone,” (3) she had experienced past persecution, and (4) she faces future persecution because of “a pattern or practice” in Honduras of persecution against a group to which she belongs.

the extortion. The IJ also ruled that Santos's proposed group of "Hondurans who have opposed or resisted criminal gangs" was not cognizable.

If Santos returned to Honduras, the IJ added, she did not have an objectively reasonable fear that she would be persecuted. Santos had not received any further threats since the extortion attempt, and her sister (who remains in Honduras) had not reported that any gang members were looking for her. And because Santos did not present evidence that the gang would be able to locate her if she returned, the IJ found that Santos could move elsewhere in the country. Santos sought further review from the Board of Immigration Appeals, but the Board summarily affirmed the IJ's decision.

Santos now petitions this court for review. To qualify for asylum or withholding of removal, Santos needed to establish that there was a nexus between her feared future harm and a statutorily protected ground—in her case, membership in a particular social group. *See Granados Arias v. Garland*, 69 F.4th 454, 465 (7th Cir. 2023); 8 U.S.C. §§ 1101(a)(42)(A), 1158(b)(1)(A). The protected ground must be a "central reason" for the feared harm, meaning that it need not be the only reason, but it could not be a minor one. *W.G.A. v. Sessions*, 900 F.3d 957, 965 (7th Cir. 2018) (citing 8 U.S.C. § 1158(b)(1)(B)); *Granados Arias*, 69 F.4th at 465. Because the Board summarily affirmed the IJ's order, we review the IJ's determinations for substantial evidence and will uphold them unless any reasonable adjudicator would be compelled to disagree. *Urias-Orellana v. Bondi*, 607 U.S. ___, 2026 WL 598435, at *5 (2026); *de Paz-Peraza v. Bondi*, 140 F.4th 390, 394 (7th Cir. 2025).

Santos argues that a central reason for being extorted was her belonging to three proposed social groups: (1) "Hondurans who have opposed or resisted criminal gangs," (2) "single, Honduran women living without male partners," and (3) "women in Honduras." In support of this assertion, she relies on an academic article that concludes that these groups "are particularly vulnerable to victimization by strangers or men with whom they have peripheral associations."

The problem with this evidence is that it is too generalized. A petitioner must show that "there is a reasonable probability that he or she will be *singled out individually* for persecution." *Capric v. Ashcroft*, 355 F.3d 1075, 1085 (7th Cir. 2004) (emphasis added) (citing 8 C.F.R. § 208.13(b)(2)(i)). Because evidence must be particularized to the petitioner, general country conditions alone are not enough to suggest a nexus between a proposed social group and a feared harm. *See, e.g., Borjas Cruz v. Garland*, 96 F.4th 1000, 1005 (7th Cir. 2024) (that extorted petitioner was a woman in a country with

pervasive culture of violence against women was alone insufficient to show she was targeted on basis of gender); *Granados Arias*, 69 F.4th at 464–65 (same).

The remainder of the record does not compel us to disagree with the IJ’s nexus determination. Santos testified, for example, that she knew of a man who had been killed for not complying with extortion—undermining her argument that gender contributed to her own experience. See *Borjas Cruz*, 96 F.4th at 1005 (existence of male victims supported finding that petitioner’s “perceived wealth, not her sex, made her a target for extortion”). And Santos presented no evidence to suggest that the gang viewed her refusal to pay the rent tax as a political statement. See *I.N.S. v. Elias-Zacarias*, 502 U.S. 478, 483 (1992) (assuming petitioner’s resistance to join rebel army was a political decision, nexus was not shown because the act of resistance alone does not compel the conclusions that the rebels “will persecute him *because of* that political opinion, rather than because of his refusal to fight with them”); see also *de Paz-Peraza*, 140 F.4th at 394 (“[C]ourts ‘must distinguish between persecution based on social status, and an individualized reaction to the applicant based on her threat to the gang’s interests.’” (quoting *Rivera-Barrientos v. Holder*, 666 F.3d 641, 653 (10th Cir. 2012))).

Although the IJ was not required to identify the assailants’ actual motivation, substantial evidence also supports the IJ’s finding that Santos was targeted because of her perceived wealth. She testified that she had visible markers of wealth: a nice car and phone. Having been extorted for perceived wealth cannot justify asylum or withholding of removal. See *Borjas Cruz*, 96 F.4th at 1005 (“[I]n a case involving extortion, the petitioner must show that the persecutor had some motivation to target the social group at issue beyond the mere desire to obtain money.”); *Orellana-Arias v. Sessions*, 865 F.3d 476, 485 (7th Cir. 2017) (same).

Because the record does not compel us to disagree with the IJ’s nexus determination, the petition for review is DENIED.