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Julianne Hing

Anti-Immigrant Fever Ignites Violence Against Women

I felt a sour taste in my throat, the one that immediately precedes my gag reflex, when I read the NY Times piece about an immigration official who forced a woman to perform oral sex on him in exchange for her green card.



After the 22-year-old Colombian woman, whose name has not been released, went in for an interview for her green card with immigration agent Isaac Baichu in December of 2007, she started receiving phone calls from Baichu demanding sex. When he called her to meet in a restaurant's parking lot in Queens, she was prescient enough to stash her cell phone, which was recording their conversation, in her purse. Her cell phone captured

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Baichu asking for sex “one or two times. That’s all. You get your green card. You won’t have to see me anymore.” Later in the tape there’s a minute-long pause when, the reporter writes, the young woman “yielded to his demand out of fear that he would use his authority against her.” The Times posted an audio clip of the woman’s recording in the web edition of the article (yay, multimedia?).

The sexual exploitation of immigrant women is nothing new, but there’s a very specific pattern of abuse tied to this case. News of a Miami ICE agent who made a pit stop at his home so he could rape the Haitian woman he was responsible for transporting to detention and reports of sexual assault on a woman held at the Don T. Hutto Family Residential Facility, a de facto prison in Texas for families awaiting immigrations processing, come to mind. Similar scandals have been reported in Maryland (Deputy Lloyd W. Miner this year), California (Agent Eddie Miranda in 2007) and Georgia (Agent Kelvin R. Owens in 2005).

So what is it about the structural design of our society and the U.S. immigration system that enables this abuse of power and the sexual exploitation of immigrant women?

Part of it has to do with the vast discretionary power immigration agents actually have. It’s a job with little oversight and nearly limitless opportunity to exploit immigrants – the power differential is too great for abuse not to be a near inevitability. But the recent jump in reports of sexual assault is not just about bureaucratic corruption. It’s a symptom of the post-9/11, anti-immigrant fever that continues to burn across the country. Mainstream media’s dominant characterizations of immigrants the last 7 years have been that of the criminal

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alien, the dark-skinned terrorist, the unwelcome foreigner. We've seen it more widely manifested in workplace raids, restrictive local ordinances, and the vitriolic daily debate taking place on talk radio. This cultural climate emboldens folks like Baichu to act with impunity against people who've been systematically demonized in the nation's political debates.

According to Pramila Jayapal, executive director of the Hate Free Zone Campaign of Washington, eighty-five to ninety percent of immigrants navigate the system without any legal representation, most immigrants have few resources and no recourse when they've been wronged. The truth is it's almost impossible to know how many similar cases go unreported.

The implicated immigration agents were not guilty of just everyday white-collar corruption. Let's call it what it was: sexual violence, rape plain and simple. Underlying these incidents is the systematic debasement of undocumented immigrants and people of color justified by the assumption that if a person is in the country without papers, they cease to be human, and subsequently relinquish their rights to be treated as such.

Posted at 2:24 PM, Mar 27, 2008 in Gender & Sexuality | immigration | Permalink | Comments (1) | TrackBack (0)



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Can I link this post for the upcoming Erase Racism Carnival at the blog Double Consciousness?

Posted by: Jack Stephens | March 28, 2008 09:48 AM

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