

Women threatened with deportation after exposing sexual harassment at UK detention centre

Trevor Johnson
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Women at the Yarl's Wood immigration removal centre near Bedford, UK, have complained that they have been subjected to sexual exploitation by male members of staff employed by Serco, the private company that runs the centre.

At least two women who came forward as witnesses to abuses are now facing deportation, in what is widely seen as an attempt to silence them before they can give evidence against the alleged perpetrators.

Forty-year-old Afolashade Lamidi from Nigeria stated that she saw a male Serco employee harassing a female detainee (known as Tanja—not her real name) who had lodged a complaint of sexual harassment. Lamidi has also stated that she saw 23-year-old Tanja self-harming. Her fiancé, Tony Babatunde Adebanjo, from north London, told *The Observer*, “They want to get rid of all the witnesses to the sexual abuse. They are keeping her in Yarl's Wood and because she's a witness they want her out of the country.”

The two were due to get married on December 4, but could not because officials would not release Lamidi who has been living in the UK. The couple bought flights to go to Nigeria for January 26. However, they claim they have been offered a refund by immigration officials, worsening their fears of a deportation order against the bride-to-be.

Another witness, Sirah Jeng, 59, has lived in the UK for 12 years and is married to a British citizen. Referring to Tanja and a Serco employee, she said, “I saw them kissing. Now they are trying to get rid of me before I can speak to the police.”

She was told she would be deported within five days and was detained in Yarl's Wood hours before she was due to be interviewed by the police. Jeng has since been

released, enabling her to speak out against the mistreatment of other detainees.

Speaking about what she had suffered, Tanja recalled, “I said I was scared and I did not want to... There were two occasions when I was made to do ‘blow jobs’ when I did not want to. [The guard] was well aware that I did not want to.”

Three members of Serco staff have been dismissed as a result of Tanja's allegations, but it is not known if this includes all those involved in the alleged incidents. So far, none of the alleged perpetrators has been charged with any offence.

A letter sent from lawyers Birnberg Peirce (representing Tanja) to the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (supposed to oversee detention complaints) raises that Yarl's Wood inmates are “particularly vulnerable”, with many psychologically disturbed due to their previous experiences and all desperate to avoid deportation.

After she made her complaint, Tanja says that a cover-up ensued.

In a statement to Bedfordshire police dated August 21, she testified that she was pushed to withdraw her first complaint to Yarl's Wood management of inappropriate sexual advances. She alleges that she was bullied by guards inside the centre. As a result, she began engaging in self-harm, cutting her arms with the sharp edges of a damaged can: “Some of the officers said I was lying... I didn't feel comfortable leaving my room for weeks. I felt very isolated and started self-harming.”

Her statement alleges that some of the guards at the centre “started being horrible” to her to force her into withdrawing her complaint. At the time of her

complaint, she had already been detained more than 110 days in Yarl's Wood and had endured a number of failed attempts to deport her. Within days of her complaint of sexual advances, the Home Office made another attempt to deport her to Kosovo, which also failed.

Tanja arrived in the UK with her Roma family when she was 10 years old and does not know her true nationality. The family was granted leave to remain in 2006. Having been charged and convicted of a robbery on the street in 2010, she was sentenced to deportation on the grounds of being "a foreign criminal."

After Tanja made her complaint, attempts were made to deport her to nine countries, including Germany, Italy, and France.

She was released on bail only after guards in the dining room began pushing her around as part of this campaign of bullying, leading to other detainees coming to her defence.

Tanja's case is just the tip of the iceberg.

Between November 2010 and January 2011, a 29-year-old woman from Pakistan was allegedly sexually harassed many times by a Serco employee in Yarl's Wood. She alleged a male nurse exposed himself in front of her and molested her on three occasions. When she registered a complaint, the Home Office had her deported.

Tanja alleged a similar experience to hers was suffered by another woman. "The day after [making a complaint] she was removed to Romania," she said in her testimony to the police.

Harriet Wistrich of Birnberg Peirce contends that Tanja's testimony has not been similarly dismissed only because she has pursued her case determinedly, and because she was able to back it up with CCTV footage and details of the Serco employees' birthmarks.

In a previous incident (to which Serco only admitted four years later) a male staff member was dismissed for "inappropriate behaviour with a resident" after an incident was caught on CCTV.

The chief inspector of prisons said that Yarl's Wood needed to recruit more female staff "as a matter of urgency" following the latest incident. But the claim that exploitation and brutalisation can be stopped by changing staff gender ratios is as preposterous as claiming that Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo Bay could

have been improved by the same means.

None of these reported incidents is an aberration. Rather, they are the result of measures taken under both Labour and Conservative governments to target the most vulnerable sections of society and especially immigrants, as a means to prepare for using such measures against the working class as a whole.

Large amounts of public finance have been handed out to big businesses under the guise of making public services "more efficient." The private companies brought in to run these services—including detention centres, transport and the National Health Service—have been embroiled in crises that highlight how severely privatisation has undermined the past gains made by the working class.

Serco is already embroiled in a scandal over the charging of fees for tagging offenders later found by auditors to be dead, back in prison or overseas.

Serco announced in March of this year that its profits had jumped up nearly 28 percent to £203 million, from revenue of nearly £5 billion. The company has been one of the main beneficiaries of the privatisation of prisons and detention centres and expects to benefit even more from the privatisation of the probation service. Serco CEO Chris Hyman gets paid £1.86 million per annum, not including his pension and other incentives.



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