

Illegal Woman: The plight of immigrants in Spain

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Directed by Ramon Térmens; written by Térmens and Daniel Faraldo

Illegal Woman (*La dona il·legal* in Catalan, *La mujer ilegal* in Spanish), streaming on Netflix, is a film exposing brutal Spanish immigration policy, and more broadly, the European and global mistreatment of immigrants and refugees.

At the center of the film, directed by Ramon Térmens, is a Spanish immigration lawyer, Fernando Vila (Daniel Faraldo, also a co-writer). His everyday work involves listening to and attempting to address the problems of an endless stream of undocumented immigrants, mostly from poverty-stricken countries.

Some of his clients are living on the streets, some face harassment and anti-Muslim prejudice. They describe terrifying crossings of the Mediterranean by boat. One, the amusing Hussein (Abdel Aziz El Mountassir), repeatedly sells his documents and comes back for more because, as he later explains, “I am poor,” and he has “many mouths to feed.” These immense difficulties strike an authentic chord. Meanwhile, a bloated, right-wing politician bellows from a television screen.

Another lawyer hands Fernando the case of a Kosovan-born prostitute, Zita Krasniqi (Klaudia Dudová), threatened with deportation. A judge, after rejecting her appeal, sends Zita to an immigration detention center, a CIE (Centro de Internamiento de Extranjeros), for 60 days. The following day, she is found hanged. Fernando is skeptical about the authorities’ version, especially since he spotted the high-ranking police officer who arrested Zita, Oriol Cadenas (Isak Férriz), in court, a highly unusual occurrence.

Fernando tracks down another prostitute, a Nigerian, Juliet Okoro (Yolanda Sey), a friend of the dead woman. She has her suspicions too. Zita was about to get married to a street vendor, Bakary. She wasn’t suicidal. We quickly learn that the cop, Cadenas, is at the center of an

odious operation, the sex trafficking of immigrants. Zita witnessed a crime and had to be summarily dealt with.

The lawyer teams up with Fàtima Jamed (Raquel Camón), an immigrant rights activist, to investigate further. She fills him in further on the atrocious circumstances in the CIEs.

By chance, Juliet becomes the girl friend of Cadenas, who is unaware of her connection to Zita, the murdered woman. When he realizes who she is, he tries to have Juliet rapidly and unlawfully deported to Nigeria. Fernando and Fàtima boldly disrupt his plans.

Cadenas, apparently cornered legally, along with the corrupt detention center director, Enric Millar (Boris Ruiz), turns to drastic, violent measures. In his own way, Fernando too, in part due to a personal tragedy, recognizes the need for a more fearless, committed approach.

The film’s final minutes include on-camera interviews with actual immigrants and deportees, who movingly recount their experiences.

Illegal Woman’s filmmakers clearly have their sights set, above all, on the immigrant detention centers, which, by all accounts, are genuine hell-holes, notorious for neglect, abuse and torture—and death.

Salif Sy, a Senegalese man who spent time in an immigrant detention centre in Madrid, told the Inter Press Service, “They mistreat you, they don’t respect you. I’ve seen beatings, suffering, and you can’t defend yourself. When you’re locked in there it’s as if you were in another world.”

The IPS report went on, “Behind the walls of Spain’s eight CIEs, immigrants are frequent victims of abuse and mistreatment by the national police, who are in charge of guarding them, national and international human rights organisations warn.”

Carlos Villán, president of the Spanish Association for the Human Right to Peace, added, “Those who torture

still have guaranteed impunity when they abuse people who are in especially vulnerable situations—undocumented immigrants, isolated from their families and friends, without money to pay a lawyer, and without knowledge of Spain’s legal system, let alone international law.”

In 2018, for example, a 36-year-old Algerian man, Mohamed Boudarbala, died in a CIE in the southern Spanish town of Archidona. Police claimed, according to France 24, that he “hanged himself with a sheet.” The man’s brother, Ahmed Boudarbala, told the media: “I was in contact with my brother every day, we called each other, he complained about the food, the cold, but he didn’t complain about life,” he told reporters in Arabic comments translated into Spanish. “He was sporty, young, very happy and very positive. He died in murky circumstances.” Dubious “suicides” are regular occurrences in the CIEs.

This is a global reality. *Illegal Woman* intimates that, with its interjections of news reports about Donald Trump’s State of the Union address and the vicious remarks of ultra-right Italian politician Matteo Salvini. The catastrophe in Libya also receives mention.

Térmens’ film exudes a healthy hatred of police brutality and corruption, and the cruel legal system as a whole. The word “impunity” recurs a number of times. Fernando and Fátima, realistically but resignedly, fully expect that Cadenas and Millar, with their powerful connections, will walk away scot-free.

That resignation indicates the film’s limitations. Sincere and well-meaning, with honest performances by its actors, *Illegal Woman* does not go deeply into the social realities that have given rise to the anti-immigrant hysteria and the growth of right-wing, authoritarian parties. Nor is there any hint here that any social force is capable of putting an end to the official barbarism. Nonetheless, the film provides an accurate, compelling picture of the abuse and indicts the abusers.



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