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Dissecting the Pieces from a New Study, Picked Apart: The Hidden Struggles of Migrant Women in the Maryland Crab Industry

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Wednesday, October 13, 2010

Dissecting the Pieces from a New Study, Picked Apart: The Hidden Struggles of Migrant Women in the Maryland Crab Industry

Hi Readers. This is Richael, *TMA's* Editor-In-Chief.

I just returned from a *TMA* co-sponsored event (with WCL's Office of Diversity Services and Latino/a Law Students Association) featuring Professor [Jayesh Rathod](#), Director of the Immigrant Justice Clinic, on IJC's recent report, [Picked Apart: The Hidden Struggles of Migrant Working Women In The Maryland Crab Industry](#).

I learned a great deal from his presentation even as a person knowledgeable with federal immigration enforcement policy and familiar with immigration law, to an extent. This study conducted by IJC (by WCL students) aimed to elevate the experiences of Mexican women brought to the Maryland Eastern Shore to do seasonal crab-picking work on H-2B visas (temporary non-agricultural visas). They interviewed 42 women. Among the things I learned:

- Women on H-2B visas have far fewer protections than men on H-2A visas, including no minimum hour work requirement or free employer housing.
- These women paid-to-play, so to speak. Despite its prohibition, every woman paid local recruiters fees to participate in the visa program, and many were forced to take out loans from their recruiters with up to 15% interest rates. Sometimes more than half of their earnings go to repaying this "debt."
- The vast majority of the crab houses are located on three remote islands along the Maryland Eastern Shore that is topographically isolated. Frequent tides flood the roads so it's impossible to leave the islands.
- Employers rent housing to workers (unlike H-2A visa workers who have "free" housing - at least according to the law) and over half of interviewees did not have keys to their homes--supervisors maintained sole access to where they stayed.
- Workers are paid by the meat pound so they have to pick about 200 pounds of crab-meat a day to just meet minimum wage (remember that these women must pay for their basic living expenses, recruiters, and usually need to send remittances back home) (one of the reasons why I'm vegan, by the way--e-mail me if this statement intrigues or upsets you).
- Many of these workers must pay social security and other taxes from which they never benefit and for which they virtually cannot claim refunds.

It's a rather shocking and sad story about which we all need to know. Approximately 60,000 people, mostly women, are brought over to the U.S. for this work each year, under these conditions; about 1200 of these visas are issued for Maryland crab companies. There are more companies alongside the Virginia and North Carolina coasts.

I encourage folks to look at the report--it's clear and easy for non-lawyers to read. I'll limit my commentary to point out that amidst the "immigration debate" that these stories about government-sanctioned and supposedly regulated migration simply exposes the myriad of institutional problems and bad policy incentives in the existing immigration system.

Such a level of exploitation is tantamount to slavery in my mind. In our backyards, no less.
Posted by The Modern American at [2:06 PM](#)