

A Kinder, Gentler Coyote

By Debbie Nathan

Bowing to anti-immigration pressure, the Bush administration announced in August that U.S. employers now have 90 days to clear up worker social security numbers that don't match with the government's database. After that, employers who don't fire out-of-status workers will face criminal sanctions. So will employees.

According to a friend of mine in the Mexican state of San Luis Potosi whom I'll call Jose, this new policy is going to make life better for women.

The intent of the new policy is to eradicate employment opportunities in the U.S.A. for the undocumented. Of course, we're talking only about the overground economy, including the agricultural sector. Will we be getting any fresh broccoli or apples after the new rule takes effect? Whatever – there's always McDonald's.

Meanwhile, there's the black market – which is far more about female nannies and house cleaners than about crack

dealer dudes. Employers of domestic help rarely pay social security, and the government certainly won't be knocking on the doors of lady bosses in the West Village or Brentwood, much less checking ID amid the fancy strollers in Washington Square Park.

Still, for Central American and Mexican women, there's the fabled, illegal trip across the evil Rio Grande or Arizona desert, with the snakes and dehydration and sexually assaultive "coyotes" – the smugglers. Who wants to risk that? Answer: Plenty of distaffers. Studies show that half of illegal immigrants coming from the south today are female. And Jose explained to me that crossing for women is getting downright convenient, thanks to the U.S. government.

Jose has crossed solo several times in the past 15 years to work in agriculture. Lately, though, stepped up border enforcement has made it so difficult to get past Laredo that he's taken to hiring a coyote for \$1,300. He knows lots of people who've always used smugglers, and until recently, he says, the coyotes were a nasty lot. "They would cross 40 people at a time, impose the charges at the border, make everyone walk three to six days to

San Antonio, often rob customers, and frequently rape the women travelers."

But now, Jose says, all those extra Border Patrol agents are having an effect. It's so hard to cross now that fewer people are coming. This has created intense competition among the coyotes, who have responded by vastly improving their services.

"Now, they pay your way on a first-class bus from your home town to the border. They cross only 8 people at a time. After they get you to the U.S. side, you only have to walk a few hours because they've made arrangements with farmers in South Texas to put you up for the night, even feed you. And some of those farmers are gringos," Jose adds. "Then they put you in vans and drive you to Houston."

"And they're much nicer to women now. No more robberies. No rapes. They know it will get out by word of mouth, and they desperately want to maintain and expand their customer base." CP

Debbie Nathan lived in El Paso for many years before moving to New York. She wrote *Women and Other Aliens: Essays from the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Cinco Puntos, El Paso: 1991).

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