

The Exploitation of Sexual Victimization for Political Agendas

Laura Zárate & Aline Jesus Rafi

Arte Sana, Alianza Latina en contra la Agresión Sexual (ALAS: national Latina victim advocate alliance against sexual violence) members and allies* decry the recent horrific news that a group of young men raped a California student while bystanders did nothing.

We are also shocked and saddened by an almost knee-jerk reaction by some in the national and online media and special interest blogs to:

- Assume that this sexual assault may be part of a "gang initiation" because Latino perpetrators were identified.
- Offer as a possible 'defense' the possibility that the victim may have been 'a willing participant' in the possible 'gang initiation'.

Subsequent assumptions have included:

- That this may be a 'Mexican-on-white' crime.
- That this is yet another component of a 'broken borders' crime wave.

Sexual violence is a seriously underreported crime that lends itself to sensationalistic fodder for media outlets and ammunition for bigoted groups and public figures to embolden their hate agendas.

No group, regardless of their ethnic, racial origin, residency or economic status holds a monopoly of sexual assault in the United States. Rape and all forms of sexual violence are perpetrated by religious leaders, famous movie producers, members of beloved musical groups, athletes, schoolteachers and military personnel. Even those who receive government defense contracts to defend US interests in Iraq have been accused of perpetrating all forms of sexual violence including gang rape.

Yet, the recent victim-blaming and bigoted assumptions regarding the tragic rape by multiple perpetrators of a high school student indicate just how much our perception of this crime is forced through the lens of race and immigration debates.

The demonization of youth and especially young men of color reinforces racial stereotypes, promotes hostility and violence against particular groups, and does nothing to address the causes of sexual violence.

The exploitation of sexual violence by anti-immigrant hate groups to further demonize all Latino males is also evidenced through *broken* border "rape tree" references by mainstream media (recently legitimized by a television program that focuses on victims of sex crimes). The origins of this alleged phenomena can be traced to Minutemen Project blog posts in 2005. Rather than focus on prevention and the needs of immigrant victims of rape and human trafficking, the context in which the term "rape tree" has been utilized by the media and hate groups has only served to stereotype all immigrants as a threat to humanity. This dehumanizing focus distracts from the ongoing revictimization of countless Hispanic victims of sexual assault who do not know what a rape crisis center is, and who cannot access victim services because of a grave lack of resources, bilingual staff, volunteers, services and in some cases, limited political will to serve all victims equally.

Furthermore, the focus on ethnic and racial backgrounds on the sexual violence discourse also renders communities of color in general as part of the problem rather than promising partners for solutions. Every rape that goes unreported, every group that is scapegoated contributes to violence in our daily lives.

All of us should denounce every effort, however subtle, to exploit sexual victimization as a means to further any political hate agendas. Rather than endorsing a culture of hate and violence where rape is allowed to occur and silence and inaction by bystanders are encouraged, this horrific crime can be yet another chance where people can come together to learn about the realities of sexual violence, and evaluate the role we each can play in ending it.

* **ALAS** Member support: Rosa Herrin, Louisiana and Clara G. Lindstrom, Oregon, as well as members in Connecticut, California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, New York, and Texas.

Comadres/allies who also support this position statement: **Enlace Comunitario**, Albuquerque, New Mexico, Diana Perez with the **Sexual Assault Victim Advocate Center (SAVA)** in Ft. Collins, Colorado, the **Women of Color Network**, Rosa Corrales-Ortiz, Austin, TX, Linnette Garcia, Indiana, and A.M., Iowa and B.A.P., New Mexico.

About Arte Sana

Founded in 2001, **Arte Sana** (art heals) is a national Latina-led nonprofit committed to ending sexual violence and other forms of gender-based aggressions and engage marginalized communities as agents of change. Arte Sana promotes awareness, healing, and empowerment through bilingual professional training, community education, and the arts.

About ALAS

Initiated in 2004 by Arte Sana, the Alianza Latina en contra la Agresión Sexual (**ALAS**) is a national Latina-led membership network of victim advocates working to address and prevent sexual violence. Through collaborative efforts and cyber activism, ALAS promotes the leadership of Latina victim advocates and develops models, resources and policies to empower communities and eliminate access barriers for survivors. ALAS honors the diversity of the Latin@ culture by respecting the similarities and differences of our languages and histories.