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# Black women sue U.S. Customs

**Say they were  
humiliated by  
strip searches**

by Dalia Dangerfield

African American women traveling from Jamaica have filed a class-action lawsuit against agents and supervisors of the U.S. Customs Office and the Immigration and Naturalization Service. There are 18 women named in the class-action lawsuit, all dark-complexioned African Americans, and more are stepping forward and speaking about their humiliating experience after coming

from Jamaica and being unlawfully searched, sometimes abusively, at O'Hare International Airport.

According to the suit, "the defendants violated the Fourth, Fifth and 14th amendments to the U.S. Constitution by targeting African American women for non-routine, pat-down searches, strip searches and/or body cavity searches."

"We do have the right to search people," said Cherisse Wilder, spokesperson for the U.S. Customs Office. "The strip search is within the scope of authority. It's completely within the law."

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But, according to Ed Fox, civil rights attorney for the plaintiffs, there needs to be reasonable suspicion and the custom's agents should be able to articulate some facts to why these people should

be interrogated further. For example, custom agents should become suspicious when they're alerted by the dog or see a large amount of cash while searching their bags, Fox said. This didn't happen in these cases, he said.

"In every single search, they

didn't find anything indicative to contraband," Fox said.

According to the Rev. Al Sampson of Fernwood United Methodist Church, the fact that these African American women are saying that they were unlawfully searched isn't an isolated

incident. Women throughout the country have also been humiliated by U.S. Customs Agents, he said.

"It's a pattern," he said. "We feel there are more cases than this and they're nation wide. Our right to travel in the world is now being challenged."

The problem will ultimately prevent African Americans, who are one of the largest number of travelers, from traveling the airways, he said.

"To be intimidated on the way and on the return is only to prevent our people from traveling," Sampson said. "It has created patterns of racism to lift it's ugly head. It reminds me of when I was in the South and Black women were fighting for their freedom. This is an extension of yesterday's slave mentality."

Many Black females began coming forward after Channel 5's Renee Ferguson aired a story featuring several women who were strip-searched and humiliated at Chicago's O'Hare Airport.

When 22-year-old Tiffanie McLeary returned from her seven-day trip to Jamaica, she never thought it would end in three hours of humiliation. But that's what happened when she and her boyfriend, Ken King, were stopped by a dog and custom agents, while walking through the terminal at O'Hare International Airport in August last year.

The dog jumped on King and after a brief interrogation by two white custom agents, McLeary and her boyfriend were led to the baggage claim where agents searched their bags.

"They said it was all routine," McLeary said. "(But) they didn't have any reason to check me. I walked straight pass the dog."

During the procedure, McLeary asked to go to the bathroom. Two female custom agents accompanied her.

"When I went to the bathroom my mouth dropped," she said.

The customs representatives walked inside the bathroom with her.

"I was humiliated by the fact they had to watch me while I used the bathroom," McLeary said. "(But) I thought if I said never mind then I would look suspicious."

McLeary was menstruating at the time. Officers asked her not to flush the toilet and examined her tissue when she was finished,

McLeary said. The process made her nervous, although she had nothing to hide, she said.

"I was really p---d off," she said.

And when she looked around, the other person being searched by custom agents, who were all Caucasian, was another Black woman, she said.

Many believe that African American women were singled out by customs agents. Those who have filed the class-action lawsuit were dark-complexioned Black women, Fox said.

"We really don't discriminate against one racial group out there," she said. "We can't stop everybody."

There are 3.2 million passengers who come across the border at O'Hare International Airport, she said.

"By simple observation there's no way we can know who the smugglers are," Wilder said.

So that's why custom agents begin by interrogating travelers.

"If the answers don't make sense or the answers are vague and there are certain other facts, they might ask you to go over to the secondary," Wilder said.

According to Wilder, the reason why many passengers coming from Jamaica are interrogated is because airlines fly direct from the country, which is a major source for drugs, she said.

"The number one mission is to get the drugs," Wilder said.

Sen. Carol Moseley-Braun has started investigating the allegations made by African American women, but Sampson said there should be more done.

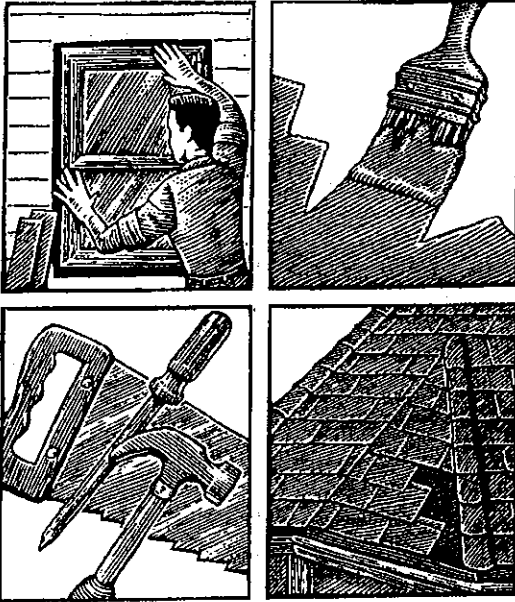
"A citizen's review board needs to be established, because we can't expect officials to be honest," he said.

Sampson also called for an open hearing with Black leaders to file a multi-million dollar lawsuit against the airlines and the custom's office.

According to Barrow, every woman's organization should begin their own investigation also. The Rainbow/Coalition PUSH fully supports them in their endeavors, she said.

"If there's going to be a policy, they should search everybody," Barrow said. "The law should dictate how far they ought to go. Every woman that has been interrogated should come forward and speak."

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