

Rape at the Southern Border

There are currently an estimated 14,500 to 17,500 human trafficking victims in the United States alone, according to the State Department. In 2019, California, Texas, and Florida were the three states in which the most human trafficking cases occurred. 72 percent of trafficking victims in the United States are immigrants; this is no coincidence. This is part of a larger crisis in our country that has been going on for years, is constantly talked about, and yet has only grown worse. In 2023 alone, federal agents at the southern border encountered 2.5 million migrants. In the past few years, the number of hopefuls at the border looking to cross into the United States has dramatically increased. But how did we get here?

Under the Trump administration, a public health order was introduced. The order, known as Title 42, denied migrants access to asylum and was a way to expel migrants back to Mexico. The Biden administration attempted to lift Title 42, arguing that it violated the right to claim asylum. It was also seen by that point as a mere (failed) attempt to deter migrants from trying to cross the border because of evidence that a lot of people who were turned away would keep trying until they eventually made it through to the United States. Title 42 stuck around for another year, but ended when the COVID-19 public health state of emergency was lifted in May 2023. In what I assume was an attempt to be organized, the Biden administration released an app called CBP One. Like any other, the app can be downloaded onto a smartphone and used to book an appointment to submit an asylum application. Many migrants will make their way to the border, hoping to get an appointment through the app by the time they reach it. Many others, however, struggle to even access the app. To anyone with an outdated

smartphone, no smartphone, or no internet connection, the CBP One app is completely useless. The seemingly next-best option: paying to be smuggled into the United States. However, this option is neither simple nor safe.

Amid the transatlantic slave trade, innumerable victims from West Central Africa were brought through the Loango Bay, a known harbor at which victims were loaded onto ships to be sent off and sold. As prisoners were marched to the central Atlantic coast, they would toss their mango seeds to the side once finished eating the fruit. Today, an avenue of 300-year-old mango trees lines the old pathway to the harbor. Now, these trees are a sort of accidental memorial for victims of the transatlantic slave trade and are even recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The phrase “rape trees” conjured my memory of these mango trees. Little did I know that what the two instances had in common started and ended with trees.

When I first heard mention of the “rape trees” near the southern border, I assumed they were used by those who have been raped as some sort of statement or memorial. When I learned that the undergarments of victims hung tangled up in the branches, I thought they were placed there *by* the victims; almost as a way of saying, “Look at this horrible thing that has been done to us.” What a haunting sight that would be. But no, the reality of these rape trees is even more horrifying than I initially thought. The rape trees at the southern border are trees with the undergarments of rape victims. But, they were placed there not by the victims themselves as a memorial or testimony; it is instead the rapist who does the displaying. Some sort of sick trophy case; even a warning to victims to remain silent. The issue of rape is so prevalent at the

border that migrant women *expect* that they will be raped at some point or another during their migration. Sheriff Mark Lamb explains a situation his department dealt with in 2021: “[S]he had a baggie full of pills,” he recounted. “And so we started saying, ‘Hey, what are these pills?’ She says, ‘Look, when I was gonna cross the border, I knew I would get raped multiple times. So these are morning-after pills.’” Why are the majority of trafficking victims in the United States immigrants? Why do women expect to be raped when they migrate across the border to the United States side—and is it really worth it? Carolina, a victim of kidnapping and rape at the border, says, “It’s the saddest, most horrible thing that can happen to a person.” Let’s pause for a moment and reflect on how ridiculous the previous question is; is the border really worth getting across if it means being raped and extorted in the process?

To blame for this dilemma, more often than not, are TCOs, which stand for transnational criminal organizations; in other words, cartels. TCOs are slated to bring in \$13 billion a year. Believe it or not, drug distribution is not the only ‘business’ the cartels are involved in.

Some migrants are smuggled into the United States. This is a service that these migrants voluntarily seek and pay for. Those who do the smuggling are referred to as ‘Coyotes’. The Coyotes are not part of the TCOs but rather work for them in a sense, paying cartels a cut of their profit. However, this is not always so. TCOs have been known to kidnap migrants for ransom. One victim of this horror, Carolina, recalls being pulled from the stash house where the cartel was holding her captive in hopes her family would send ransom money. The cartel had made her call her family to beg for

\$2000, so Carolina assumed they would make her do so yet again. Instead, she was raped. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has picked up on a pattern of rape being used as a method of torture to succeed at extorting vulnerable migrants. This includes migrants who do not seek Coyotes' help to smuggle them across the border. Various TCOs occupy different parts of the border and force migrants to pay when passing through, using threats (at the very least) of violence and rape. Those smuggled across with the accompaniment of a Coyote are less likely to be extorted or harmed by TCOs when crossing.

The crisis at the United States southern border has many working parts contributing to it. We talk plenty about the number of people trying to cross over into the United States. However, we rarely hear about the true horrors going on there. To put it simply, the cartels are running the show. They profit from smuggling migrants into the country. When that alone is not profitable enough, they turn to kidnapping and torture to ask for ransom. Rape, as we have seen in many conflicts worldwide, is routinely used as a weapon. Similarly, the cartels use it as a tactic to threaten migrants and get what they want—more money. To turn a blind eye to vulnerable migrant women and children, who expect to be raped when they cross the border, is the opposite of feminism. Yes, something needs to be done about it. However, this will never happen until these truths are acknowledged.