

# 'You Have to Pay With Your Body': The Hidden Nightmare of Sexual Violence on the Border

By Manny Fernandez

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MCALLEN, Tex. — It was dark in the stash house where they kept her, the windows covered so no one could see inside. At first, the smugglers had her cook for the other migrants who had recently crossed illegally into the United States. Then they took her to a room upstairs, locked the door and began taking turns with her.

It was the summer of 2014, and Melvin, a 36-year-old mother of three, had just completed the journey from her native Guatemala, crossing the Rio Grande on a raft before being led to the house in the Texas border city of McAllen.

For weeks in that locked room, the men she had paid to get her safely to the United States drugged her with pills and cocaine, refusing to let her out even to bathe. "I think that since they put me in that room, they killed me," she said. "They raped us so many times they didn't see us as human beings anymore."

On America's southern border, migrant women and girls are the victims of sexual assaults that most often go unreported, uninvestigated and unprosecuted. Even as women around the world are speaking out against sexual misconduct, migrant women on the border live in the shadows of the #MeToo movement.

[Read: *In a Border Courtroom, a Migrant Woman Confronts Her Biggest Fear*]

The stories are many, and yet all too similar. Undocumented women making their way into American border towns have been beaten for disobeying smugglers, impregnated by strangers, coerced into prostitution, shackled to beds and trees and — in at least a handful of cases — bound with duct tape, rope or handcuffs.

The New York Times found dozens of documented cases through interviews with law enforcement officials, prosecutors, federal judges and immigrant advocates around the country, and a review of police reports and court records in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. The review showed more than 100 documented reports of sexual assault of undocumented women along the border in the past two decades, a number that most likely only skims the surface, law enforcement officials and advocates say.

In addition, interviews with migrant women and those working with them along the border point to large numbers of cases that are either unreported or unexamined, suggesting that sexual violence has become an inescapable part of the collective migrant journey.

[Read the Newsletter: *Yes, There Was Duct Tape: The Harrowing Journeys of Migrants Across the Border. Sign up for Crossing the Border here*]

President Trump has used the threat faced by migrant women to make his case for a border wall. "One in three women are sexually assaulted on the dangerous trek up through Mexico," he said in January — an estimate that appears to have originated from some limited surveys, one of them by Doctors Without Borders, of women traveling through Mexico.

But less understood is that the violence that befalls migrant women happens not just during the perilous journey through Mexico: Much of it happens after women reach the supposed safety of the United States.

In July, a 23-year-old Honduran woman told the authorities that she was sexually assaulted in a bedroom closet by a smuggler who had helped her and her sister cross into the South Texas city of Mission. The following month, a sheriff's deputy in San Antonio was charged with sexually assaulting the 4-year-old daughter of an undocumented Guatemalan woman and threatening to have her deported if she reported the abuse. In 2017, a guide leading a group of migrants through the Tohono O'odham Nation's reservation in Arizona raped a woman from El Salvador twice during a seven-day desert hike, threatening to leave her stranded if she resisted. "I hope I leave you pregnant so you have one of my kids," he said, the woman told the authorities.

In 2016, a migrant woman fled a stash house in the South Texas city of Edinburg, where she said she had been raped by a smuggler who brandished a machete. In West Texas that same year, two teenage girls reported that they had been sexually assaulted by a Customs and Border Protection officer, who they said forced them to strip, fondled them, then tried to get them to stop crying by offering chocolates, potato chips and a blanket. In an unusual turn, the girls filed legal claims against the federal government, which settled the case in 2018 for \$125,000.

At least five of the women who were assaulted — in one case, bound with duct tape, raped and stabbed — were attacked not by migrant smugglers, who are often the perpetrators, but by on-duty Border Patrol agents and Customs officers.

Experts say the actual number of sexual assaults is almost certainly much higher than those documented by prosecutors and the police, because most attacks are never reported. And such attacks don't end at the border. Women have reported being assaulted in immigration detention facilities, and the federal government over a recent four-year period has received more than 4,500 complaints about the sexual abuse of immigrant children at government-funded detention facilities.

The Times interviewed eight migrant women from Central America who were sexually assaulted between 2013 and 2016 — women still struggling with nightmares, depression and in some cases, thoughts of suicide. One reported that she was attacked in Mexico; six said they were assaulted in South Texas. One said she was attacked in both Mexico and South Texas. The oldest victims were in their early 40s when they were attacked; the two youngest were 14.

Most of their attackers were never prosecuted or identified, and The Times was not able to independently verify the women's accounts. But all eight women either gave sworn testimony or submitted statements under penalty of perjury to the federal government in order to qualify for visas, and cooperated with the police in the investigation of their cases.

They described a netherworld of fear that coexists with the bustling life of American cities up and down the border. One woman told of being held prisoner in a house that had been turned into a makeshift brothel in McAllen, a city of 143,000 in the Rio Grande Valley. “Nueva carne” — new meat, the smugglers said as she and other migrant women were led into the house, said the woman, Lucy, 45, a migrant from Honduras who, like others interviewed, did not want her last name used.

She said a series of men came into the house over the next several days and raped her. “Because I didn’t want to let them, they tied my feet together and my hands behind my back,” Lucy said.

Gladys, 45, a mother of four from Guatemala, said she was kidnapped by armed smugglers after crossing the border and jumped out of a car to escape, but was captured again. For days, she was held prisoner at a stash house in McAllen and forced to have sex with six men. “I thought it would be better if I died when I fell from the car,” she said.

Law enforcement officials on the border said they had made arrests in many of the cases brought to them and would pursue more if they could. But the majority of women who have been assaulted do not report it, often because their attackers threaten to expose their immigration status — or worse — if they do. One woman, raped repeatedly at gunpoint in a stash house in Phoenix in 2005, said her attacker threatened to sell her 3-year-old daughter if she reported him. Those who do go to the authorities may not know the names of their attackers, or even where the assault occurred. Smugglers make sure their clients are unsure of their whereabouts; if they are detained by Border Patrol, they won’t be able to pinpoint where they were held.

*[Read: Open Wounds, Head Injuries, Fever: Ailing Migrants Suffer at the Border]*

The women are powerless by almost any measure. Most of the eight interviewed now live in the United States after receiving the victim-related visas. They work in stores, restaurants and factories, most barely making a living. Their English is limited. Many of them have not even told their families what happened.

“They don’t have many defenses,” said Jesus R. Romo Vejar, an Arizona lawyer who has represented many migrant women victimized by sexual assault. “Undocumented women and children are the most unprotected of human beings.”

Here are some of their stories.

Lucy, 45, was raped while being forced to work at makeshift brothels, first in Mexico and then in McAllen, Texas. Caitlin O’Hara for The New York Times

## **They just told us, ‘You have to pay with your body.’**

*Lucy, 45, was raped while being forced to work at makeshift brothels, first in Mexico and then in McAllen.*

When we got to the house, there were many women. It was a big house. I couldn’t see everybody’s face, but there were different women in different rooms for prostitution. I wanted to flee but I was afraid they were going to kill me. They just told us, “You guys don’t have money, so you have to pay with your body.”

When we crossed the river, there was a man waiting, a white guy with tattoos. He was in a truck. We got into the truck. He brought us into a house in McAllen. When we got there, the guy started talking and he said that I was new meat.

When they wanted to have sex with me they had to tie me up because I wasn’t cooperative. They tied my feet together and my hands behind my back and then they’d have sex with me from behind.

Before, I could not talk about this. I would have panic, really serious panic. I didn’t want to leave the house. I didn’t want to talk to anybody. I thought that everyone in the world saw me as a prostitute. I come from a poor family but a very decent family.

It has affected me, yes. But not anymore. I’m kind of enraged. Those guys have mothers and daughters. What they did to us is what they did to women.

Melvin Caitlin O'Hara for The New York Times

## **Every time I closed my eyes, the men would appear.**

*Melvin, 36, was raped and forced into prostitution in a locked room at a stash house in McAllen.*

I lost count of how long I was there for. It wasn't me anymore. I think that since they put me in that room, they killed me. They have no mercy. They don't care that you're a mother, that you have family. They see someone who doesn't matter to them.

And I still remember while I was with them there, it was my birthday, and I didn't want to, not that day. And I remember that he grabbed me and at one point bit me, and when I arrived at the detention center, I still had the bite marks. I told them that it was my birthday. And according to them, the rape that day was for my birthday.

I tried to commit suicide three times. Because you can't live with all of that. And every time I closed my eyes, the men would appear. You'd shower. You'd close your eyes. They were there. I didn't want to live with that in my head anymore. But here I am.

J.E. Caitlin O'Hara for The New York Times

## **I didn't know what to do. My feet were tied up.**

*J.E., 19, and two other migrants were kidnapped in South Texas by a Border Patrol agent, Esteban Manzanares, when J.E. was 14. He raped her in his apartment in Mission, Tex., and later committed suicide.*

He took me and tied me up to a tree. He said he would come back. I was thinking about my little brother, who's in Honduras, and I'd never see him again. He was about 10, I think. It was hours.

He undid me from the tree and put me in the car. In the apartment, there were two beds on top of the other, children's bunk beds, and ropes there, too. They were shoelaces. For my wrists and my feet.

My mind was blank. I was trying to understand everything. I didn't know what to do. My feet were tied up. I would look at him and he had a gun. And that frightened me. I asked him why, and he answered me that he was doing this to me because I was the prettiest one of the three.

There are people who sort of discard you when they know what happened to you. But the majority of my girlfriends do know so they can understand what I went through, and they support me.

## **He bit my mouth so I could not cry out.**

*V.E.M.L., 39, was raped in the South Texas brush by a smuggling guide. She was apprehended, detained at the Hutto detention center in Taylor, Tex., and later deported.*

I knew that they were the ones who were going to take me across, so I knew that I had to stay with them. I never learned his name. I felt nervous about him. He was very strange. I wasn't sure if he was on drugs. He always stood up and sat down, and stood up and sat down.

The older one walked ahead. The younger one said, "Come with me."

I said, "Where are we going?" And he said, "We're going to catch up with them ahead."

He bit my mouth so I could not cry out. I was scared that it might occur to him to kill me.

Afterwards, he told me to hurry up or he would leave me there on the ground. The guys in the group start saying, "Immigration! Immigration!" I ran toward Immigration. I wanted to get away. But then when they took me and put me in the car, I felt frustrated and alone. I just felt like I couldn't stop crying. They were all men agents. They kept asking me why I was crying and I couldn't explain.

When they brought me to Laredo, I told a doctor what happened. He said, "Don't feel like you're the only one that this happened to. This has happened to many other women."

Cindy and her son. Caitlin O'Hara for The New York Times

## **I had been marked because of what had happened to me, that violation.**

*Cindy, 26, and her son Samuel stayed at a stash house in Mexico while waiting to cross the border. She and another woman were raped by a smuggler, and she learned after being apprehended by Border Patrol that she was pregnant. Samuel is now 8. His little brother, to whom Cindy gave the biblical name of Adonai, is 2.*

When he entered the room, he had the gun. He took the children out. He had the gun and he pointed the gun at my head when he was attacking us. First he abused me and then he abused her. We're in his power and we feel like we're disposable. We can't do anything because it's like they tell us, they can kill us and nobody will say anything.

It wasn't until that test that I knew I was pregnant. In that moment, it was like I had been marked. I had been marked because of what had happened to me, that violation.

I wanted to kill myself. Going to the psychologist, that's what helped me heal. She told me that we had to talk about it, we had to think about it, and we had to learn to live with our lives moving forward, even with what happened.

My son, I realized he was an innocent bystander in this situation and that it wasn't his fault. My motivation to keep going in life are my two kids. I thank God because everything that I suffered, they're the happiness that came out of that.

Michelle O'Donnell contributed reporting from Taylor, Tex., and Mitchell Ferman contributed from McAllen. Kitty Bennett contributed research.

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