

Torn from Her Arms: The US government immigration policy that “rises to the level of torture”

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Torn from Her Arms, recently aired on the Lifetime television cable channel, is based on the true story of a mother and daughter fleeing gang violence in El Salvador brutally separated at the US border by immigration officials in 2018.

The channel, geared towards paint-by-number dramas for female viewers, took time out from its concentration on stalkers, deadly cheerleaders, baby stealers and other middle-class terrors, to expose one of the American government’s most egregious crimes.

The program is directed by Mexican-born filmmaker Alan Jonsson Garcia, scripted by Tawnya Bhattacharya and Ali Laventhol. The creators should be commended for producing one of the shamefully few works to depict this truly inhuman policy. Other films treating the plight of children at the border or refugees from Central America include *Nona* (Michael Polish, 2017), *Icebox* (Daniel Sawka, 2018), *Frontline’s Separated: Children at the Border* (produced by Marcela Gaviria and Martine Smith, 2018) and the earlier *The Infinite Border* (Juan Manuel Sepúlveda, 2007).

In *Torn from Her Arms*, Cindy Madrid (Fátima Molina) and her six-year-old daughter, Ximena (Camila Nuñez), having fled life-threatening conditions in their native country, El Salvador, seek asylum in the US, only to be separated at the border as a part of the Trump administration’s notorious “Zero Tolerance Policy.”

At a detention center in Brownsville, Texas, armed guards pull traumatized children from their parents and march them off to an undisclosed location. Unbeknownst to their frantic parents, the children—many younger than Ximena—are transported to the Children’s Detention Center in Phoenix, Arizona. There, the youngsters are each given thin “space” blankets, two meals a day and allowed only one hour outdoors. A child-inmate

complains that “the food is not good and the guards rough us up.” With a few honorable exceptions, the guards treat their young charges like subhuman offenders.

For Cindy and other parents, as well as their terrified offspring, the emotional toll is extreme. Your children have been “adopted by nice American families,” Cindy is cruelly taunted by one of the guards. She now finds herself at the Port Isabel Detention Center in Los Fresnos, Texas. The privately run prison, in fact, has been the scene of numerous hunger strikes—what the government describes as “voluntary fasting”—to protest alleged abuse, lack of medical care and virtually no access to legal resources. The incarcerated are forced to wear orange jumpsuit prison garb.

“It’s torture not telling [the parents] where their children are,” angrily asserts Thelma Garcia (Judy Reyes), a Texas immigration attorney, who takes Cindy and Ximena’s case pro bono. A dedicated activist, Thelma is bolstered by a supportive family, including a wealthy brother (“I help the rich get richer, and you do God’s work”) who buys her a luxury car, which she eventually trades in for Cindy’s bail money.

Indicative of the retrograde political climate, a television newscaster blathers on about “parents [who] are criminals, illegal immigrants who put their children at risk.” Meanwhile, Cindy must pass a “Credible Fear Interview” (!) in order to avoid deportation. Without Thelma being present, she explains to an unsympathetic official that in El Salvador, gang members are “best friends with cops.”

Gloria Reuben portrays Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist ProPublica reporter, Ginger Thompson, who breaks the story. She obtains a recording of the detained children crying out for their parents. On the tape, Ximena begs guards to call an aunt living in the US, whose

telephone number she has memorized: “Are you going to call my aunt so that when I’m done eating, she can pick me up?” she asks plaintively.

At one point, Thelma blasts the authorities: “You think the toddlers and school-age kids are gangsters and thugs.” To add insult to injury, Cindy must take a DNA test to prove she is Ximena’s mother!

Torn from Her Arms is a moving film with a committed cast and crew. Its postscript informs the viewer that 2,000 children are still missing. However, in reality, the overall number of children still separated from their parents is unknown.

The Lifetime film puts a human face on a devastating 2020 investigation by Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) entitled, “You Will Never See Your Child Again: The Persistent Psychological Effects of Family Separation.” The report revealed that evaluations of “asylum-seeking parents and children who were separated by the U.S. government in 2018, found pervasive symptoms and behaviors consistent with trauma; most met diagnostic criteria for at least one mental health condition, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, major depressive disorder, or generalized anxiety disorder consistent with, and likely linked to, the trauma of family separation.”

The study forthrightly contends that the US government’s treatment of asylum seekers through its policy of family separation “constitutes cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment and, in all cases evaluated by PHR experts, rises to the level of torture.”

“In fiscal year 2018,” continues the exposé, “the year in which the family separation policy was rolled out, a record number of 107,212 families were apprehended at the southern border.” The PHR listed “indiscriminate violence, physical and sexual violence targeting women and children, forced recruitment into gangs, and extortion” as some of the horrors asylum seekers were escaping.

“Instead of recognizing these regional displacement trends,” states the physicians’ report, US government officials, including Trump, portrayed “asylum seekers as ‘bad hombres,’ ‘smugglers and traffickers, MS-13 members, criminals and abusers,’ characterizing parents fleeing with their children as traffickers and gang members fraudulently migrating with children to gain access to the United States.”

More than 5,500 migrant families were pulled apart at the Southwestern border beginning in 2017, wrote the *New York Times* in a July 2021 article. Even families

lawfully presenting themselves at ports of entry continued to be separated.

Moreover, jailing immigrants is a lucrative business. “Over the last four decades, a series of emergency stopgaps and bipartisan deals has created a new multibillion-dollar industry built on the incarceration of immigrants,” according to the *Guardian* in September 2019.

The brutality and mistreatment continue. In an August 2021 article, headlined “Families are still being separated at the Arizona-Mexico Border,” Joanna Williams, told the *Phoenix New Times* that “People are seeking asylum because they’ve experienced significant trauma in their home communities. Family separation and detention is another level of trauma that their family then experiences, so, instead of the U.S. being a palace of safety and healing, it’s a place of further anxiety and suffering.”

Williams is the executive director of the Kino Border Initiative—a binational aid organization that serves migrants on the Arizona-Mexico border. “What’s deeply hypocritical about it is if the Biden administration campaigned on anything on immigration, it was its opposition to Trump’s policy on family separation. But here they are, in a different way, continuing to separate families.”

Torn from her Arms exposes the reality that the US migrant detention facilities should more accurately be described as concentration camps.

Furthermore, the social breakdown, poverty and gang violence driving millions, like Cindy and Ximena, to flee their homelands are the direct result of more than a century of American imperialist economic domination and military-CIA intervention. In countries such as impoverished El Salvador, Washington has practiced what can only accurately be described as sociocide, propping up dictatorial governments of big business.



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