

Immigration Rape

Abortion clinics are full of stories.

We never know what we will hear at work.

For six months, I worked as a translator at the Women's Medical Center of Rhode Island, which provides abortion services.

Ambi Hello, Women's Medical Center. This is Nancy, how can I help you?

It is a call from a nurse at the New Bedford Health Center in Massachusetts. *Hola. Te paso Maria, necesita hacerse una cita.* I ask Maria the standard appointment questions- name, date of birth, date of last menstrual period, and we set up a time for her to come in.

She tells me part of her story in counseling. She just arrived in the states 10 days before, and was staying with her sister in New Bedford. She tells me her pregnancy was the result of a rape in Mexico during her two month journey from Central America to the U.S., by foot and by bus.

Understandably, she did not offer a lot of information, so I sought out answers with health care professionals, immigration activists, NGO employees and the Border Patrol.

According to Border Patrol, as of this year, an average of 720 women are caught a day on the southern border. While we don't know how many of these women are rape survivors, Marisa Ugarte, the executive director of the Bilateral Safety Corridor Coalition, explained that it is a constant problem.

Ms. UGARTE Women assume that rape is part of what they have to go through to get to the United States.

To cross the border, women have long employed the services of *coyotes*.

Ms. UGARTE The coyotes before used to be people that you knew from family . . . its no longer that. Now it has become very very dangerous. They don't care about the lives of the people that they are transporting.

Marisa Ugarte explains the most recent case of border rape she is working on. The two Guatemalan women who traveled together are cousins.

Ms. UGARTE They went through three days of rape, everyday. The coyote would rape one in front of another.

Martha Gonzalez works with pregnant Latina women at the New Bedford Community Health Center in Massachusetts. In her experience, sometimes women are raped before they even reach the border.

Ms. GONZALEZ If they're gonna get raped, they don't know if they're gonna be in a room or a trunk or a truck or right next to a river.

There are three main reasons why women usually do not tell anyone when they are raped.

Ms. UGARTE One, for fear of retaliation. Two, because the people who get raped are afraid that they will get deported if they denounce the crime in the United States. Three, the coyote knows where their families are and they were afraid that their children or their families would get killed.

When women's stories do come out, there is another problem: proof. A rape kit has to be administered by the hospital within 72 hours of the rape. But if a woman is raped in a desert, by the time she gets to the hospital, it may be too late to prove that she was raped, or identify who attacked her.

Maria had never been to a doctor nor a gynecologist. In counseling, I offer to go into the operating room with her to introduce her to the doctor and explain what is happening before she falls asleep from the anesthesia.

Gina, the shorthaired OR tech, helps Maria onto the operating table. Sterilized paper rustles beneath her as she adjusts her legs in the stirrups. Maria fiddles with her gown, looks around nervously at the tubes and equipment.

The doctor sits down to examine Maria before he begins the procedure. The anesthesiologist comes in shortly afterwards. Maria falls asleep as the drugs enter her bloodstream, and her eyes roll into her head.

Maria's body reveals the parts of the story she did not tell me herself.

Dr. DI ORIO : The physical examination showed rectal warts, uh, condiloma. Multiple. Very unusual to see that other than in, probably, multiple partner rape.

When crossing into the states illegally, women's bodies are no longer their own.

Marisa Ugarte leaves a lasting image of what's happening at the border.

Ms. UGARTE Nobody should have crime committed against them, regardless of where you enter in the country, illegally or not. And these women have lost the right to be protected; they've lost the right to be free. While they are in the coyote's hands, they are not free. They are totally dependent on them. And then

the fears of deportation and smuggling make it the perfect fertile ground for human trafficking and rape.

For intern edition, I'm Kira Neel, in Washington.