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Memoir of a former abortion addict

In 'Impossible Motherhood,' Irene Vilar, now a mother of two, writes of what led her to have 15 pregnancies ended.



Vilar is photographed in the backyard of her Colorado home. (Nathan W. Arnes / For The Times)

By Robin Abcarian
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Reporting from Denver - Irene Vilar's house, a charming old place on a leafy block outside Denver, is a monument to her mothering. Half the downstairs has been transformed into a preschool, with picture books, educational toys and art supplies in organized disarray.

Outside, her little girls, 3-year-old Lolita and 5-year-old Loretta, are decorating the walkway with brown-eyed susans plucked from the garden. It is a scene of almost magical domesticity.

Inside, their mother, a striking 40-year-old literary agent with big, brown eyes, long, straight hair and a Spanish-inflected lilt that gives away her Puerto Rican roots, is describing how, from the age of 16 to 33, she could neither stop herself from conceiving, nor from terminating her pregnancies. Fifteen of them.

She explores her history in a brutally frank new memoir, "Impossible Motherhood: Testimony of an Abortion Addict."

Even before it was published last week, Vilar's story unleashed a wave of emotion in the anti-abortion community. Reactions have included pity and -- at least in one blogger's case -- a call to put her behind bars.

On the abortion rights side, reaction has been muted.

"The majority of pro-choicers -- and I don't blame them -- are somewhat confused," said Vilar. Vilar believes that access to legal abortion saved her life because she would have found a way to end her pregnancies no matter what.

"Abortion exists everywhere, legal or not," she said. Latin America, she noted, has a relatively high abortion rate and stringent anti-abortion laws. Most abortions in the region are considered "unsafe" by health authorities, who estimate that up to 5,000 women in the region die each year from abortions.

Vilar, whose pregnancies were punctuated by several suicide attempts, is aware of the horrific reaction her story may inspire. (Worried about the safety of her family, she asked that her neighborhood not be identified.)

Difficult marriage

She describes her abortions as part of a misguided quest to free herself from the burdens of a complicated and tragic family, then as part of an immensely dysfunctional dynamic with her first husband, a professor of Latin American literature whom she met at Syracuse University when she was 16 and he was 50.

"We could be a couple as long as I relinquished my desire for children," she said of her husband, "a disturbingly handsome man" who taught her that "families are nests of suffering" and informed her that he preferred young women because they are "unformed . . . unfinished, with not too many wounds." Children, he told her, were incompatible with freedom. (Her ex-husband, Pedro Cuperman, did not respond

to an e-mailed request for comment.)

Again and again during their 11-year relationship, she rebelled: "Forgetting" her birth control pills, she would get pregnant, feel the thrill of self-determination, then panic that she would lose her husband, seek an abortion and collapse in relief and despair.

"Of course, this did not mean I wanted to do it again and again," she said. "A druggie also wants to stop every time."

"Her story is just so tragic," said Charmaine Yoest, president of Americans United for Life. "It really underscores everything we always say in the pro-life movement -- that abortion is part of a very sad story for women." For proponents of legal abortion, who often invoke the Clinton-era mantra that abortion should be "safe, legal and rare," Vilar's story raises uncomfortable, and perhaps unanswerable, questions about the use of abortion as a first-line tool of birth control.

"I can completely understand the discomfort that some feminists feel," said feminist author Robin Morgan, who wrote the book's foreword. "There is a perfectly human tendency to say we can't afford ambiguity, we can't afford nuance. I am afraid it comes from years of being pummeled by the extreme, anti-choice right. The truth is that it's a complicated issue."

Morgan wondered while reading the book: Had the women's movement somehow failed Vilar?

Not at all, Vilar said. "My feeling was that I let them down. They risked their lives to give me this, and I abused that right. But thanks to that right, I'm alive."

Her lineage

Vilar places her story in the context of a multi-generational fight for self-determination, both personal and political, originating in the unique circumstances of her Puerto Rican homeland.

Vilar's maternal grandmother is the famous Puerto Rican nationalist Lolita Lebrón, who left Vilar's mother as an infant with relatives and moved to New York. In 1954, Lebrón and three other nationalists shot up the U.S. House of Representatives, wounding five congressmen. Convicted of attempting to overthrow the U.S. government, Lebrón spent 25 years in prison, and was pardoned by President Jimmy Carter in 1979. She is now 89 and in ill health.

While Lebrón was incarcerated, her daughter -- Vilar's mother, Gladys Méndez -- leaped from a moving car and died two days later. Vilar's father was driving, and Vilar, then a child of 8, had tried to hold her mother back.

Méndez's suicidal unhappiness, said Vilar, had multiple causes: abandonment by Lebrón, a philandering husband and an unnecessary hysterectomy at 33 that left her moody, ill and depressed.

Puerto Rico, at the time, was a living laboratory for American-sponsored birth control research. In 1956, the first birth control pills -- 20 times stronger than they are today -- were tested on mostly Puerto Rican women, who suffered dramatic side effects. Starting in the 1930s, the American government's fear of overpopulation and poverty on the island led to a program of coerced sterilization. After Vilar's mother gave birth to one of her brothers, she writes, doctors threatened to withhold care unless she consented to a tubal ligation.

These feelings of powerlessness -- born of a colonial past, acted out on a grand scale or an intimate one -- are the ties that bind the women of Vilar's family.

"If there is something that is intersecting across generations -- my grandmother, my mother and me -- it's the issue of control," said Vilar. "I chose a very private drama to show my problem of control, my mother chose a personal one, not as intimate as mine, and with my grandmother, it was the ultimate political control."

Painful memoir

Vilar has addressed part of her family history before. In 1996, at 27, she published a well-received memoir, "A Message From God in the Atomic Age," recently reissued as "The Ladies Gallery." (Both titles are homages to her grandmother. The first was the name of a tract Lebrón wrote following a religious vision in prison and sent to President Eisenhower; the second is the name of the balcony from which Lebrón attacked Congress.)

For years, she resisted writing "Impossible Motherhood" for fear that she could be misunderstood, or that her confession might endanger the legal choice that she exercised so compulsively.

She received 51 rejections, though many were complimentary.

"I should want to publish it, I know," wrote one publisher, "but it's just too painful for me . . . even with its somewhat happy ending."

In 2008, the manuscript found its way to Judith Gurewicz, a Lacanian psychoanalyst who taught at Harvard and runs the publishing house Other Press.

"As a publisher, I need a good story, and the fact that it's quite intellectual and well written is what attracted me to it," said Gurewicz.

In the wake of scandals involving embellished or fabricated memoirs, Gurewicz hired ("for the price of a small house," as she put it) an attorney to vet Vilar's claims. The attorney confirmed to The Times that Vilar produced medical records proving most of the procedures. (Some clinics do not keep records for longer than seven years.)

Vilar, for one part, was stunned to learn while gathering her medical records that she had forgotten about her abortion. She had recalled having a procedure in Rochester, N.Y., and when she left messages at every abortion clinic in that city, two called her back.

'Helicopter mother'

These days, she is raising her daughters and two teenage stepchildren with her second husband, whom she married less than two months after they met at a writers workshop in 2003.

Her friends tease her about being a "helicopter mother," always hovering. "I wouldn't call it overcompensating," she said, "but some friends have said that." (Though her sister is supervising her daughters outside, she has lost her train of thought twice in two hours worrying about them.)

She spends many hours each week reading up on child development. "I try to be very aware of what I lack, and what I need to learn. I read a lot of books to see what ways I can protect my girls from the world, including me."

She is working on a new memoir, "In the Middle of the Night." It is, she said, about motherhood.

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