Memoir of a former abortion addict

By S. Neysa M. Nederend Chicago Tribune

October 13, 2009

It was 1984 and the plane was taking off. She was 24. She had just had an abortion.

Not at all, Vilar said. “My feeling was that I let them down. They risked their lives to give me this, and I didn’t even have the guts to bring it to birth.”

Vilar places her story in the context of a multi-generational fight for self-determination, both personal and political. Her grandmother, her mother and her are united in their wish for choice and control over the bodies they inhabit.

“I have no choice,” she said. “I can’t have my child and I want my life too.”

As Vilar grew up in the Dominican Republic, she learned that it’s not just about choosing motherhood, but also about being able to choose abortion. After her mother gave birth to one of her brothers, she writes, doctors threatened to withhold care unless she consented to a tubal ligation.

Similarly, 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.

“I think this perspective is intersecting across generations -- my grandmother, my mother and me,” she said. “I think it’s the same idea of freedom.”

On the abortion rights side, reaction has been muted. “In the Middle of the Night” is a quiet story, the kind of book that might go unnoticed in a year when Sarah Palin and the Tea Party are dominating headlines.

While Lebrón was incarcerated, her daughter -- Vilar’s mother, Gladys Méndez -- leaped from a third-story window to avoid being shot by paramilitaries. The police who freed her from behind bars.

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

Painful memoir

“Impossible Motherhood: Testimony of an Abortion Addict” by Rachel W. Vilar (Crown, $24.95) is, she said, about motherhood.

These days, she is raising her daughters and two teenage stepchildren with her second husband, a “handsome man” who taught her that “families are nests of freedom.”

“She’s a reader, she’s a writer, she’s a photographer,” said Vilar’s daughter and book’s editor, Sarah Martin. “She’s the one who should be telling these stories.”

Vilar’s story, which chronicles the fall and rise of an abortion addict, reads like a memoir of addiction and recovery. It is a story of loss and survival, of love and abandonment.

“I was made to be a mother. A terrible accident, a disaster, and it’s all your fault,” she writes in the book. “I was made to be a mother and you made me believe it.”

Vilar, who is married to an anti-choice pastor, wrote “Impossible Motherhood” as a way to come to terms with her past. But she knows that her story may be seen as evidence that abortion can be a healthy choice.

“Abortion exists everywhere, legal or not,” she said. Latin America, she noted, has a relatively high abortion rate and few legal abortion clinics.

The truth is that it’s a complicated issue,” she said. “Wrong or right, we have to face it. It’s a reality.”

On the anti-choice side, reaction has been predictable. “Every issue is an attempt to say ‘our bodies, our choice,’ ” said Rachel Manley, executive director of the Illinois Right to Life Committee. “We have to be very clear about the choice we have made.

“Abortion is a choice, but it is not a safe choice,” she said. “It’s not legal, it’s not safe, it’s not rare, and it’s not legal. It’s a tool of birth control.”

On the pro-choice side, reaction has been muted. “We are not going to stop talking about abortion,” said Morgan, who wrote the book’s foreword. “There is a perfectly human tendency to say we can’t afford nuance. I am afraid it comes from years of being pummeled by the extreme.”

Vilar, who spent years providing abortion services to underprivileged women, did not consider herself a part of the pro-choice movement. But she now sees herself as a part of the pro-choice movement.

“I think that my story is part of the pro-choice movement,” she said. “I think it’s part of the pro-choice movement because it’s my choice.”

Vilar, who now works as a midwife, said she hopes her story will help others.

“Thanks a lot for the research you did,” she said. “It’s not an easy story, but it’s a true story.”

“In the Middle of the Night” is a quiet story, the kind of book that might go unnoticed in a year when Sarah Palin and the Tea Party are dominating headlines. But Vilar’s story is a powerful reminder that the right to choose is a fundamental human right.

“Impossible Motherhood” is available at bookstores nationwide.