

Salvadoran woman set free, ruled innocent of abortion charges



San Salvador, December 19 (RHC)-- Twenty-year-old Imelda Cortez walked away from a Salvadoran court a free woman, after a judge found her 'not guilty' of the murder charges which detained her in prison for over a year.

A victim of intra-familial sexual abuse since the age of 12 by her 70-year-old stepfather, Cortez was accused of trying to abort her rapist's baby after she was found suffering a miscarriage in Jiquilisco in 2016.

According to reports, Cortez ran to a public restroom after experiencing severe stomach pain and heavy bleeding ensued. She called to her mother for help before fainting from the pain and was taken to a local hospital, leaving the newborn behind. Despite allegations, Cortez maintained she was unaware of the pregnancy.

Prosecutors attacked Cortez from every angle, first accusing her of lying, then of inducing labor and abandoning the baby on purpose. These allegations were disproved with a DNA paternity test as well as medical exams which proved the fetus was not subject to any deliberate harm.

Activists rallied in the support of the young woman, carrying signs outside the courthouse and taking to social media calling on the public to band together and "Save Imelda."

Paula Avila Guillen, the director Latin America initiatives at Women's Equality Center, said: "We believe the reason why the prosecutor lowered the charges was because they were able to understand the situation of Imelda and they were able to feel the pressure and recognize what they were doing was unfair."

One activist, Avila Guillen, told the Daily Beast: "It should not take the force of the entire world to free one woman," she said. "That's what it took in this case. And if it takes that in every case, that's what we are going to do."

El Salvador's harsh anti-abortion laws which prohibit mothers of experiencing miscarriages and stillbirths have incriminated and imprisoned scores of women since the practice was outlawed in 1998.

Catalina Martinez, regional director for Latin America and the Caribbean at the Center for Reproductive Rights, said: "Many women who suffer an obstetric emergency do not seek for medical assistance because they fear they will be imprisoned. Women do not trust the medical system to fulfill their needs for care."

According to the Agrupación Ciudadana por la Despenalización del Aborto (Citizens' Coalition for the Decriminalization of Abortion), an El Salvador-based advocacy group, between 2000 and 2011, nearly 129 women were prosecuted for abortion-related crimes in the country, with 23 of these convictions being for receiving an illegal abortion and 26 for homicide.

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