



Marta's Story

From "The Story of My Body," an event co-Sponsored by *Glamour* magazine and the International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC)

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I smoke marijuana to dull the pain. My hair is falling out in big chunks. I'm almost never hungry, but I'm always thirsty.

I have cervical cancer. They tell me I have about four months left to live.

I was diagnosed in 2005. I was bleeding, so I went to the hospital. "You have cancer, Marta," the doctor told me. "And you are pregnant, three weeks." Another child! I couldn't, I already had three girls at home, in one room where we sleep and cook and go to the bathroom. After my third, a c-section, I'd had the doctor sterilize me. So how could it have happened? Another child! I didn't want to subject my girls to having to share the few clothes and toys they had. And if I was sick...

"If you want to live," the doctor told me, "you have to abort." But all of the other doctors immediately threatened to sue him if he did it. And I would go to the women's prison, because in Colombia, it's illegal. I begged those doctors to take out my uterus because I didn't want to die. But they would not.

Two friends of mine have had illegal abortions, and when they did it, I was scared for their lives. You hear about the women who come to your house and put their hands in you without gloves and use dirty instruments. If you live, but get caught, you go to jail. So I could not.

I went home to my girls, three weeks pregnant and severely depressed. I didn't want to talk to anyone. I wasn't taking showers, and didn't leave my bed. I stopped eating. I sent my girls to stay with my aunt. The father of my daughters left me. *Bastardo*. I wanted to die. The doctors sent me back to the hospital, and I stayed there until I gave birth. My daughter Daniela was born prematurely at seven months. I loved the name Daniela. I heard it on a telenovela. It's a beautiful name.

I went home for few days but then I was rehospitalized to start radiation and chemotherapy. I didn't see my baby for the next five months. All of the girls were staying with different aunts of mine.

My life changed when I met a young lawyer named Monica Roa. I met her through a woman's group called De Pie De Mujer. She was horrified those doctors didn't let me abort. She told me about her work fighting for women's rights and offered to file a lawsuit against the abortion ban. People threatened to kill her. But Monica Roa made sure my story was told to the world.

A Catholic bishop went on television to say that I should be ashamed of myself for even thinking of having an abortion. I got phone calls from all over the country from people who said I was a sinner. The bishop excommunicated Monica and me. I was scared that

fanatics would stone my daughters or me. For 20 days, I didn't send my daughters to school. When rich women get abortions, they can fly out of the country. No one criticizes them. But when poor women need abortions, we're called assassins.

I was angry with my society, my government, the church, and with the doctors who refused to take care of me. I went with Monica to court. I wore a black t-shirt that said "Mujeres Por La Libre Opcion a La Maternidad, "Mothers for the Free Choice of Motherhood." I told my entire story. I urged the government to help the millions of women who would benefit from legalizing abortion, including my daughters. The day after I testified the judges announced that they would legalize abortion in cases where the mother's life was at stake.

I have begun to tell my oldest, Jenny Alejandra, to go to college and educate herself. She is 17. I enrolled her in classes to become a teacher. I don't want her to clean floors like I did. She sometimes cries and tells me she doesn't want me to die. I tell her to be valiant and succeed for her sisters, and to never give them away. My greatest hope is that someone will adopt the four of them, together. I don't have the right words to tell my three youngest daughters that I will die soon.

I've lost the nails on my hand and I've lost three teeth. It was really hard to not have my teeth. I've been poor my whole life but I always took care of my teeth. I am careful now not to laugh or smile because if my employers see that I have no teeth, they would be disgusted and wouldn't give me work.

Everything hurts me.

I want my daughters to say that their mother contributed at least a little grain of sand to make abortion legal in all forms. Someone told me I was a revolutionary woman. And I think she's right. I'm happy that other women will benefit from the law changing. But the change will not benefit me.

I want my daughters to remember me but especially my baby, Daniela. I am scared that when I am gone people will tell her that I had wanted to abort her. I want her to know that I did not want to kill her. It is only for my daughters that I wanted to live.

IWHC has worked side by side with Latin American women's organizations to promote access to safe abortion for more than two decades.