

Mexican human-rights activist believes safe abortion is a woman's basic human right

Veronica Cruz Sanchez, one of Mexico's most prominent women's- and human-rights activists and a 2006 Human Rights Watch Defender of the Year, participated in a speaking tour through the southeastern United States, co-sponsored by Ipas. Veronica shared her passion and work to promote and protect women's rights in Mexico with nearly 1,000 students, activists and community members in North and South Carolina through classes and community presentations at the University of North Carolina, the University of South Carolina, Duke University, a community cultural education institute, organizations serving North Carolina Latinos, and radio and newspaper interviews.

Cruz is the founder and executive director of Las Libres (The Free Women), an organization in the conservative state of Guanajuato that helps rape victims obtain safe abortions. In Guanajuato, where abortion is illegal except in cases of rape, women who seek safe abortions face considerable hurdles.

The fact that abortion has been legal in cases of rape for more than 30 years in Guanajuato hasn't stopped opponents' attempts to criminalize it in every circumstance. In 2000, the state legislature tried to pass an amendment to the penal code that stripped rape victims of their right to an abortion. Cruz organized hundreds of women to publicly protest the new law. Her tactic worked — public pressure led the governor to veto the legislation.

Cruz and her organization provide a voice for women who have been raped and work tirelessly to ensure them access to their legal right: safe abortion services.

In addition to legislative assaults on their rights, rape victims in Cruz's home state of Guanajuato face other obstacles when they wish to terminate a pregnancy. Officials in public hospitals and family service centers try to dissuade rape victims from choosing abortion and often attempt to delay victims' access to legal abortion.



The myriad attacks on their legal right to a safe and free abortion often force rape victims into back alley abortions, therefore endangering their lives. Cruz and her organization provide a voice for these women and work tirelessly to ensure them access to their legally sanctioned human right to safe abortion services.

"I come to defend women's human, sexual and reproductive rights and to raise consciousness of the effects on the family caused by migration," she was quoted in an interview with *Hola Noticias*, a Spanish newspaper serving Charlotte, NC.

Veronica's message had special resonance in North Carolina, with the nation's fastest growing Latino population, a significant number of whom emigrated from her home state of Guanajuato. Audience members who provide services to Latinos remarked that Veronica's talk helped them to understand the barriers faced by women with whom they work. Veronica's inspiring words emboldened some audience members to better incorporate issues of reproductive rights into their work in the U.S. and, for others, made clear the essential links between reproductive health and human rights.