

Women: new wave of illegal immigrants

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Body

Swaddled in dirt in the inky night, the newborn trembled as a stranger struggled to snip her umbilical cord with nail clippers. A smuggler and other migrants had bolted when the baby's 18-year-old mother screamed with labor pains.

But Lilia Ortiz couldn't just leave them in the harsh Arizona desert. Ortiz, 23, had walked two days straight to get this far. But she knew what it was like to struggle as a mother on her own.

The two women are part of a new wave of migrants. A decade ago, illegal migration was dominated by men. Now more women are making the journey, risking rape and even death to support their families.

The increase in female migrants comes as beefed-up border security has funneled migrants through one of the world's most forbidding deserts, and as smugglers adopt increasingly violent tactics.

Some cross with their children. Others leave them behind with relatives. Pregnant women, like María Pérez, the 18-year-old who gave birth this week, walk for days through the desert in the hope that their children will have a better life as U.S. citizens.

Rape has become so prevalent that many women take birth-control pills or shots before setting out to ensure they won't get pregnant. Some consider rape "the price you pay for crossing the border," said Teresa Rodriguez, regional director of the U.N. Development Fund for Women.

If caught by the U.S. Border Patrol, women are often deported to Mexico's violent border towns in the middle of the night, despite a 1996 agreement between the two countries that promised women and children would be returned only in daylight hours, according to directors of migrant shelters along the 2,000-mile border.

Worldwide, nearly half of the estimated 180 million migrants are women, according to a report released in February by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.

A study released last week by U.S. and Mexican migration experts, partly funded by the Mexican government, found that nearly half of all Mexican migrants living in the United States are women.

The female migrants are getting younger. Of migrants under 18 deported to Mexico, females accounted for only 2 percent in 1994, when the United States started cracking down at the border. Since 2002, they have made up nearly a third each year, said Blanca Villaseñor, who recently published a book on Mexico's female migrants.

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Central American women face even more danger because they must first cross Mexico, where gangs and even immigration officials have attacked women, said Jesús Aguilar, a migrant-rights activist in El Salvador.

Ortiz and Pérez were caught by the Border Patrol. Ortiz was returned to Nogales, where she vowed to try again. Pérez and her newborn daughter were recovering at a hospital in Tucson, according to the Border Patrol.

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