



Dutch doctors send free abortion pills to women with Zika

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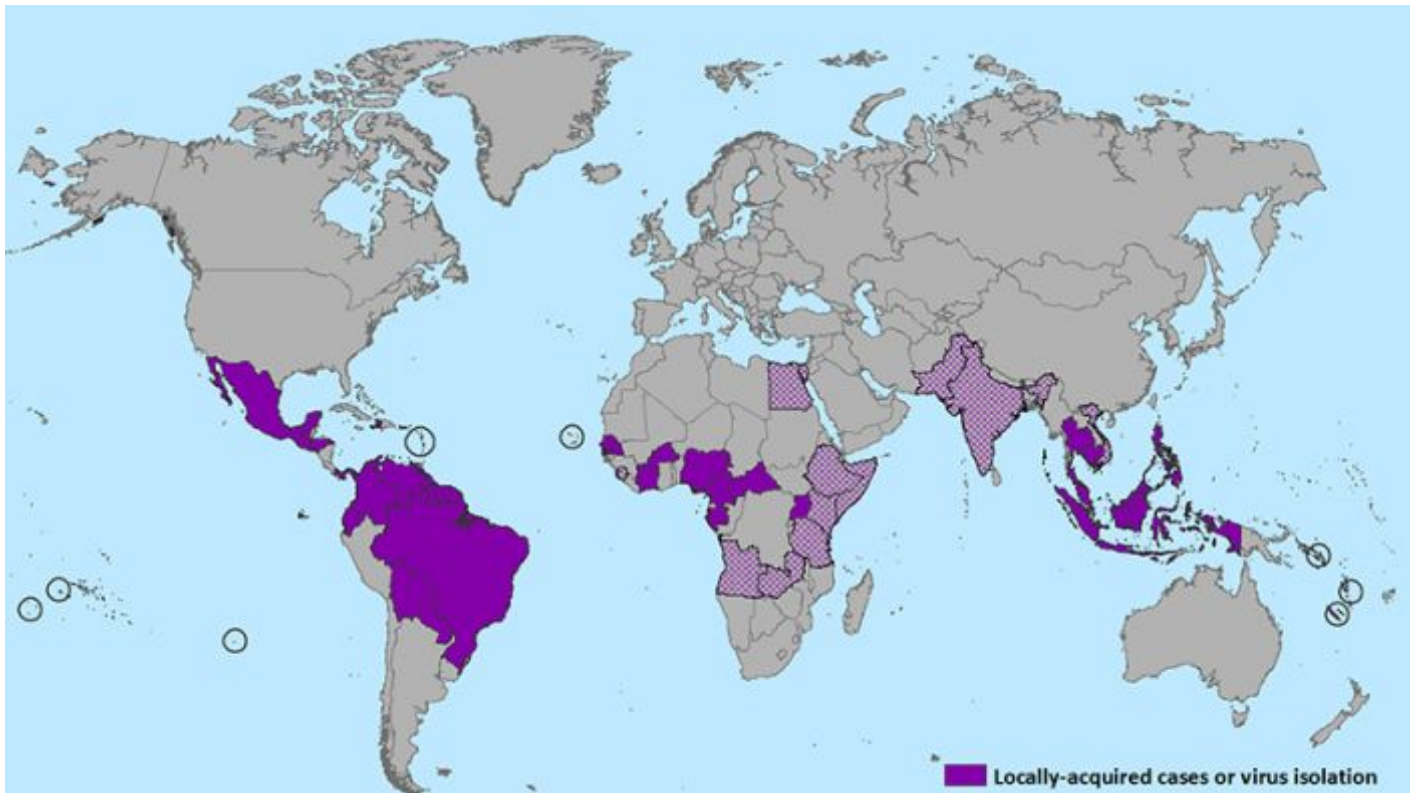
If you fell pregnant in an area affected by the Zika virus - a disease that could be linked to microcephaly, which is associated with incomplete brain development in babies - what would you do? If you wanted to terminate the pregnancy, but abortion in your country was illegal, where would you go?

Doctor Rebecca Gomperts, a Dutch physician and human rights activist, runs [Women on Web](#) - a service that mails out medical abortions to women around the world who can't safely terminate pregnancies.

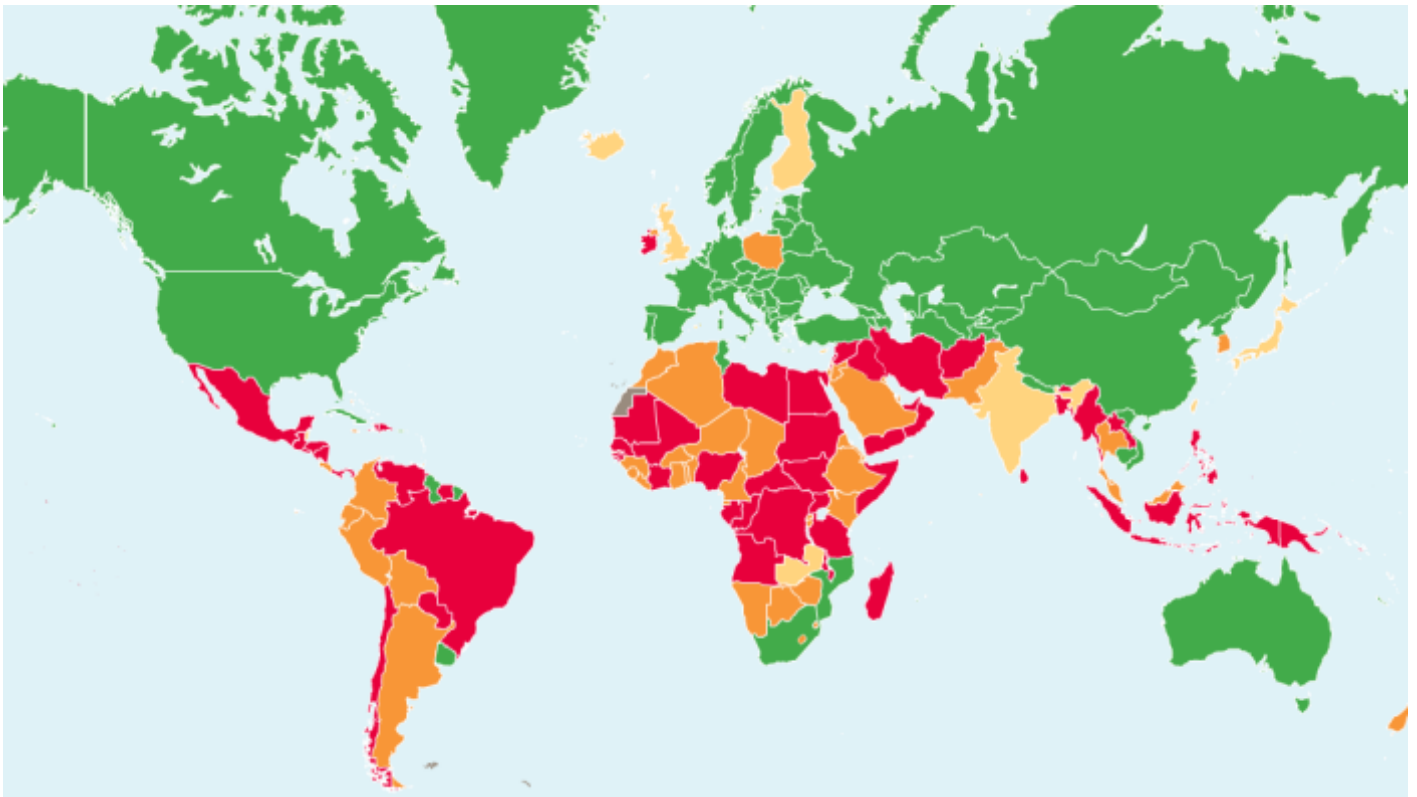
When the Zika outbreak began to escalate last month, Rebecca noticed a spike in traffic for her service.

"We realised that women were panicking, and that they were looking for help, and the most of these women would end up finding dangerous abortion methods," Rebecca told *Hack*, "It's very hard to get a safe abortion in these countries."

To put the Zika outbreak in perspective, here are the areas where Zika is currently being transmitted (keep in mind - although there have been cases of Zika in Australia, these patients have contracted the disease overseas):



And here's where abortion is illegal (red) or administered only to "preserve health" (orange):



While symptoms of Zika are generally mild and short-lived, its effect on unborn babies - whose mothers have contracted the virus - could be profound. There's been over 4000 cases of microcephaly reported in Brazil since last year. That's around twenty times the usual amount of cases than previous years.

Rebecca says pregnant women in countries like Brazil - one of the countries with the biggest Zika outbreaks, and also where abortions are illegal - started reaching out to Women on Web for help. She says staff directly consult with their clients before sending out the medical abortion.

"We ask them if it's an unwanted pregnancy, because of Zika, or if it's actually a pregnancy they want to carry to term.

"Because of course it's the woman's decision whether or not she wants to take the risk to have a baby with an underdeveloped brain.

"Then women do an online consultation, which is reviewed by doctors. And if there's no contrary complications, the doctor prescribes a medical abortion which is sent to them from our partner pharmacy in India."

Women are also asked to donate up to 90 euros for the service, unless they're struggling financially - in which case they can still receive the package for free.

Brazil Customs blocking deliveries

Mailing out medical abortion kits isn't always as simple as it sounds.

"One of the problems that we only face in Brazil, is that they started stopping all the [abortion] medications and packages coming in about one and a half years ago.

"So actually we stopped providing this service to women in Brazil, and we referred them to other countries. But now because of Zika we decided to start sending again."

Rebecca says they don't know if their recent batch of packages have successfully made their way past Brazilian borders yet; they'll know in about two weeks.

We called upon the Brazilian government; and we hope that there's people working at the Brazilian customs that have some sort of empathy and humanity in them, and will decide to let packages through."

Obtaining an abortion in Brazil is already contentious: a pregnant woman can only legally terminate a pregnancy in Brazil if it was a result of a rape, if the mother's life is threatened by the pregnancy, or if a sonogram shows brain deformities in the fetus. And Brazil's speaker for the lower house, Eduardo Cunha, [has been pushing to put up further legal barriers](#) for rape victims to access abortions.

"We're really anxious about [the deliveries], because this might be the only option left for women in Brazil."

Zika link to unborn babies unconfirmed

There's no vaccine to prevent Zika, and there's no cure.

To further complicate a pregnant woman's decision about terminating their pregnancy, an ultrasound can't detect microcephaly in a baby before the second trimester. But Women on Web's medical abortions are only available to women less than nine weeks pregnant.

"It's up to the women whether they want to take the risk," Rebecca says.

"What we think is important is that women have all the facts and all the information and they can make their own decisions based on these facts.

"If a woman says 'I don't want to take this risk, I had Zika, and I can end this pregnancy and become pregnant again when I'm not in a Zika-threat area.' I think that's a very legitimate decision to make. And we support that.

"If women decide that they want to take the risk, that's fine too, we'll support that decision as well."

Added to that, Zika has not been scientifically proven to cause microcephaly in unborn babies.

This week, a four-year survey of more than 100,000 newborn babies in north-eastern Brazil [has uncovered previously unrecognised patterns](#) of microcephaly. The discovery suggests microcephaly is not



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Zika virus has been declared an international public health emergency. Symptoms can include fever, skin rash, aches, pains, headaches and conjunctivitis. Symptoms only last for about 2 - 7 days, but researchers say the virus may cause birth defects in unborn babies.

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necessarily a new phenomenon, and questions whether Zika virus is even the cause.

But Rebecca thinks the link is possible, and upholds the freedom of choice women should be able to exercise.

"I think that the World Health Organisation would not have called a public health emergency if there wouldn't have been a very very strong indication that it is linked."

"And this is also what the research suggests. Of course, it's true, [the link is] not finally proven."

If you're concerned about traveling to areas where Zika is active, check out DFAT's current travel recommendations [here](#).

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The second map is incorrect in that it does not mark Australia as a country where an abortion can be administered only to "preserve health"

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