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HEALTH

Desperate Women In Zika-Infected Countries Are Begging For Abortion Pills

BY [ALEX ZIELINSKI](#) FEB 17, 2016 12:51 PM

CREDIT: AP PHOTO/RICARDO MAZALAN

Six-weeks pregnant Daniela Rodriguez, 19, waits for test results after being diagnosed with the Zika virus at the Erasmo Meoz Hospital in Cucuta, Colombia

Pregnant women across Latin America, a region of the country with some of the most restrictive abortion laws in the world, are growing increasingly desperate.

As women learn more about the rapidly spreading Zika virus, they're faced with the possibility that their babies could be born with microcephaly, or an unusually underdeveloped brain. But they have few options in countries with limited access to reproductive health services, where they're being told to simply avoid getting pregnant.

Women on Web, a group that has provided women with abortion-inducing medication in countries where it is banned for more than a decade, has seen a recent influx in need that appears to be directly linked to Zika. The number of Brazilian women contacting the group tripled in just two months — from 100 in December to 285 in February — after news spread of the Zika virus.

"When Zika hit the news we saw an [immediate] increase in the number of requests from countries that are affected by Zika," Dr. Rebecca Gomperts, the program's founder, told the Washington Post. "We think that is related to the Zika outbreak. We cannot explain it any other way."

There are few options available for pregnant women who have contracted the disease. Brazilian customs officials have confiscated all pills from Women on Web for the past few years, and the country shows no signs of softening its laws — despite the fact that one Brazilian judge has pushed for allowing abortion in cases when a fetus has been diagnosed with microcephaly.

The women contacting Gomperts' organization have nowhere left to go.

"I contracted Zika 4 days ago. I just found out I'm about 6 weeks pregnant," wrote one woman. "I have a son I love dearly. I love children. But I don't believe it is a wise decision to keep a baby who will suffer. I need an abortion. I don't know who to turn to. Please help me ASAP."

Another pointed to the social and economical challenges of having a child with microcephaly in her community: "I already have two girls and work long and hard as a single mother to provide for them. Life in Bogotá is difficult enough without being in charge of a sick child, especially with the health system so precarious in Colombia."

Gomperts said she hopes the spread of Zika will push countries to accept Women on Web's shipments, if not loosen their own regulations on abortion — a policy change that lawmakers and activists across the globe agree on.

Earlier this month, the United Nations demanded countries that ban abortion lift their restrictions to allow Zika-infected women to end their pregnancies. A group of U.S. senators joined together to call for expanding women's access to abortion and contraception around the world.

But the threat of birth defects still isn't enough to transform the politicized conversation about abortion. GOP lawmakers have already raised questions about President Obama's emergency funding to fight the Zika virus, saying they don't want to do anything to support abortion. And some Republican congressmen have suggested that struggling women in developing countries should welcome babies born with microcephaly.

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