



## Zika prompts urgent abortion debate in LatAm

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Milena Kaline, 17, who is three months pregnant, centre, holds Angelica Pereira's daughter Luiza, who was born with microcephaly, as they talk in Santa Cruz do Capibaribe, Pernambuco state, Brazil.

By **Dom Phillips, Nick M, Iroff and Julia Symmes Cobb**  
*The Washington Post (\*)*

### Fears rise that rapid spread of virus will prompt surge in illegal, backstreet terminations

RIO DE JANEIRO — Across Latin America, in countries with some of the most restrictive abortion laws in the world, thousands of pregnant women have been infected with the Zika virus, potentially exposing their offspring to devastating birth defects. The virus' explosive growth and the possible dangers it poses to fetal development are fuelling urgent abortion debates in several of the countries hit hardest by Zika.

Nearly everywhere in Latin America, women who wish to terminate their pregnancies have few legal options, raising fears that the outbreak will drive an increase in dangerous, clandestine abortions.

On Friday, United Nations human rights officials urged governments in the region to make abortion services available to infected women. Activists in Brazil, Colombia and other nations say they will press lawmakers to act as swiftly as possible to ease rigid restrictions on abortion as Zika proliferates.

UN health officials have projected as many as four million infections in the Americas this year.

Several governments in Latin American nations where abortion is essentially banned have responded to the crisis by urging women to postpone pregnancy. But the availability of contraceptives is limited, especially in rural Latin America, and Church authorities in the heavily Roman Catholic region oppose their use.

The number of illegal abortions in Rio de Janeiro is increasing, said a leading doctor in the state who took part in a high level meeting with health officials about the crisis. The doctor asked not to be identified because the information is unofficial.

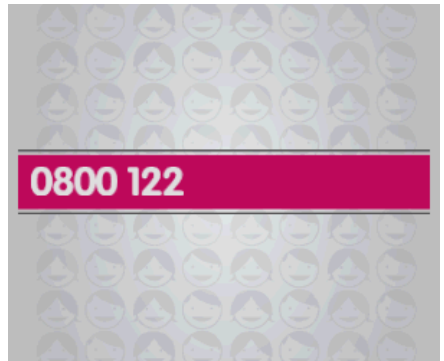
"If I was a woman, had just got pregnant and discovered that I had been infected by the Zika virus, I would not hesitate an instant to abort the gestation," wrote columnist Hélio Schwartzman in the daily newspaper Folha de São Paulo on Saturday. Each mother should be able to follow her own instincts, he said.

#### Microcephaly

Those calls have been echoed in El Salvador and Colombia and by others here in Brazil, the epicentre for the outbreak, where the government estimates that as many as 1.5 million people may have caught Zika. It is spread mostly by infected mosquitos, but can also be transmitted through sexual contact, and researchers have recently detected "active" Zika cells in saliva and urine.

Brazil's government blames the virus for a sharp increase in reports of children born with undersized heads, a condition known as microcephaly, but doctors say they're only beginning to understand the dangers posed by Zika to neurological development.

Uruguay and Cuba are the only nations in Latin America where abortion is legal and widely available. Other countries allow it in cases of rape, incest or when a mother's life is in danger.



In Chile, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, the procedure is completely banned.

All four have reported cases of Zika, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Other nations in Latin America, including Colombia, the country with the second-highest total of Zika cases to date after Brazil, permit abortions in cases where the mother's health is in danger or a foetus displays signs of a severe deformity. In Brazil abortion is allowed if the woman has been raped, her life is in danger or the foetus has anencephaly where part of its brain or skull is missing.

Last week in Colombia a woman was allowed to abort her foetus at 32 weeks, the first known case of a Zika-related legal abortion in the country, according to Colombia's leading weekly magazine, *Semana*. The foetus had severe cranial deformities and microcephaly, according to the report, but the mother's decision to abort at such a late stage in pregnancy ignited a fierce debate on social media.

Colombian officials say 3,100 pregnant women in the country have tested positive for Zika, but they have not publicly confirmed any cases of Zika-related microcephaly.

Health Minister Alejandro Gaviria has said pregnant women infected with the virus could be allowed to have abortions under one of the country's legal exceptions. (Pregnant women aren't the only people who should be wary of Zika — Gaviria has linked the virus to three deaths associated with a form of paralysis called Guillain-Barré syndrome.)

"We hope Zika changes the debate," said Silvia Plana, the director of Coordination for the Life and Health of Women, a pro-choice legal aid group in Colombia.

The government says Colombia likely has 80,000 to 100,000 Zika cases, with as many as 650,000 infections possible this year.

"The pro-abortion lobby is taking advantage of this to liberalize the legislation," said Danelia Cardona, a psychiatrist and director of the Colombian Episcopal Conference's Department for the Promotion and Defence of Life. She said it was inappropriate to modify legislation about "something as serious and delicate as human life" because of Zika, in the midst of what she called "a temporary and uncertain situation."

Row over reasoning

The virus is believed to be especially dangerous to women during the end of their first trimester of pregnancy, a critical stage in the development of the central nervous system. But it is extremely difficult for doctors to detect such damage, even several months later, so granting women access to legal abortions based on an ultrasound diagnosis of microcephaly would do little to alleviate the risks of giving birth to a child with severe impairments. Brazilian activists want women who have been diagnosed with Zika to be able to terminate a pregnancy on that basis alone.

A growing concern among paediatricians is that Zika could inflict harm to developing brain tissue in other, less obvious ways than microcephaly.

That condition could be the "tip of the iceberg" of a series of neurological problems, some of which might not show up in the brain scans used to spot microcephaly, and might not even show up for years to come, said Isabel Madeira, president of the state paediatrics society in Rio de Janeiro.

Women On Web, an international group based in Canada that provides advice and medication for women wanting abortion in countries where it is banned, said it has seen a surge in inquiries from women in Brazil.

About 10 percent of the 96,000 emails the group receives every year come from Brazil, a spokeswoman said. Normally it asks for a donation of US\$78-100 to send abortion-causing drugs through the mail. Often, government customs inspectors seize the pills.

On February 1, Women On Web announced it would send the drugs for free to women with Zika. Emails from women in Brazil have increased more than 25 percent.

Upper- and middle-class women can opt for safer, if illegal, abortions at discreet private clinics in Brazil, said Rebecca Gomperts, the group's founder, but for poor women the only option may be cheap back-alley clinics.

"We just hope that women won't resort to really dangerous methods," she said.

An estimated 800,000 to one million illegal abortions take place in Brazil every year, and some 200,000 women are hospitalized with complications from the procedure.

"Imagine the stress, the worry, the desperation of not knowing what will happen with you, or the foetus. It is intense suffering," said attorney Sinara Gumieri, a member of Anis, a feminist group preparing a new proposal to Brazil's Supreme Court giving women with Zika access to abortion. Most of those affected are women in poorer northeastern Brazil where the outbreak has been concentrated. The proposal will also call for better social services for children with microcephaly and those who care for them.

But Brazil's powerful anti-abortion lobby includes many influential female doctors and academics.

The Brazil Without Abortion Movement, which claims 100,000 members across the country, has attacked the Anis proposal. Its president, Lenise Garcia, a microbiologist at the University of Brasilia, compared it to "Nazi philosophy."

"The mentality that is behind this is the same," Garcia said. "It is prejudice against a disabled person."

Women should be offered counselling and support, not an abortion they will later regret, Garcia said.

In El Salvador, where abortions are banned under all circumstances, including rape and risks to the mother's life, women convicted of having the procedure can be sentenced to decades in prison. But at least 100 pregnant women have tested positive for Zika so far, and the spread of the virus has intensified the debate about whether the country should ease its blanket prohibition.



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