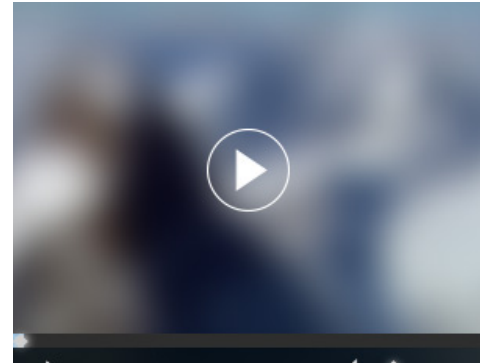


HEALTH



JUNE 27, 2016

ABORTIONS RISE IN ZIKA-AFFECTED COUNTRIES DESPITE ILLEGALITY AND SAFETY RISKS

AMANDA KATHERINE

Due to the persistent spread of the Zika virus in Latin America and other highly affected areas, there has been a significant rise in the number of abortions performed and requested this past year. This has occurred despite the illegality and safety risks of abortion in most of these countries.



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The mosquito-borne Zika virus has been linked to microcephaly, a condition where newborns are born with abnormally small heads. The disease outbreak is thought to have originated in Brazil. Since the **Zika outbreak in Brazil in October**, the Health Ministry has confirmed 1,271 cases of microcephaly. Zika can also cause severe brain abnormalities and eye and hearing defects.



[Photo by Mario Tama/Getty Images]

The spread of Zika and rising cases of microcephaly have prompted a spike in the demand for abortions in areas like Latin America, where the procedure is mostly illegal. Women in these areas are not likely to have many options in regards to terminating a pregnancy. Some end up taking abortion drugs without medical supervision or risk having a cheap abortion performed by under-qualified doctors in backroom operating rooms. Women risk serious complications following a potentially botched abortion, but the fear for their health and that their unborn child has driven these women to do what they deemed necessary.

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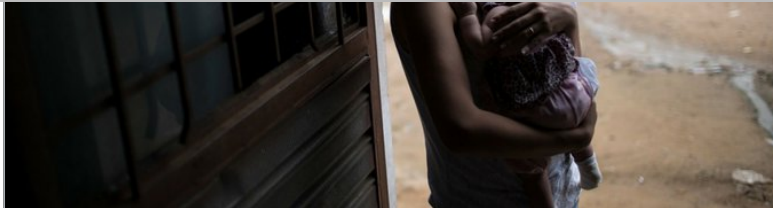


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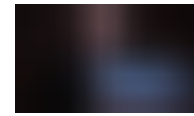
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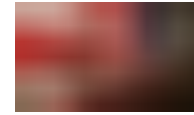
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Paula Ávila-Guillen, a Latin America specialist at the Center for Reproductive Rights in New York, **gave insight on recent study** results published by the *New England Journal of Medicine*. The study revealed that **countries affected by Zika** with strict abortion laws have seen a 36 to 108 percent increase in requests for abortions.



“We aren’t surprised because when a woman does not have legal options and her health is in danger, they do what they need to do.”

“Until countries legalize abortion we are practically creating a class-based division between women.”

Brazil, Ecuador, and Venezuela reported the most significant increases. Some of these women had not contracted the Zika virus, but they feared they might get it.

That largest increase came from Brazil, and Ecuador, which had a 107.7 percent increase, was not far behind. Venezuela’s abortion requests rose by more than 93 percent, Honduras by nearly 76 percent, Colombia by 39 percent, and Costa Rica and El Salvador by about 36 percent. Jamaica was the only country included in the study that saw a decrease in abortion requests, by nearly 33 percent.

However, these numbers are likely on the low end of the spectrum, because the majority of illegal abortions are unreported. Women are likely to use an unsafe method, accessing the abortion pill from local pharmacies or the black market or seeking local underground abortion providers.

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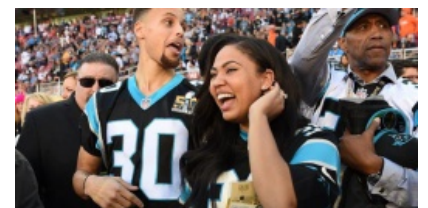
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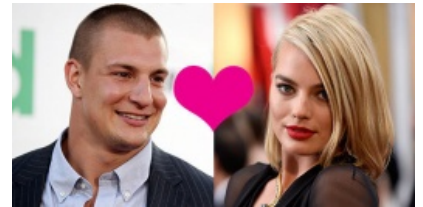
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The spread of Zika has reopened the longtime debate over abortion in Latin America countries. Currently, the law states in Brazil that a woman may only have an abortion if the mother is directly in danger, she has been raped, or the fetus is not viable.



[Photo by Mario Tama/Getty Images]

In the neighboring country of El Salvador, abortion is completely banned even if the pregnancy poses a threat to the mother's life. Health officials in El Salvador have recommended that women do not get pregnant until 2018.

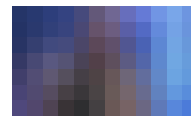
The **Zika outbreak is expected to spread** to almost every country in the Americas. **The World Health Organization predicts** that three million to four million people across North America, Central America, South America, and the

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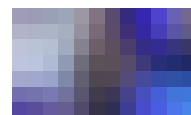
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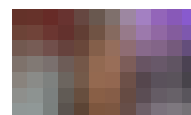
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Dr. Catherine Aiken, one of the study’s authors, feels that telling an entire country not to get pregnant is just not a realistic way to lower abortion numbers. It also needs to be taken into account that these affected counties mostly all have a high prevalence of sexual violence, marital rape, and limited access to contraceptives.



“It isn’t enough for health officials just to warn women about the risks associated with Zika. They must also make efforts to ensure that women are offered safe, legal and accessible reproductive services.”



Aiken and the rest of her colleagues are certainly not alone in the belief that it is time for serious legal discussions about women and reproductive rights in Latin America. Their study just further proved what Aiken and her colleagues unfortunately already knew: There has been an extreme rise in abortions performed and requested in countries that have become stricken with the Zika virus, and the only way to lower those numbers is to provide more information about the Zika virus and to improve the safety and legality status of abortion for women in these affected areas.

[View the video below](#) to see a current news update regarding Zika’s abortion boom in Brazil & South America.

[Photo by [Mario Tama](#)/Staff/Getty Images]

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**Amanda
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