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HEALTH

Women in Zika-Plagued Countries Are Begging For Abortions. It Could Be The Tip Of The Iceberg.

BY [LAUREL RAYMOND](#) JUN 24, 2016 8:00 AM

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Angelica Pereira holds Luiza outside their house in Santa Cruz do Capibaribe, Pernambuco state, Brazil. Luiza was born in October with a rare condition known as microcephaly.

Zika, a mosquito-borne virus linked to a fetal neurological disorder, is raging across Latin America, which has some of the most restrictive abortion laws in the world. In response, desperate pregnant women are turning to online abortion services in record numbers, according to a recent study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

The study analyzed requests for abortion pills to [Women on Web](#), a nonprofit organization that has provided women with abortion-inducing medication in countries where it is banned for over a decade. In Brazil, the epicenter of the Zika virus, requests for abortions through the service [more than doubled](#), from 528 over a comparable period to 1,210. Requests in Ecuador, Venezuela, and Honduras increased more than 70 percent, while requests in Columbia, Costa Rica, and El Salvador increased more than 30 percent. There was no such rise in demand in countries unaffected by a Zika outbreak.

For three weeks, the researchers also asked women specifically if they were seeking abortions due to concerns about Zika, and the percentage of women who responded affirmatively [strongly correlates](#) with the country-specific increases. Although it's difficult to definitely pinpoint cause for the increase, the correlations are too compelling to ignore.

"We cannot explain it any other way," Dr. Rebecca Gomperts, the founder of Women on Waves, told [The Washington Post](#) in February about the increase in requests, a trend that was already becoming

apparent to the organization. “When Zika hit the news we saw an [immediate] increase in the number of requests from countries that are affected by Zika.”

I need an abortion. I don't know who to turn to. Please help me ASAP

The latest study, which comprehensively confirms the trend, shows that countries with both Zika transmissions and government-issued health advisories saw the largest increase. In these countries — like Brazil — women are told to avoid getting pregnant due to the serious risk posed by the virus, which is linked to unusually underdeveloped brains, or microcephaly, in infants. But since these countries have high rates of sexual assault and unreliable access to reproductive health care, telling women to simply “not get pregnant” often puts women in an impossible situation.

Once they are pregnant, strict abortion laws give them nowhere to go. And if they give birth, it may not get any better. There are [reports](#) of men in Brazil [abandoning women](#) who give birth to children with microcephaly, leaving them to bear the economic burden and hardship alone.

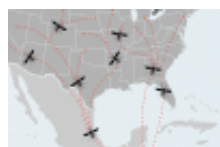
“I contracted Zika 4 days ago...I love children. But I don't believe it is a wise decision to keep a baby who will suffer. I need an abortion. I don't know who to turn to. Please help me ASAP,” a woman in Venezuela wrote to Women on Waves in an email, [published](#) along with the study.

Another woman in Columbia wrote, “I have no resources at this time and want to ask for your help because fear overwhelms me. What if the baby is born sick?”, while a woman in Brazil wrote, “I need to do an abortion because of the great risk of infection with Zika here... Please help me. My economic situation is extremely difficult.”

The study, however, only opens a very small window into the experience of women on the ground in Zika-affected countries. Women on Web, being an internet service, is accessible primarily to upper-class women, living in urban areas where they would have internet access.

And, even when women contact services like Women on Web for medical advice and, if necessary, abortion medication, the service isn't always able to help. The organization sends abortion pills that work up to 10 weeks of pregnancy, but women who are further along are left with few options. Brazil, which saw the highest increase in abortion requests, has been confiscating shipments that contain abortion medication, and has shown [no sign of softening](#) their laws even in the face of the Zika epidemic.

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Zika's Sprea

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Left with no safe, legal options, women are driven to dangerous back-alley methods -- and if this data bears out to the normal spread of abortions in these countries, of which Women on Web [usually only](#)

account for a tiny fraction, they're doing it in record numbers.

"If anything, our approach may underestimate the impact of health warnings on requests for abortion, as many women may have used an unsafe method or visited local underground providers," Abigail Aiken, an assistant professor at the University of Texas at Austin and the study's lead author, told the Guardian. She said that there is "a much, much wider problem with women who don't have access [to the internet] and live in very poor rural areas and are in very dire straits and will be driven to less safe methods of illegal and underground abortion."

"We think we are looking at the tip of the iceberg," said Aiken.

While Zika first surged in South America, with the advent of summer it's coming to the United States. Recent research shows that over 2 million pregnant women in the United States are likely to be exposed to the virus. The southern states that will be hardest hit, like Florida and Texas, have some of the harshest abortion restrictions in the nation. While abortion is technically legal, increasingly restrictive laws and regulations have made access nearly impossible -- leaving many women here with similarly few places to turn.

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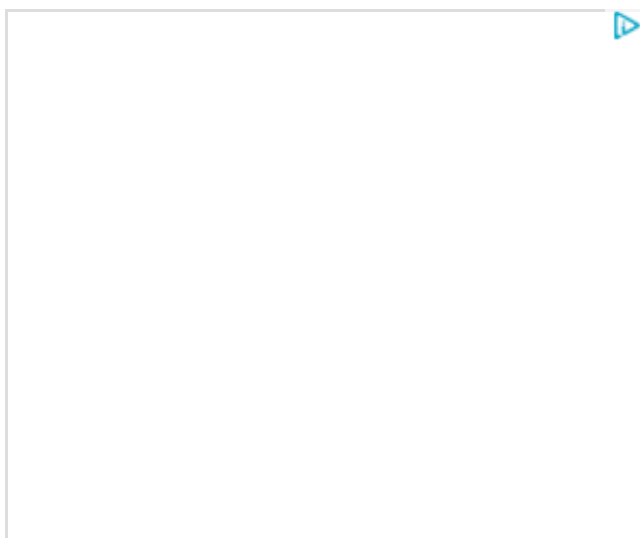
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