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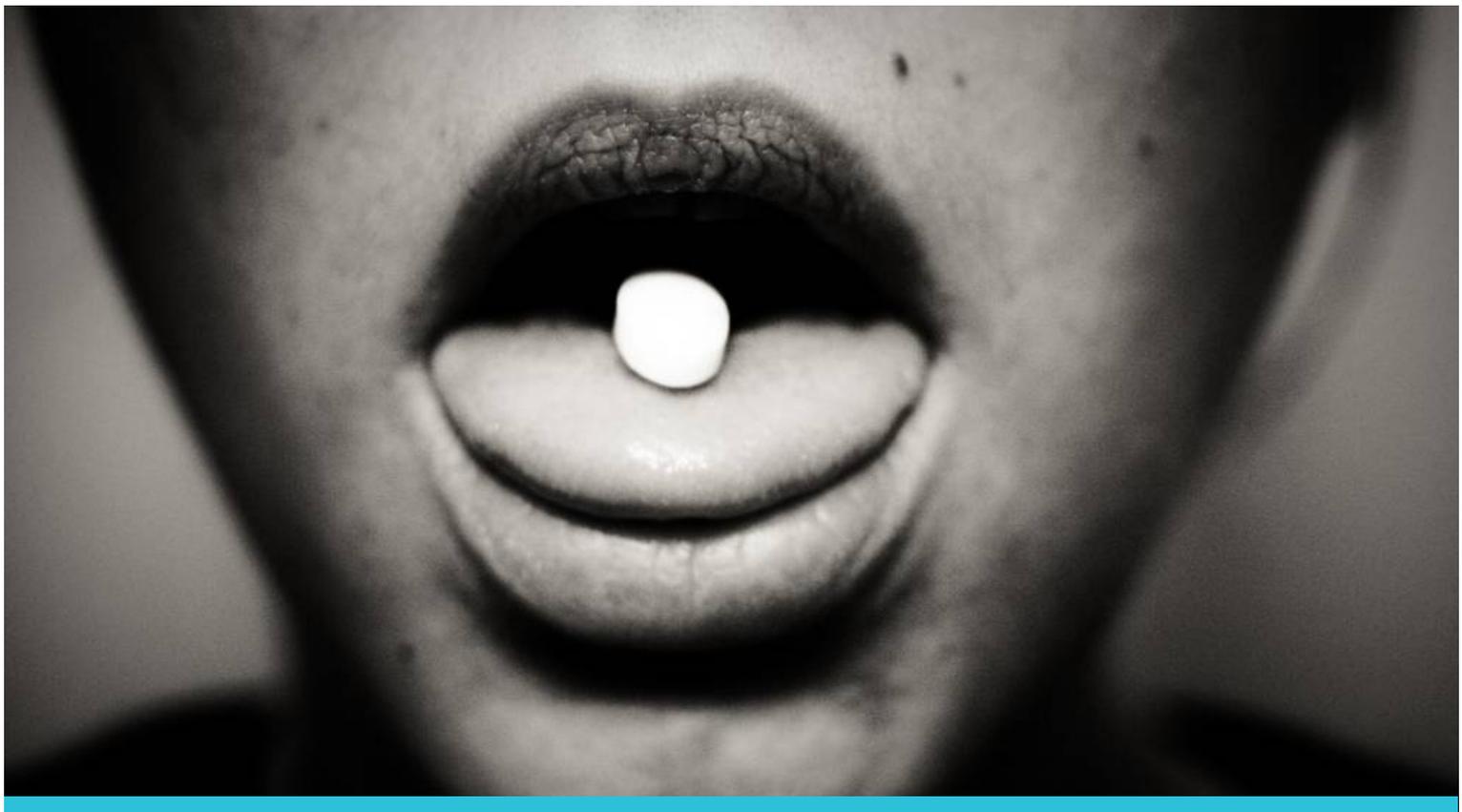
We Talked to the Activist Sending Illegal Abortion Pills to Women With Zika



by Callie Beusman

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FEB 2, 2016 9:45 PM



Yesterday, the WHO declared Zika a global emergency—but, despite the fact that it's linked to serious birth defects in babies, women in affected areas still can't get safe abortions.

Dr. Rebecca Gomperts, who runs an abortion-by-mail service, hopes to change that.

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Yesterday, the World Health Organization (WHO) **declared** (http://www.vice.com/read/the-world-health-organization-just-declared-the-zika-virus-a-global-emergency?utm_source=vicefbus) the **Zika virus** (https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/topic/zika-virus) outbreak a "public health emergency of international concern," putting Zika in the same category as Ebola.

As of now, there is no vaccine or medication capable of stopping Zika, which is carried by mosquitos and believed to cause infants to be born with **abnormally small heads and underdeveloped brains** (<https://news.vice.com/article/virus-suspected-of-shrinking-the-heads-of-brazilian-babies-arrives-in-puerto-rico>). According to the WHO, Zika is "spreading explosively," with **more than 20 countries** (<http://www.bbc.com/news/health-35459797>) in South and Central America reporting cases. As the Zika outbreak grows increasingly dire, advocates **have warned** (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/29/zika-virus-unsafe-abortions-contraception-latin-america>) that Latin America's draconian restrictions surrounding abortion and contraception put women in increased danger of dying from unsafe abortions: While several governments in the region have urged women to avoid getting pregnant until 2018, abortion **remains severely restricted or illegal** (<http://worldabortionlaws.com/map/>) in nearly every Latin American nation. Several countries currently have laws so harsh that they forbid abortion even in cases of rape, incest, or fetal abnormality.

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This bizarre paradox—in which women are cautioned to avoid getting pregnant but denied the option of ending an unplanned, unwanted, potentially dangerous pregnancy—leaves women with tragically limited options. In many of these countries, a woman infected with Zika who becomes pregnant can do one of two things: She can either face a significantly increased chance of giving birth to a child with a serious birth defect, or she can resort to an unsafe and illegal method of terminating her pregnancy. In Brazil, before the Zika outbreak began, **between 800,000 and one million** (<https://news.vice.com/article/as->



women-die-from-illegal-abortions-in-brazil-presidential-candidates-remain-silent)

women obtained illegal abortions per year. That number will likely increase in the wake of Zika's spread.

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Dr. Rebecca Gomperts, who runs an abortion-by-mail service called **Women on Web** (<https://www.womenonweb.org/>) which ships the abortion pill to women in over 120 countries, says that she's already seen an increase in online consultations from women in affected countries. In an email to Broadly, Dr. Gomperts cited the connection between the Zika virus and birth defects in infants, affirming women's right to reproductive choice. "Women have the right to decide to end their pregnancy to avoid such harm," she said.

In to a **press release** (<http://www.womenonwaves.org/en/page/6210/free-medical-abortion-for-pregnant-women-with-zika-offered-by-women-on-web>) posted on the Women on Web site this weekend, the organization announced that they will send free abortion pills to any woman who can provide them with a laboratory test indicating that she has contracted the Zika virus. Women on Web normally asks for a "**suggested donation** (<https://www.womenonweb.org/en/page/9254/donation-system>)" of 70-90 euros, "depending on the country where you live and your economic circumstances," although Gomperts says that any woman who cannot afford to pay the suggested rate will get the pills for free—and about 15 percent of women who contact the service do. "We consider an unwanted pregnancy a medical emergency, and it is not ethical to deny care if somebody cannot afford it," she said.

Dr. Gomperts worries that we'll start seeing an increase in women dying of unsafe abortion in countries where Zika has spread—especially in Brazil, where customs vigilantly prevents shipments of the abortion pill from entering the country. "[Offering women with Zika medical abortions for free] is something we felt we needed to do," she said. "Women will look for abortions, and the problem is that most of the abortions in this region are unsafe. We wanted to give women the option of safely ending their pregnancies."

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Research **shows** (https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/banning-abortion-doesnt-actually-reduce-abortion-rates-at-all) that banning abortion doesn't reduce the abortion rate at all: It just makes it far more likely that women will terminate pregnancies using **unsafe and illegal methods** (<https://manage-broadly.vice.com/articles/edit/women%20will%20look%20for%20abortions,%20and%20> like drinking bleach, taking drugs, or inserting a foreign object into their uterus. "These laws are bad for public health," Gomperts said. Statistically, it's hard to argue with her:

According

(http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/unsafe_abortion/article_unsafe_abortio to the World Health Organization, 68,000 women per year die of unsafe abortion, which the organization terms "one of the most neglected global public health challenges." Women on Web aims to reduce this staggering rate by providing women with mifepristone and misoprostol—commonly known as the abortion pill—so that they can safely miscarry at home. (When taken together, misoprostol and mifepristone are **over 90** (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21080899>) percent (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21080899>) effective at terminating a pregnancy. Both are on the WHO **List of Essential Medicines** (<http://apps.who.int/medicinedocs/en/d/Js7918e/5.1.2.html>.)

While several news outlets **have**

(<http://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2016/01/31/464750384/zika-virus-isnt-the-first-disease-to-spark-a-debate-about-abortion>) **predicted**

(<http://www.usatoday.com/videos/news/world/2016/02/01/79579442/>) that the spread of the disease will force Latin American governments to rethink the harsher provisions of their extant anti-abortion laws, Gomperts insists that this isn't the only reason abortion should be made safe and legal. "Abortion should be legalized—not because of Zika, but because scientific research has shown over and over again that only legal abortion will diminish unnecessary deaths because of unsafe abortions," she said.

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