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Abortion Rates Soar In Zika-Stricken Countries, As Women Try To Avoid Major Birth Defects

Kylie Cheung @kylietcheung | June 23, 2016 - 3:11 pm

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Abortion has become a contentious issue in Latin American countries since the conclusion of 2015, when Zika began to emerge at particularly alarming rates and the link between Zika and serious birth defects like microcephaly was revealed. Abortion remains illegal in devoutly Catholic countries struck hard by Zika, like Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Ecuador, Honduras, Venezuela, and others. When Pope Francis gave contraception the OK in February, this was already perceived as substantial progress for women in affected regions whose only other option to not get pregnant was to not have sex. However, the sanctioning of contraception, which women in the region have relatively limited access to, was clearly not enough: since the start of the ongoing <u>Zika epidemic, more women have sought abortions</u>, according to a new report published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

After <u>analyzing requests for abortion medications</u> (Mifepristone and Misoprostol pills) between January 2010 and March 2016 in regions highly affected by Zika, researchers found the volume of orders over this period of time rose between 36 and 108 percent depending on the country. They used data from the nonprofit organization <u>Women on Web</u> (WoW), which offers aid to women in regions with highly restrictive abortion laws, from medical advice to abortion pills.

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The study suggests that government warnings about Zika contributed to higher rates of abortion medication requests, and that, while it can't be confirmed that Zika is the definitive cause of the increased demand, the number of women citing Zika as the reason they were seeking abortion increased substantially. And the rates of abortion, or at least, requests for abortion-inducing medication, found by the study could be even higher, "since many women may have used an unsafe method, accessed Misoprostol from local pharmacies or the black market, or visited local underground providers," the study says.

All in all, the study is hardly surprising and pretty much reinforces existing research that indicates restrictions on abortion aren't going to prevent it from happening, but merely threaten women's safety by making conditions less safe. Denying women dignity and autonomy just to impose a religious ideology that ignores the most basic science about life and embryonic development is frankly shitty enough, but additionally, it now poses a substantial health risk to generations of human beings.

On a world scale, alarming numbers of pregnant women are affected by Zika, with one report indicating <u>12,000</u> pregnant women in Colombia are affected by the virus. But even in the U.S., which seemed to merely watch the chaos south of its border from afar for months, roughly <u>500 pregnant women have contracted</u> the virus, too. And Congress' response to this has, unsurprisingly, been pretty disappointing.

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House <u>Republicans passed a \$1.1 billion spending plan</u> to fight the Zika virus late Wednesday night, falling short of Obama's \$1.9 billion request and offering only about \$400 million in new spending, with \$750 million being pulled from other health department priorities like ObamaCare programs and a 2014 fund to fight Ebola.

According to Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada and other Democrats, the bill not only isn't enough, but also strains women's access to birth control. In response to the bill, NARAL Pro-Choice America released a statement sharply calling out House Republicans for their hypocrisy, saying:

"House Republicans' constant claim that they're out to 'protect the unborn' falls flat when this bill undercuts the very protections women need to bear healthy children."

In the U.S. and abroad, Zika poses a serious public health risk, so here's to the all too unlikely hope that Congress will manage to decisively address it soon.

Tags: abortion, global health, zika

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