



## Zika underscores need for reproductive justice for all women

### Access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health care—including safe abortion—is essential

The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared the Zika outbreak a global health emergency. The Zika virus is of grave concern for pregnant women because it can cause microcephaly and other negative impacts on fetal development. Zika is transmitted through the bite of an infected *Aedes* species mosquito and can be transmitted sexually from men to women. Inadequate urban and rural infrastructure enables Zika-carrying mosquitos to proliferate rapidly. The virus has already spread to more than 25 countries in Latin America.

Government responses to the Zika virus have been weak, disregarding the best interests of pregnant women and those who may become pregnant. Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador and Ecuador have all called for women to delay pregnancy until the Zika virus is no longer a threat, while ignoring the existing challenges Latin American women face in regulating their fertility. High rates of sexual violence and limited access to contraceptives and abortion mean that many women cannot control when they get pregnant. These government recommendations place the greatest burden on women and girls, and do not provide the support needed to prevent pregnancy.

### Latin American countries' substandard responses to the Zika epidemic highlight the region's problem of gender inequity and neglect of women's reproductive rights.

Many of the women most at risk of Zika live in poverty. They face significant barriers to accessing reproductive health services and information on the potential consequences of contracting Zika during pregnancy. These are the women who most need accurate, comprehensive information about their health-care choices and counseling on health risks in order to make informed decisions about whether to continue a pregnancy. Women and girls also need basic health services and access to rapid diagnosis of the Zika virus. Lastly, they need access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health care, including contraception and safe abortion.

## The facts

- Rates of unsafe abortion are likely to increase in Latin America during the Zika epidemic because of fear and panic related to Zika and pregnancy—and the failure of governments to protect women’s sexual and reproductive rights, including the right to safe, legal abortion.
- Access to contraceptives to prevent unwanted pregnancy is very limited in Latin America, and safe abortion is rare or nonexistent because of highly restrictive criminal abortion laws. Sexual violence is rampant in the region, and the rate of unintended pregnancies is high.
- When a woman has an unwanted pregnancy in a country where abortion is restricted or totally illegal, she is likely to find few safe options to end the pregnancy. This means she is more likely to resort to unsafe abortion—putting her health and life in danger. She also risks arrest, prosecution and jail if she is reported to the police.

## Ipas believes

- Every woman has the right to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health care, including information, contraception and safe, legal abortion. Every woman must be able to freely decide whether to continue or terminate a pregnancy, particularly during the Zika outbreak, and according to her specific health and well-being concerns.
- Denying women access to health services such as contraception and safe abortion in places with active Zika transmission—or denying access to comprehensive information about the risks associated with Zika infection during pregnancy—can harm women’s mental health and cause suffering equivalent to torture, especially when women are forced to carry pregnancies to term against their will.
- Core principles of reproductive justice must be considered when responding to the Zika outbreak in Latin America. Reproductive justice recognizes that women make decisions within broader social, economic and political contexts—and that women are the ones best positioned to make decisions about their own bodies and health. Women disempowered in any of these contexts may lack the autonomy and support to make informed decisions on sexuality and reproduction and to exercise their reproductive rights, which include:

- the right to decide if, when and how to continue a pregnancy, and the conditions under which to give birth
- the right to decide to prevent or end a pregnancy
- the right to parent children with dignity and respect, in a safe environment, and with the necessary social support

## Measures states can take to protect women’s health and rights during the Zika outbreak

- Educate health-care professionals about women’s sexual and reproductive rights and, in countries where abortion is legal, how to refer women to safe, legal abortion services.
- Provide comprehensive reproductive health care to all women—including access to quality prenatal care, sexual and reproductive health information, contraception, emergency contraception, counseling and safe abortion services.
- Provide information, services and support to women infected with Zika who choose to continue their pregnancies and give birth to children with microcephaly or other impairments.
- Implement the Montevideo Consensus for Population and Development (a landmark regional agreement adopted by 38 Latin American and Caribbean governments that commits to human rights-based development) and amend criminal abortion laws.
- Adopt a human rights and public health framework for providing access to safe abortion that acknowledges women’s rights to health, life, self-determination and equality.
- Provide health-care professionals with guidance and training on how to discuss the challenges women face in obtaining and successfully using contraception and other family planning methods. Specifically, this should include information on how to advise women when contraception is not available, when women do not use contraception consistently, and when contraception fails. This information should also address the crucial role men play in ensuring women can access and consistently use contraception, and the importance of protected sex if a man has contracted Zika and his female partner is pregnant.