

Abortion is a Fundamental Right, Even during a Pandemic.

Voluntary pregnancy termination is considered an essential service that must continue to be provided, even in the context of a Pandemic. This has been asserted by the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, who are asking providers to adapt their practices in order to ensure access for all women.¹ The need to make this service widely available is also highlighted by the World Health Organization and the International Federation of Obstetrics and Gynecology (FIGO).²

We know that the majority COVID-19 patients will recover and overcome this health crisis, but most of the women who require abortions and are unable to reach safe providers will have to choose between a clandestine procedure or forced motherhood. Any woman might be faced with this dilemma during the current crisis, but it will undoubtedly be the most vulnerable- those that are already facing adversity, including physical or sexual violence- who will suffer the worst health outcomes as a direct result of unwanted pregnancies and unsafe abortions in this context of travel bans and financial crisis.³

In this context, it has become necessary for the medical community to protect the life, health and autonomy of women more than ever, which is why we are denouncing the unconscionable and opportunistic actions of members of congress, the "pro-life" movement and other anti-abortion groups attempting to capitalize on this crisis by spreading false information about abortion and discrediting the efforts of civil society to mitigate the effects of COVID and defend the exercise of women's reproductive rights.

*"FIGO supports services and these must be sustainable and resilient. It has committed to serve women safely as we navigate these uncharted waters and we call on governments to do the same. Changes need to be implemented swiftly to save lives and prevent further strain on medical services...Women will always need abortions. Whether they can access them safely and with dignity depends upon every one of us to rise to the challenge to provide them."*²

Starting with a press release⁴ issued on April 13th, these groups have continued to mobilize and promote their fundamentalist and misogynistic agenda while openly defying Colombian constitutional decrees in regards to abortion and public health including but not limited to guidelines service providers defined since before the pandemic.

Telemedicine abortion services were established to protect women and to meet the guidelines issued in response to the current public health crisis in Colombia. They are regulated by decree 2654 of 2019 since before the pandemic, which allows early access to abortion services by tackling the barriers that force women to carry an unwanted pregnancy to advanced gestational stages. These practices meet strict protocols in accordance to the Ministry of Health and Social Protection and guidelines established by the World Health Organization. Services are provided by medical professionals certified by the C-355/06 constitutional court ruling decriminalizing abortion in specific instances and enabling access to quality practitioners throughout the nation.

Since before the global Coronavirus crisis, the safety of telemedicine abortion services has been widely upheld by scientific literature. The most recent study, which compared the rate of complications between in-person and telemedicine services received by close to twenty thousand women, found no significant difference between both groups, highlighting a very low amount of complications among participants overall.⁵

We reject the way in which the anti-choice movement is attempting to mislead the public, especially women, with arguments based on unscientific personal opinions stemming from privilege and power, spreading fear and uncertainty in regard to safe abortion services. We find this practice unethical and reprehensible, and that is why we defend telemedicine for voluntary pregnancy termination which is legal, evidence-based and a moral imperative when it comes to preventing forced motherhood.

Grupo Médico por el Derecho a Decidir

www.globaldoctorsforchoice.org/colombia

¹ Ministry of health and Social Protection. Temporary Guidelines for healthcare in perinatal, postnatal and lactation services during the COVID-19 pandemic in Colombia. Cod. GIPS05 V1, 25 March 2020.

² International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics. Abortion access and safety with COVID-19. <https://www.guttmacher.org/article/2020/03/covid-19-outbreak-potential-fallout-sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-rights> <https://www.figo.org/abortion-access-and-safety-covid-19>

³ The COVID-19 Outbreak: Potential Fallout for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights <https://www.guttmacher.org/article/2020/03/covid-19-outbreak-potential-fallout-sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-rights>

⁴ Congress of the Republic of Colombia. Press Release, April 13. <http://www.senado.gov.co/index.php/prensa/lista-de-noticias/987-comunicado-a-la-opinion-publica>

⁵ Grossman D, Grindlay K. Safety of Medical Abortion Provided Through Telemedicine Compared With In Person. *Obstet Gynecol.* 2017 Oct;130(4):778-782