

Pro-choice professor forced into hiding by death threats over Brazil abortion hearing

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Campaigner involved in case that could lead to legal abortion in first 12 weeks of pregnancy enters protection programme

Days before a Brazilian supreme court hearing on a move that could eventually decriminalise abortion in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, a leading feminist campaigner is in hiding after receiving death threats.

Debora Diniz, a professor of anthropology at the University of Brasília, who helped bring the legal action with bioethics institute Anis, is sequestered in an unknown location but will still appear at the two-day hearing, which starts on Friday.

“We are in a new moment,” Diniz, who will be escorted by police at the trial, told the Guardian by phone. “It could change the criminalisation of abortion in the country, and that is why it is so important.”

Abortion is banned in Brazil unless a woman has been raped, her life is in danger, or the foetus has anencephaly, a fatal brain disorder. Unsafe abortions leave [250,000 women](#) in Brazil hospitalised annually and cause 200 deaths.

Rosa Weber, the supreme court judge who called the hearing, is steering the case through the court and has called upon dozens of doctors, government officials, specialists, campaigners, churches and religious organisations to speak on Friday and Monday.

Last year, Weber dismissed a petition from a Brazilian woman, Rebecca Mendes, to terminate a pregnancy in [Brazil](#) on procedural grounds. Mendes had her abortion in Colombia.

Two days after the hearing, Argentina’s senate votes on [a bill to decriminalise abortion](#) that has raised Brazilian campaigners’ hopes. But there is no timeline on when the supreme court might vote on the issue, said Eloísa Machado, a professor of constitutional law at São Paulo’s Getúlio Vargas Foundation.

Meanwhile, some of the threats made against Diniz remain online, in comments left under her photograph – captioned “you are a monster” and posted on June 23 – on the Facebook page of a group calling itself the National Union of Rightist Students. One featured a gif of a man pointing a gun. Another said she should have been aborted at birth.

Three men turned up at congress when Diniz was there, saying they wanted to “talk to her” and filming her. Others sent threats to her through WhatsApp. Police recommended she entered a protection programme and left her home.

“They asked for a series of protective measures,” she said.

According to the health ministry, there are almost a million illegal terminations of pregnancy a year in Brazil. In 2016 alone, 203 women died as a result of unsafe abortions. Most at risk are black women from low-income groups, Diniz said, because richer Brazilian women can afford to pay for safer, albeit illegal, abortions.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a 35-year-old black woman in the north-eastern city of Recife told of how she aborted at home after taking Misoprostol tablets. She already had two young sons and at the time was going through a difficult separation from her husband, father to the youngest child.

"I was in a totally unstructured home with a young child and a father who I didn't love or respect any more," she said. "It was very painful in all senses – physically, psychologically, it is a very difficult thing for a woman."

She has no regrets, however, and believes she made a responsible choice even though, as an evangelical Christian, she contradicted church teaching.

"It is a public health issue," she said. "We have to use empathy. There is a big lack of this in Brazil."

Leila Katz, an obstetrician-gynaecologist who works in an obstetric emergency ward in Recife, deals with women suffering complications – including sepsis, haemorrhage and infections – after unsafe abortions. She said black market Misoprostol tablets reduced cases but have become scarce recently, causing a new rise in complications.

"This whole problem of abortion being illegal and criminalised is very sad," she said.

Sergio Rego, a paediatrician and researcher at government research institute Fiocruz, will tell the hearing why his wife Marisa opted for an abortion after she got pregnant soon after the birth of their son Pedro, the only survivor of triplets. Pedro, now 33, was born with multiple disabilities.

"We already had two other children," he said. "One more at that time would have made it more difficult to take care adequately of Pedro. It was a very rational option."

Pedro and Marisa will be there to hear him speak.

Brazil is a profoundly conservative country, with a Catholic majority and an increasing number of politically active evangelical Christians who are largely against abortion. In a poll last year, only 26% of Brazilians said women should be able to decide to interrupt a pregnancy, even though 45% said they knew someone who had had an abortion.

Not all those opposing abortion at the hearing will do so on religious grounds. Hermes Nery, a professor of bioethics from the National Pro-Life and Pro-Family Association, said the move to decriminalise abortion is part of an international movement that offends Brazilian sovereignty. "It is an anti-life and anti-family agenda," he said.

Last November, a congress committee approved a bill that would [effectively ban abortion](#) in all circumstances. It has yet to be voted on by both houses.

The hearing comes during a [heated presidential election campaign](#), in which a leading campaigner, far-right army captain and lawmaker [Jair Bolsonaro](#), faces charges at the same supreme court for [telling a female lawmaker in 2014](#) that she did not "deserve to be raped".

Leading polls, though he is currently jailed on corruption charges and unlikely to be able to run, Luiz

Inácio Lula da Silva, the former president, has long said he is personally opposed to abortion. His campaign managers said he now believes the state should “discuss the legislation”.

Environmentalism Marina Silva, another presidential contender, believes a plebiscite should be held, while Conservative candidate Geraldo Alckmin has called the current legislation “adequate”. Neither Bolsonaro nor leftist candidate Ciro Gomes responded to requests for their position.

Brazil’s health ministry may provide one of the most powerful pro-abortion arguments at the hearing. It will present figures showing that abortion numbers fell following its legalisation in the US and Portugal, and an estimated cost of unsafe abortion in all developing countries of \$232m – a big spend for a country struggling to reduce a huge deficit.

“The complications from unsafe abortions result in hospitalisations, increased health costs and avoidable deaths,” health ministry officials will argue. “The burden of voluntary termination of pregnancy is high in Brazil.”

Dom Phillips

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