



Birth Control as an Electoral Issue in the Philippines

The Birth Control Issue

When the lobbying for the Reproductive Health Bill began last year, the issue of reproductive health became a hot topic in Philippine politics. Many facts had been raised with regards to the nature of the bill itself, supporting its provisions. Arguments were hurled against the RH Bill as well. Anti-RH Bill advocates have often cited Christian doctrine and moral issues, while pro-RH Bill camps have stressed the importance of securing the welfare of our people, especially of women and children.

To help us better understand the reproductive health issue, let us focus on the most contested element of the RH Bill, which is birth control. Here are some critical data on birth control in the Philippines in relation to poverty, public health and women's welfare.

Poverty in relation to Birth Control

- With our population increasing at a rate of 2.3% per annum, with today's population estimated at over 90 million, the demand for basic commodities and other necessities is increasing.
- Placing this statistic in contrast with the fact that 44% of Filipinos continue to earn less than two dollars a day (*State of the Philippine Environment: A Progress Report, 2006*), and that there are 11 dependents for every 6 working Filipinos (Orbeta, 2005), we see that poverty in the Philippines is not only a case of financial insecurity; it is also a problem that is systemic. Ultimately,

to speak of a massive population with a huge demand that cannot be met and properly handled is to speak of a political problem.

- The number of unemployed rose from 2.91 million in 2005 to 2.93 in 2006, with labour participation pegged only at 64.9%. (*SWS Quarter Survey, 2007*)
- The 2004 Philippine Health Statistics report shows there is only 1 doctor for every 27,842 people.

Public Health in relation to Birth Control

- In the 2005 national budget, the health budget was pegged at PhP10.273 billion, which roughly translates to about 35 centavos per Filipino per day. By international parameters, the amount hardly covers the basic welfare and health needs of Filipinos.
- In the book *"Philippines: The Challenge of Managing Migration, Retention and Return of Health Professionals"*, it was cited that over 200 hospitals in the Philippines closed down by mid-2003. With insufficient resources for addressing the nation's reproductive health, our means to addressing poverty in the country become more and more limited, and made more difficult by other major problems: low income, insufficient education, poor public health, and a non-active state.
- The 2003 National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) shows 26% of women aged 15-24 years have already begun childbearing, and that about 1 out of 16 girls aged

- 15-19 are already young mothers. The University of the Philippines Population Institute's (UPPI) Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study in 2002 reports the following findings:
 - o An estimated 4.9 million young adults (15-27 years of age) have already engaged in premarital sex.
 - o Of the sexually active young Filipinos, an estimated 34% have multiple partners.
 - o Majority of this group say that sex was something they did not plan for but did it anyway.
 - o Only 19% used any contraception to protect themselves against pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases the first time they had sex.
 - o 36% of hospital cases of abortion involved young women aged 15-24.

Women's Welfare in relation to Birth Control

- The 2003 NDHS cites that "only half of married women practice family planning because of lack of information and proper knowledge on various family planning methods and services".
- Greater proportions of these women live in rural areas "where there are few [formal] service providers and where services are scarce and inaccessible".
- The study further asserts that "poor women have three times more children than the rich (5.9 children for the poor and 2.0 for the rich); give birth to their first child at a younger age; and have more problems spacing their children than wealthier

women. Likewise, men who belong to the poorest segments of society have more children (5) compared to those who belong to the richest sectors (3)."

- The NDHS also highlighted that "only 38% of child deliveries in the Philippines have been found to be attended by skilled health professionals. Majority of them still seek the services of traditional *hilots* (midwives) because they can't afford birthing in hospitals or because of lack of proper information".

The May 2010 Elections

The upcoming elections this May presents an opportunity for us to set and secure a definite agenda for comprehensive state actions towards birth control. Given the alarming facts presented above, candidates need to consider birth control as a critical issue and as an electoral agenda.

So far, progressive movements for birth control have operated solely on the local and municipal level. Local government officials, however, hold shorter terms (3 years), thus, prohibiting a deeper consolidation and long-term implementation of proactive reproductive health programs.

Majority of the efforts to provide reproductive health services are being done by NGOs, civil society groups and concerned organizations.

5 reasons why birth control is a critical issue for this coming elections:

- 1) **Filipinos are looking for a more comprehensive plan and a more proactive government with regards to providing reproductive health care and services.** Birth control is important to Filipino voters' precisely because of its implications to family life. According to Pulse Asia's *Ulat ng Bayan*, 9 out of 10 Filipinos consider family planning important, while 8 out of 10 believe in the importance of including family planning in any aspiring candidate's plan of action. The survey further says that 75% of Filipinos claim they will support candidates that will allot government budget for extensive family planning methods. Also, about 9 out of 10 Filipinos believe

it is important for government to provide budgetary support for modern methods of family planning, which includes pills, intra-uterine devices, condoms, ligation and vasectomy.

- 2) **On one hand, birth control is seen as a moral issue. On the other, it is viewed as a political issue.** Both arguments, however, occupy a singular space in the elections. The recent debate regarding the RH bill showed the different stands of groups lobbying for or against the bill. The government is being pressured by the opposing camps to come up with a resolution that would either uphold Christian moral or secure the health and well-being of our people.

The 2010 elections provide a space for the issue of birth control to take precedence and provide an opportunity for Filipinos to act upon this issue positively by voting for candidates who present comprehensive programs for securing our reproductive health.

- 3) **The issue of birth control with respect to the Catholic Church's pro-life stance presents an electoral issue.** The Catholic Church is a historically empowered entity in the Philippines and wields significant influence in Philippine politics. And being a predominantly Catholic country, campaigns against the RH Bill have gone to the extent of questioning the morality of candidates who support the bill. The argument about religion influencing the practice of birth control seems unfounded, as shown by the NDHS of 2003, which says only about 2.4% of married women refer to religion as a reason for abstaining from contraception. Birth control is an important electoral issue that our candidates should carefully analyze and understand, given the widely accepted teachings of the Catholic Church and the impending population crisis.
- 4) **The Filipino youth are directly affected by the issue.** This coming elections, over 50% of the registered voters are between the ages 18 to 40, giving a wide margin for the 'youth vote'. Candidates have often

cited and endorsed pro-youth advocacies and education programs; they should take note of the steady rise in youth engagement in pre-marital and unprotected sex. The census of 2002 shows that the youth comprises over 23.2 million of the total 82.7 million population, with about 3.8 million of them having already engaged in pre-marital sex. A staggering 80% percent of such encounters are unprotected. A direct corollary to this phenomenon would be the rise in the number of young people with sexually transmitted diseases. 62% of reported STI cases involved the youth, while 29% of HIV/AIDS cases involved the youth as well. (PLCPD, 2010)

- 5) **The inaccessibility to services or information regarding birth control leads to misinformation and limits the avenues towards securing public health.** The lack of a comprehensive nationwide reproductive health program only exacerbates poverty in the country. The government only has the Natural Family Planning Policy (NFP), which not only leaves out the choice to use contraceptives or other artificial methods for birth control but also, in principle, leaves family planning and public health in the hands of fate. The government's involvement in and support for the family's welfare and reproductive health remain *a priori*. A firm and a more comprehensive policy on birth control still remains to be seen.

In conclusion

It is important for us to consider the issue of reproductive health as we contemplate on who to vote for this coming May 10. As shown by the figures and arguments presented, reproductive health is not a stand-alone issue but is tied to the bigger concerns regarding our booming population, our unstable economic condition, and the well-being of the general public. The government should provide and support a proactive and comprehensive nationwide reproductive health program that secures and maintains the reproductive health of every Filipino family and of our youth. A candidate who prioritizes reproductive health and presents a clear plan of action on how to address RH concerns may be worth considering.

Women for Women's Sake: 14 Female Senatorial Candidates on Reproductive Health and Population Control

Filipino Women and Politics: Facts and Figures

- In general, there are more registered male Filipino voters than female Filipino voters. However, come election day, more women go out to vote than men.
- In the 1995 elections, out of 18.1 million registered female voters, 71% of them voted, while only 70.3% of the 18.3 million registered male voters voted. The trend has been consistent through the years, and at present, this is still the case.
- The 'women as the majority' trend, however, is true only in terms of the voting population. The number of women who are actually in government is still small. Statistics show that out of the 24 senators in office at any given period of time, it is most likely that there are only 4 to 5 women senators.
- The requirements for a citizen to run for senator are simple. According to the 1987 Constitution, any Filipino can run for senator as long as he/she is a natural-born citizen of the Philippines; at least 35 years of age on the day of the election; literate; a registered voter; and a Philippine resident for not less than 2 years before the day of elections. Gender is clearly not an issue. Therefore, the underrepresentation of women in government cannot be blamed on State requirements. The question, is this: what are the factors—(social, cultural or economic) that prevent an increase in the number of women politicians?

The RH Issue and Women "Senatoriables": It's Not Only About Girl Power

This underrepresentation of women in the political arena is a pressing issue because it can potentially lead to indifference to women's issues. It seems as if this is about to change, as we now have 14 women candidates for senator in the upcoming elections. Some of these women are already in public office, while the others are from the private sector. Regardless of origin, these women have proven themselves to be advocates of women's rights, focusing on issues such as reproductive health and to an extent, population control.

For women, reproductive health and population control are key issues because both pertain to the general role of women in society - that of bearing and rearing children. However, such issues are not limited to this aspect alone. According to the United Nations, reproductive health is a "state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of reproductive disease or infirmity... [that] deals with the reproductive processes, functions and system at all stages of life... which includes sexual health, the purpose of which is the enhancement of life and personal relations, and not merely counselling and care related to reproduction and sexually transmitted diseases."

With the controversial Reproductive Health (RH) Bill (House Bill No. 5043 entitled, An Act Providing for a National Policy on Reproductive Health, Responsible Parenthood and Population Development, and for Other Purposes) still on-hold, how do we address the reproductive health of Filipino women? Our 14 women senatoriables speak about RH and their proposed strategies to improve women's reproductive health in the country.



Rep. Risa Hontiveros (Liberal Party)

- She finds it peculiar that President Arroyo, a woman, did not put women's rights as a priority concern during her term.
- She fought for the passage of the Reproductive Health Bill in order to give Filipinos, particularly the women and the youth, a national policy that would allow access to information and products that would protect reproductive health.



Rep. Liza Maza (Nacionalista Party)

- As head of the feminist group Gabriela, she believes that sexual and reproductive health are within the bounds of the universal right to health, and that right is ingrained with the universal right to life.
- She is an avid sponsor of the Reproductive Health Bill.
- She was once quoted saying, "reproductive health aids in the stabilization of population growth".



Sonia Roco (Liberal Party)

- She stands in opposition of the Reproductive Health Bill because she chooses to stand by the Catholic Church's pro-life belief.
- She believes modern family planning methods runs in contradiction to the moral principles of the Church.
- Her platform is more geared towards issues on education and early childhood development.



Sen. Pia Cayetano (Nacionalista Party)

- She successfully passed the Magna Carta of Women among other bills and resolutions about women.
- Section 10 of the said charter states that "women can avail of health services regardless of age and situation", and emphasized the "importance of education and training programs in helping families understand reproductive health issues".


Yasmin Lao (Liberal Party)

- She is a political neophyte who, in 1997, founded Al-Mujadillah, an NGO that raises community awareness about Muslim women's rights, particularly on reproductive health, which she plans to raise to the national level.


Sen. Miriam Defensor-Santiago (People's Reform Party)

- She sees the significant connection between family relations and the protection of women's health.
- She advocates for the protection of the youth against teenage pregnancy and the reduction of health service costs.


Kata Inocencio (Bangon Pilipinas)

- Before entering politics, she has been an advocate for the youth, women, and OFWs.
- She believes women have the "divine right" to choose whatever measure to use in managing their reproductive health.
- She is in favour of the case-to-case basis usage of traditional and artificial methods of family planning but she is against any form of abortion.
- She thinks overpopulation is not the effect of poor implementation of reproductive health policies but is an aftermath of poverty.


Jo Aurea Imbong (Ang Kapatiran Party)

- Previously worked for the legal office of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) and she is against sex education in school
- Sex education should only be given at home by parents.
- She sees the issue of reproductive health as a family and social issue.


Gwendolyn Pimentel (Partido Demokratiko Pilipino-Laban)

- She intends to focus on the rights of children, OFWs and OFW families.
- She has no particular stand on reproductive health and population control.


Susan Ople (Nacionalista Party)

- She intends to focus on anti-drug advocacies and labour rights.
- She has no particular stand on reproductive health and population control.


Atty. Grace Rinoza-Plazo (Ang Kapatiran Party)

- She intends to focus on legal rights.
- She adheres to Ang Kapatiran's stand against the Reproductive Health Bill.


Imelda Papin (Kilusang Bagong Lipunan)

- She intends to address the broader empowerment and improvement of women and the health care system (i.e. having a state hospital in every municipality).
- She has no particular stand on reproductive health and population control.


Alma Lood (Kilusang Bagong Lipunan)

- She does not have any concrete platform.


Judea Millora (Kilusang Bagong Lipunan)

- She does not have any concrete platform

(Data on the candidates' platforms and stand on reproductive health and population control were culled from articles both in print and online. Candidates' photos taken from Google Pics: www.google.com.)

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

More and more women now engage in politics and run for various government positions. It would seem as if they see the upcoming elections as the time for women to finally have a say in governance and in doing so, help protect the rights of Filipino women. Most, if not all, candidates understand reproductive health and population control as complex issues, affecting not only the individual but societal relations. Thus, addressing our concerns regarding reproductive health and population control is now more important than ever.

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