

basic right

Know the facts about the Reproductive Health Bill and how it will affect women's lives
By Monica Guerra

fetus dumped beside a church or in the garbage or in one of the comfort rooms in a university dorm. Newborn infant found inside a bag on a commercial plane or abandoned in an old building. Lady died while giving birth due to lack of proper health care. News of this sort may still shock us, but as inhumane as it sounds, the fact that we've heard of stories like these, more than once, indicates that these things happen and they are not unusual.

According to a recent report from World Health Organization, in 2009 there was a significant increase in pregnancies in the adolescent age group (10 to 19 years old) in the country, and the Philippines contributes 1 percent to global adolescent pregnancy distribution. It was found out and highly evident that pregnancy in early and mid-adolescence age group adds to the high risk factors of infant and maternal deaths. Furthermore, just this August of 2010, a New York-based organization called Centre for Reproductive Rights issued a report saying about 1000 women die annually

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ED SIMON. MODELS: JOSEPH VILLALOBOS AND LEIN KOJIMA (BOTH FROM ADMOVERS). MAKEUP BY ANI NORCENA AND JOYCE TURGO FROM MAKE-UP DESIGN ACADEMY. CLOTHES BY SOLO. FOR STORE INFO, SEE PAGE TK

in the Philippines, after having backstreet abortions. About 54 percent of all pregnancies that occurred in the Philippines in 2008 were unplanned, the report also said.

Faced with the real and current situation of women in our country, now's a good time to re-focus our energies to things that can be helpful to us in the long-run. Knowing and understanding the Reproductive Health (RH) Bill, and how it will greatly affect our lives as women, will enable us to be accountable for our own actions and for our health.

What is the RH Bill about?

Abortion, adolescent pregnancy, infant and maternal deaths are just few of the many pressing issues that many Filipinas are dealing with when it comes to women's reproductive health. These problems, together with the appropriate allocation of funds for reproductive health services and proper health care system, adequate information on different family planning methods and the freedom of informed choice to adopt family planning, are the basis why the RH Bill or formally known as the "undefined" Health and Population Development Act of 2008 was written and proposed.

There have been many misconceptions and pretenses about the RH Bill, that it is high time for us to really know and understand what it is all about and how this will affect us, because evidently, we Filipinas are the direct and primary beneficiaries of this bill. Principally authored by Representative Edcel Lagman of the 1st District of Albay, the RH bill proposes to "guarantee universal access to medically-safe, legal, affordable and quality reproductive health care services." Although the bill has been filed in previous congresses, it has not been passed into law yet.

Foreseen effects of the bill

We don't have to be lawyers or have a background in political science in order to have a reason to know and understand the RH bill. "It is extremely important for Filipinos to actively gather information

about the RH bill, and read the actual text for themselves. There are so many prejudices, distortions, misinformation and propaganda out there about the bill. Simply reading the bill quickly and clearly exposes all the untruths. Everyone should read the bill themselves, and then make up their minds about it," said Amina Evangelista Swanepoel, executive director of Roots of Health, an NGO that seeks to provide women, young mothers, and children with educational, medical, and nutritional support to enhance their health and the quality of their lives.

Once the bill is enacted, this will have impact on the lives of millions of Filipinas, and the society in general. More information, more options, more access to

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potentially life-saving tools, and generally more control over their own reproductive health, are just some of the changes that the bill seeks to create. "Empowering women to have the information and technology they need to plan the number and spacing of the children they want to have (if any), will result in poverty alleviation and in improved maternal and child health," said Swanepoel.

In addition, the enactment of the bill would greatly have positive effects to underprivileged Filipinas. "Many of the benefits the bill would bring are already available to middle and upper class women in the Philippines because they can afford to pay for education, health care, contraceptives and medicines. It is poorer women in underserved sectors of the country who don't have these same options and whose lives would really be dramatically changed by the passage of the bill," shared Swanepoel.

Controversial points

Fallacy: The bill is anti-life.

Answer: It is actually pro-life because it seeks to ensure that the births are

planned and wanted. More information about family planning methods will be available to couples, which will have the opportunity to plan and space their children.

Fallacy: The bill legalizes abortion.

Answer: The bill still believes that "abortion is a crime." But to be able to promote humane treatment of women in life threatening situations, management of post-abortion complications is provided.

Fallacy: The bill will prohibit pregnancy and will promote contraceptive mentality.

Answer: Contraceptives are used to prevent unwanted pregnancies. But if the couple decides to have a baby, then it is assured that the pregnancy is planned and wanted.

Fallacy: Sexuality education will give birth to a culture of promiscuity.

Answer: In contrary, education of sexuality will empower the youth to make wise decisions because they will be fully aware of the consequences of unwanted pregnancies.

As much as many are supporting the passage of the said bill, there are also organizations that seek to improve and perfect the said bill like the Gabriela Women's Party. "Gabriela is crafting the Quality and Accessible Reproductive Health for Women Act, which means that the provision of health services should be for women as she goes through the life cycle of pre-menstruation, puberty (when she has her menstruation), reproductive age (*panabon ng kanyang paghubuntis*), and menopause," said Gertrudes Libang of Gabriela. The mechanics may be slightly different, but the main objectives are the same; to uphold and promote respect for life, informed choice, birth spacing and responsible parenthood and to guarantee universal access to medically-safe, legal and quality reproductive health care services and relevant information on reproductive health.

For more information and questions about the bill and the issues surrounding it, check out <edcellagman.com.ph> <reproductiverights.org> and <rootsofhealth.org>