

## **ULTRA POOR FILIPINOS NOT UNDER FAMILY PLANNING**

Due to low levels of contraceptive use, around half of all pregnancies in the Philippines are unplanned, according to a 2008 survey by the Guttmacher Institute, a United States-based group that promotes sexual and reproductive health.

In the Catholic-majority country, government reproductive health policies have long been shaped by the Church's opposition to artificial contraceptive methods. The Philippines is one of the few countries where it is illegal to have an abortion under any circumstances.

Unwanted babies are usually abandoned in places where they can be found. But reports of dumped foetuses are common. Two years ago, one turned up inside a bathroom at the presidential palace.

Filipinos were shocked by reports around that time of a four-month-old foetus hidden in a basket of fruit offered by its mother to a priest celebrating mass in Manila's Quiapo Church. Ironically, market stalls around the landmark church are notorious for selling drugs and potions with abortive properties.

Last year, the social services handled 1,091 cases of abandoned children. Of the total, 212 were infants - 120 boys and 92 girls - aged below one.

In the family-centric Philippines, infants born of single mothers, especially young ones, are often cared for by relatives. But the Guttmacher Institute estimates that more than 500,000 Filipino women have illegal abortions every year.

The methods are crude and dangerous, and include painful abdominal massages, illegally sourced pharmaceuticals and herbal concoctions to induce labour.

"Criminalisation... has not prevented abortion in the Philippines, but it has made it extremely unsafe," said the New York-based Centre for Reproductive Rights (CRR) in a report on abortions in the Philippines released last month.

About 90,000 women are hospitalised yearly for abortion-related complications, said the CRR. Long-pending legislation aimed at reducing unwanted pregnancies and illegal abortions by promoting modern contraceptive methods was re-filed in the new Congress in July, soon after President Benigno Aquino III took office.

Joy Pacete of women's health advocacy group Likhaan said: 'There is a huge unmet need for free contraceptives as well as family planning advice on all the options for poor Filipinos.'

However, the Reproductive Health Bill, which Aquino backs, does not seek to legalise abortion. The nine years under the previous administration discouraged modern family planning methods as a public health policy.

Just how the Bill fares during Aquino's administration remains to be seen.

As if replying to those who still insist that the link between population growth and poverty hasn't been proven, the report emphasizes: "A convincing range of macro and micro evidence suggests that continued high fertility by the poor has affected progress in poverty reduction in the Philippines... At the macroeconomic level, simulation models using economic and demographic data for the Philippines showed that higher population growth lowered GDP per capita."

The "use of family planning has stagnated in the past decade, with persistent unmet needs for family planning and inadequate access to family planning services for poor women," the report said. The percentage of married women using family planning has remained static at around 50 percent since 1995.... In 2003, only 24 percent of women in the poorest quintile were using family planning, compared to 58 percent in Vietnam and 49 percent in Indonesia."

The Philippine State has been abdicating its responsibility to provide the poor with contraceptive information and tools. But there is not a shadow of a doubt that this is because of the Catholic Church's vehement opposition to genuine family planning programs. The Church in the Philippines therefore has and continues to be an agent for Filipinos' impoverishment.