

Filipino teenage pregnancies rise amid the pandemic

By Raizza P. Bello

An estimate of at least 102,000 Filipino adolescents gave birth during the coronavirus pandemic last year, revealed a recent study by the University of the Philippines Population Institute and the United Nations (UN) Population Fund.

Government officials and advocates attributed the spike in cases to the lack of access to health and family planning services amid the community quarantines. Others raised gender-based violence issues – such as child sexual abuse and rape – as the roots of these early pregnancies.

Jona Turalde, leading facilitator of SheDecides Philippines, emphasized that this urgent issue warrants more care and attention given the stigma and normalization attached to the experiences of teenage mothers, especially for young girls in rural communities.

Filipino senator Risa Hontiveros, who chairs the Senate Committee on Women, Children, Family Relations, and Gender Equality, expressed renewed concern on this growing crisis in a press statement last February, as she urged

the passage of Senate Bill No. 161 or the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention bill that seeks young parents' social protection and health care support in caring for their child.

First filed in July 2019, the bill was a response to the steady rise of early pregnancies in the Philippines since 2011, a trend previously reported by the Commission on Population and Development. The country also has one of the highest adolescent pregnancy rates across the Asia Pacific region in recent years.

Although the Philippines has reproductive health (RH) policies to address such issues, it strips minors of access to family planning services and the law's poor implementation – particularly on the comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) – impact challenges on teenage pregnancies, said Au Quilala, advocacy and partnerships manager of the Philippine Legislators' Committee on Population and Development (PLCPD) Foundation.

More than eight years since the RH law's enactment, the Department of Education is yet to integrate the CSE in the schools' learning curriculum, she remarked. Both Turalde and Quilala shared that religious conservatism is one of the driving factors that make it difficult to forward the RH agenda across the country.

These current conditions fall short of the Philippines' commitment to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women agreement which entitles Filipino

women access to RH education and options so they are able to “decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children”, based on Article 16.

Given the alarming situation, the advocacy groups call for the full implementation of the RH law, especially on CSE, and the passage of the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention bill to equip the youth in making informed health decisions.

“We need to accept that puberty age is that really age of exploration,” Turalde added, “We need to give them ways to have informed decisions. So, it’s their choice if they want to do it [sex] or abstain, as long as they know how to protect, care, and value themselves.”