

Voices: Philippines

Break down barriers to contraception

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Sharon Camp and **Junice Melgar**

Public health and development experts agree: contraception is one of the most effective investments a country can make to protect the health of mothers and babies and to enable women's full participation in economic development.

That is why it makes eminent sense for the Philippines to ensure that all its citizens have the family planning services they need to decide for themselves when to become parents and how many children to have.

Since 2004, the provision of publicly funded contraceptives in the Philippines has been declining at a steady pace. Many Filipino women, especially the poorest, now face obstacles to preventing unwanted pregnancies.

This decline has been mostly due to the refusal of the former Arroyo administration to establish a national, public family planning programme in the wake of the US government's decision to phase out its foreign aid for family planning in the Philippines to focus on poorer nations. As a result, access to contraceptives for poor and low-income Filipino women depends largely on the ability and willingness of local governments to pay for these services. However, these governments lack the funds – and at times the political will – to fill this need. Only a handful have dedicated a part of their budget to filling the critical need for contraceptives.

And the need is dire: a new analysis conducted by the New York-based Guttmacher Institute found that more than one in five married Filipino women do not want to become pregnant within the next two years, or at all, but are not

using any method of contraception – that is, they have an unmet need for contraception. The situation is more critical among the poorest married women and sexually active, unmarried young women.

The researchers found that cost is a leading cause for women not using any modern contraceptive method. Meanwhile, the proportion who obtained modern contraceptives from the public sector declined, from 67 per cent in 2003 to 46 per cent in 2008. As a result, more women now rely on the private sector to obtain contraceptives, which means higher costs.

Funding shortages also mean that many women do not get the information and counselling they need to make sound decisions about their reproductive lives. This reduces their ability to choose the method that best fits their needs.

Filipino women deserve to have all the means necessary to make their own childbearing decisions, no matter what their socio-economic status. An immediate national response is required to ensure that Filipino women, especially those who are most disadvantaged, have access to the contraceptive services and supplies they need.

The new administration of President Benigno Aquino should make family planning services a public health priority and fund these much-needed services. In doing so, they will improve the health and well-being not only of Filipino women but of the nation as a whole.

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