

The RH Bill: Beyond the Culture War

Something about the debate over the Reproductive Health Bill feels like it is a proxy culture war whose ideological underpinnings come from somewhere else.

On one side are the pro-lifers sounding like the Religious Right in America, conjuring images of abortion clinics and shadows of a 'culture of death' descending upon us the moment the bill gets passed. On the other side are the pro-choice advocates whose arguments echo western liberal discourse, with its overdeveloped language for 'rights' and freedom of choice. In fact, the realities on the ground have little to do with either the fear of abortion or the militant individualism of those pressing for absolute autonomy over their bodies.

The Roman Catholic Church warns that the passage of the RH Bill will open the floodgates of promiscuity and encourage abortion due to the easy access to contraceptives. But then, a high abortion rate already stares us in the face: more than half a million Filipino women opt for underground abortions each year, according to the 2009 report of the Guttmacher Institute. Most of these are done in back alleys and unsafe conditions.

Early studies in the 1990s show that most of these cases involve poor married women who have had three or four children - 87% of whom are said to be Catholic and resort to abortion not because of promiscuity or assertion of rights over their bodies, but because of sheer poverty.

Why does this happen in a Catholic country where the Church teaches its followers that abortion is a sin, and remains militantly intransigent about any form of artificial contraception?

What this tells us is that the terrible pressure of poverty forces women to abort unwanted babies, even against legal sanctions and at the expense of their moral values. Nobody among these poor women is talking of the ideology of 'reproductive rights' as elaborated by international aid agencies.

The other side of the picture: studies also show that the rate of abortion goes down by as much as 83% in countries where access to contraception is made possible. This is a fact that the Church hierarchy has to take into account. There is no question that the main reason for abortion in this country is poverty and the consequent lack of access to cheap contraceptives.

About 54% of married women in the Philippines do not want an additional child, according to the NDHS 2008 study. However, 49% are not using any form of family planning. A parallel study, the Family Planning Survey of 2006, found out that 2.6 million women would like to plan their families, but have neither access nor information on suitable methods.

What this means is that the RH Bill is important, not so much for the economic dividends from improved demographics, but as a poverty alleviation measure for needy households. It is true that there are other variables needed for the demographic dividends to work – sound economic

policies, fiscal discipline, human capital, efficient and relatively clean state institutions, and a genuinely competitive market.

Still, it cannot be denied that in a less-than-ideal world, reproductive health policy helps to keep population growth apace with the rate of economic growth.

This editorial is adapted from the original article written by Dr. Melba Padilla Maggay entitled "Battle over RH feels like proxy culture war." Dr. Maggay is the President of ISACC.