

Philippine reproductive health bill continues to illegalize abortion

Dante Pastrana
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Republic Act Number 10354, or the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act of 2012, formally came into effect in the Philippines last month. Key provisions include mandating that the government provide “public access to and relevant information and education on medically safe, legal, ethical, affordable, effective and quality reproductive health services, methods, devices and supplies.” It also mandates that the government provide sex education to public school students from the ages of 10 to 19.

The new law passed after acrimonious debates in the Philippine Congress and the wider political establishment. The Roman Catholic Church hierarchy mounted a vitriolic opposition campaign, despite survey after survey indicating that 70 percent of its own adherents supported public access to contraceptives and sex education for youth.

President Benigno Aquino III’s administration backed the legislation. At the end of last year, Congress finally approved the law, over a decade after the first bills on public access to contraceptives were first filed.

The bill’s main backers in Congress, the Bayan Muna—aligned to the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines (CCP), Akbayan—a breakaway from the CCP, and petty-bourgeois reformers led by House Representative Edcel Lagman, are painting the new law as a significant reform. This is far from the case.

The law is aimed not at improving the lot of the vast working poor. It continues to criminalize abortion, does not provide free access to contraception, and allows schools to opt out of sex education on religious grounds.

The RH bill institutes means testing, which limits its so-called ‘universal access’ to contraception to just 5 million households, who are identified by a government database as ‘poor’. Section 3 of the new law states:

“The limited resources of the country cannot be suffered to be spread so thinly to service a burgeoning multitude.”

The legislation has the backing of sections of the corporate elite. In 2011, according to the *Manila Bulletin*, five large business groups, including the Makati Business Club and the Philippine Chamber of Commerce Industry, issued a joint statement demanding the Senate and the House of Representatives “pass [it] into law without further delay.” Reproductive health and family planning, according to these business representatives, was “a direct strategy for poverty reduction and maternal and child healthcare.”

Big business has no real concern for the plight of the multi-millioned urban and rural poor in the Philippines. For decades, the ruling elites have regarded a young and rapidly expanding population as a crucial source of cheap labour. Amid the deepening global economic crisis, however, business leaders are increasingly fearful of the rising social tensions generated by the gulf between rich and poor.

Despite an official 2012 economic growth estimate of 6.6 percent, grinding poverty continues to beset over 50 percent of Filipino families, and unemployment remains at 11 percent, one of the highest rates in the Asia-Pacific region. Last year, according to economist Benjamin Diokno, “the October labor survey results show that on a year-to-year basis, from October 2011 to October 2012, 882,000 jobs were lost.”

The Philippines, with more than 103 million people, has the 12th largest population in the world. Metro Manila, the seat of government, ranks as the 5th largest city in the world, with a population over 21 million. According to the National Statistics Office (NSO), the country has the fastest growing population in

Asia—more than a million babies are born annually.

This population expansion is occurring in the grinding social conditions of a backward capitalist economy. Workers and peasant farmers are brutally exploited. Social services, including basic health services, are criminally inadequate. The country's doctor-to-population ratio, for instance, is 1 to 30,000 and is worsening, while the World Health Organization minimum is 1 doctor for every 10,000 people. According to the health department, an average of 15 mothers died in childbirth every day in 2011, up from 11 in 2009.

NSO statistics indicates that 36 percent of births in the Philippines are unplanned. Significantly, unplanned pregnancies are more likely to occur among older women than younger women, with more than 84 percent of such unplanned births for women ages 40-44 being unwanted.

Teen pregnancy in the country, the United Nations Family Planning Association reported, is one of the highest in the Southeast Asian region. Seven out of 10 mothers are teenagers. In the Philippines, there are currently, at least, four million mothers below the age of 19.

The Center of Reproductive Rights reported that an estimated 560,000 abortions every year are being performed in “back-alley clinics”, resulting in 90,000 women suffering abortion complications every year, and an estimated 1,000 dying, due to the “crude and painful methods” used.

The Aquino administration's legislation will do little to ameliorate this social disaster. In fact, the bill was enacted as the government is pressing ahead with the pro-market agenda demanded by big business and foreign investors. The government is reducing public debt by implementing regressive taxes and starving public education and public hospitals of funds; as well as exacerbating the already dire working and social conditions of Filipino workers through casualization and the export of cheap labor.

As it imposes the burden of the economic crisis on working people, the Aquino administration has resorted to various political diversions. Under the banner of “fighting corruption”, Aquino has mounted a witch hunt against his unpopular predecessor and political rival, Gloria Arroyo, and her supporters. Arroyo-appointed Supreme Court Chief Justice Renato Corona

was impeached in early 2012 and Arroyo herself was charged with “sabotaging” the 2004 presidential elections and placed under house arrest in 2011.

The RH bill performs a similar political function. It has helped Aquino to posture as a “progressive” and make a pitch via gender-based politics to better-off layers of the middle class. In turn, the legislation provides some public money for the ‘non-government’ and ‘people organizations’ run by his backers among the Stalinists and petty bourgeois liberals.

None of this does anything to address the terrible situation facing working class women, who do not have the basic right to abortion and freely available contraception, and are forced to rely on the country's limited public health system, even as it is being further starved of funds.



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