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Filipino women struggle for birth control

Malaysian Digest (15.03.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2mrGJHN> - Philippine President Duterte wants more Filipino women to have access to contraceptives, which reportedly will run out in the Philippines by 2020 unless a Supreme Court order is overturned. Ana P. Santos reports.

In January, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte issued an executive order calling for the full implementation of the so-called Reproductive Health Law that would give an estimated 6 million women in need access to birth control. According to government data, an estimated 2 million of those women are poor and require government assistance to access contraceptives.

But unless the Supreme Court lifts its temporary restraining order (TRO) on the registration of contraceptives, the Philippines may run out by 2020.

"Of course, we welcome the president's support, but it is not enough," Romeo Dongeto, head of advocacy group Philippine Legislators' Committee on Population and Development (PLCPD), told DW.

In 2015, the Philippine Supreme Court issued the TRO preventing the Department of Health (DOH) from procuring, selling and distributing the contraceptive implant, Implanon. The order was issued in response to a petition filed by anti-abortion groups that claimed it caused abortions.

When the DOH appealed for the lifting of the order, the Supreme Court rejected the motion and in August 2016 effectively expanded its effect when it put the renewal of licenses on hold for other contraceptives.

"To date, the most serious challenge to the implementation of the Reproductive Health Law is the Supreme Court's temporary restraining order, which would result in contraceptive stock-out in the country if it remains unsolved, affecting more than 13 million Filipino women," said Dongeto.

A presidential executive order cannot overturn the Supreme Court order as the executive and judicial are equal branches of government.

Public health emergency

The imposition of the TRO for more than 18 months has had a drastic effect on reproductive health and government health officials warned that if it remains in force, the increasing number of unplanned pregnancies and maternal deaths could reach the scale of a public health emergency.

"Since 2015, when the TRO was first imposed, we estimate that half a million unintended pregnancies have occurred," Juan Antonio Perez, executive director of the Commission on Population (POPCOM), said at a press conference.

Based on the Philippines' current maternal mortality ratios, POPCOM projects that these pregnancies will result in 1,000 maternal deaths every year.

"That is the equivalent of three jumbo jets of pregnant women dying every year," said Perez. "It would be equivalent to a public health emergency if the Supreme Court does not lift its TRO."

According to a United Nations report, the Philippines topped the regional list of Asian countries with high numbers of teen pregnancies. Globally, teen pregnancy rates have declined over the past two decades, except in the Philippines.

Gradual decrease in supply

Despite efforts by both public and private healthcare providers, the Philippines faces a worsening atmosphere for expectant mothers. According to 2012 government figures, 220 out of 100,000 Filipino women died during their pregnancy, a considerable increase from two years earlier. Health workers attribute that statistic in part to multiple births by one woman, within short periods of time.

At one of Likhaan's clinics in the Tonsuya slum of northern Manila, 19-year old Jessa, tells the story of her mother, who died last year during childbirth.

"It was the 11th time she was pregnant," Jessa says, while wiping back tears. "She went into labor at home, but something went wrong. My father took her to the hospital, but it was too late. The baby died too."

Jessa says she first came to the clinic for prenatal care because she was afraid that she too might die during her own pregnancy. She thinks that birth control could have saved her mother's life.

Opposition continues

When the new law takes effect on March 31st, it will be the culmination of a nearly 16-year long battle, between health advocates and the Catholic Church and their respective sympathizers in the Philippines parliament. The Archdiocese of Manila has been an outspoken critic of the legislation, claiming that it will encourage promiscuity and lead to more out of wedlock pregnancies.

For many of the church's supporters, the fight for moral control of the Philippines isn't over yet. Some Catholic-affiliated groups have even gone as far as to petition the nation's Supreme Court to repeal the law.

Melgar isn't bothered by the continued opposition. She's confident that now that family planning is a legally protected right, it's here to stay.

"There are elements here that will forever ideologically and politically oppose reproductive rights," she says.

For now, Melgar says Likhaan and her clinics will work to educate young women about their rights and also tackle other pressing gender issues, like domestic violence.