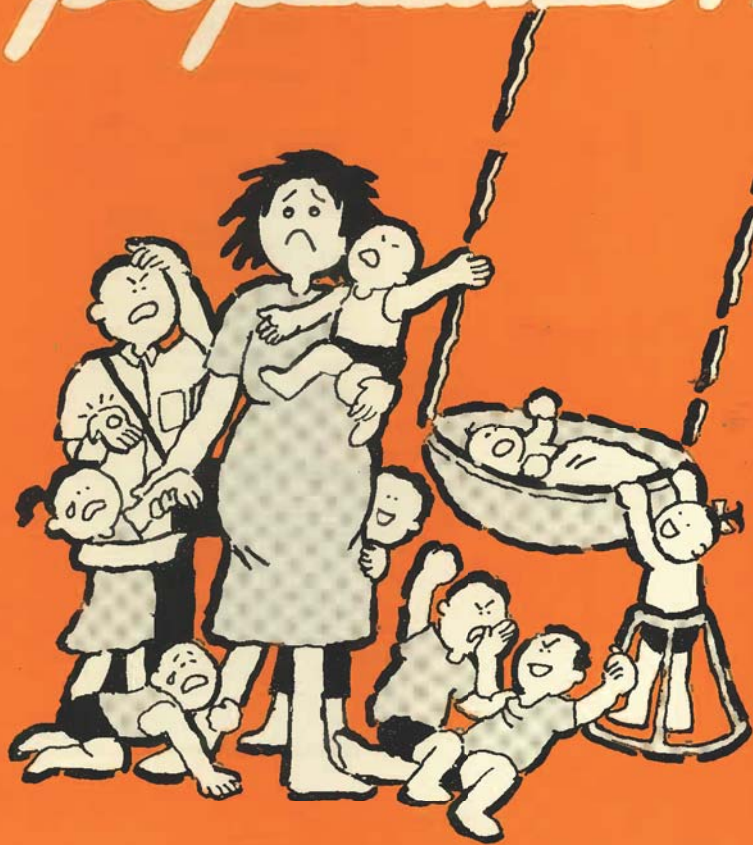


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The Population Debate: But where are the women?

Life used to be much simpler.

"Go and multiply," was sound advice and most girls dreamed of being a mother to a happy brood of six or more. Children were God's blessings. They were handy around the farm and in the house and ensured the continuity of one's bloodline. They could also be counted on to support parents in their old age.

But times have changed and these days, the number of children one should have has become a topic for debate, especially in the Philippines where population grows at a worrying 2.4% a year. Environmentalists have sounded the alarm: the Earth is dying. Entire forests are being cut down to make way to more farms and subdivisions. Too many people, industries and cars have choked the air and fouled up the seas and rivers.

Economist and planners have decried city congestion and the continuing migration to cities. There are too many people and not enough jobs, they point out. Social services cannot grow with the demands of an increasing population. Economic growth has slowed down. Family planning must be pushed harder, they urge.

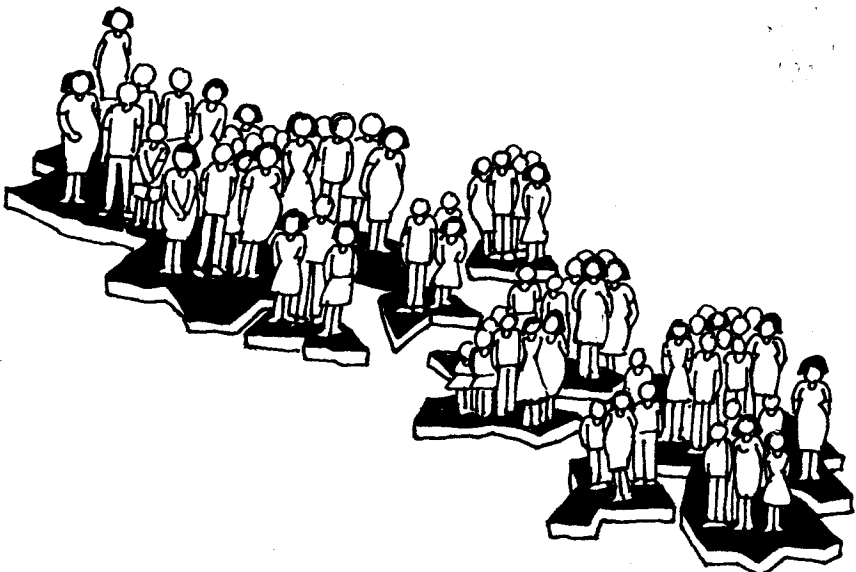
But the idea of curbing population growth through contraception sits hard among some sectors who insist that it is anti-children, anti-family and anti-life, and might lead to promiscuity among women. Only natural family planning methods should be made acceptable, they argue, saying that artificial methods are against nature.

Where do the women stand on this debate? While childbirth is a shared social responsibility between couples and the state to ensure the continuity of the human race, women are in a unique position of being the main instrument for delivering and nurturing this new life.

But the truth is, even women are confused and conflicted about the issue. Surveys have indicated that given a choice, most women favor small families to be able to cope with their double burden of overseeing the household and doing paid work. But they remain wary on several points: Just how safe are contraceptives? What are the risks and side effects involved? Which methods are best for my needs? Are they affordable? Where does one go for services and follow ups? What will my husband say when he finds out? Will my church approve?

The fact is, we have not heard from women enough, probably because they hesitate to speak up for fear of revealing their confusion — or ignorance — about the issue. This primer is an attempt to clear up some of the misinformation on the population debate, by discussing some of its most controversial points. Hopefully, the discussions will enable women to transcend the emotional reef surrounding their silence, so that they can reclaim their right to be heard, at last.

women and population



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Do we really have a population problem?

Yes. The Philippines has a population of at least 62 million, and an estimated growth rate of at least 2.4% a year, the 17th highest in the world. Over 1.3-million Filipinos are born yearly, so that by the year 2019, our population is expected to double.

The growth rate is fueled by the composition of our population, half of which are women. More than half of these women are from 15 to 49 years old and are therefore of childbearing age.

Why should we worry about the population? With AIDS, wars and all kinds of disasters, shouldn't every body count if we are to pull together for the future?

That is true. But many of the disasters we've faced recently are in fact a result of too much pressure by a growing world population on limited resources. The increasing demand for lumber for more homes has led to deforestation that bring on devastating floods, mudslides and even drought because of erosion.

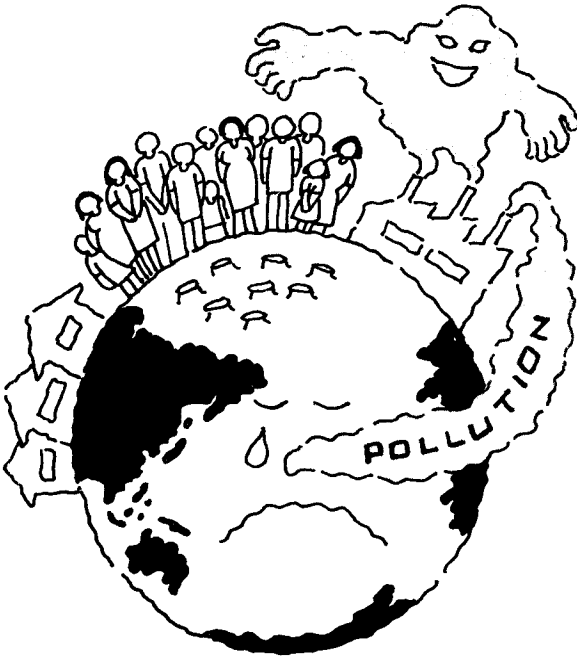
Forests are also being cut to make way for farming, towns, roads, dams. Pollution from too many cars and factories are destroying the atmosphere. Traditional agricultural practices have given way to chemical fertilizers and pesticides that yield more crops but have poisoned the soil. In effect, disasters are nature's way of striking back because a runaway global population has abused it.

But the world's environment problems are caused mainly by a few greedy companies who want to make a fast buck, so why penalize the millions of new babies being born?

That big corporations have been stretching nature's resources cannot be denied. But the lure of the fast buck also infects the average family man who has more mouths to feed than he can afford, and he likewise succumbs. And while family planning is no quick fix to environment problems, we don't have the luxury of time: if we don't do anything now to reverse current trends, it will take a thousand years to restore depleted topsoil, forest cover and climate.

Blaming the population's impact on dwindling resources may be misleading and unfair because it assumes that each person consumes an equal amount of resources. But the truth is, people in developed countries who comprise only 25% of the global population, consume 75% of the world's energy, 79% of all commercial fuels, 85% of all wood and 72% of all steel produced. Shouldn't the developed countries be held accountable for their lifestyle instead of the world heaping the blame on the unbridled population growth in third world nations?

Again, that is true. Just as it is a fact that because they consume more, developed countries pollute more. Paul Shaw of the UN Population Fund calculated that in 1987, rich countries were producing approximately 1.6 tons of waste per capita against the 0.17 tons of wastes per person in poor countries. "This means that the biggest contributors to environmental degradation—measured by waste generation—are countries where population growth has been stable, if not declining for some time."



These are all valid observations. That is why the government's population program must be very careful that it does not solely blame women for its economic problems and expect wonders once population growth has been curbed. Instead, the government must constantly be reminded that the fundamental issue remains development and that nothing can take the place of producing enough and distributing it justly among members of society.

But admittedly, much headway can be gained if the government's limited drive and resources were focused on long-term economic projects and not solely on providing for the immediate needs of an ever increasing number of people.

Population control cannot solve hunger and poverty, the main causes of which are the global economic structure and the unequal distribution of resources. If food resources were fairly distributed, there would be enough for every living person, don't you agree?

Yes, ideally. But that has been a problem since the start of time and there doesn't seem to be a solution in sight. Perhaps none in the next century or so. In the meantime, while our leaders strive to arrive at dividing the world's resources more equitably, do we allow the population to continue its runaway growth knowing we can easily do something about it?

There seems to be racist overtones to the population debate. For instance, some people contend that developed countries have imposed a population target on the third world because they fear that overpopulation from these poor countries could spill over to their own countries, and that migrants might eventually take over their economies.

That is an absurd premise. Despite their increasing numbers, overseas contract workers (OCWs) remain very much abused in developed countries. Because OCWs know that so many out there are waiting to take over their slot, they are desperate and would do most anything to keep their jobs. As a result, they remain cheap and docile labor often abused by their employers. This argument against population growth in poor nations is as absurd as that forwarded by George Winternitz of Families for Family, who urged Filipinos to keep up their population levels. With the decline of the population in the West, Winternitz said, we can ship out Filipino families who can then repopulate the world (!) **

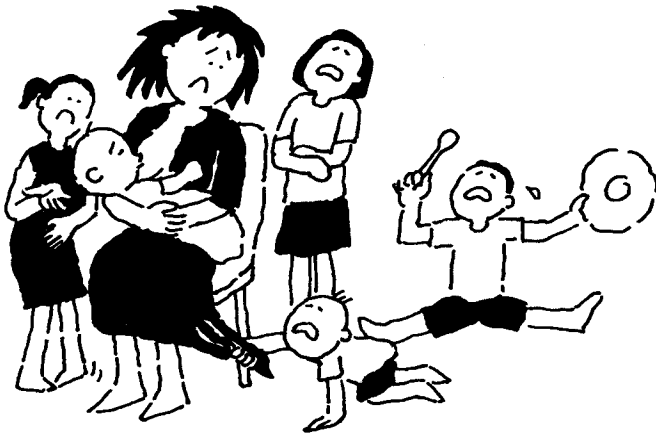
Isn't population control anti-family in that it seeks to limit the spontaneous expression of love between couples and between parents and their children?

On the contrary, by helping couples cope with their responsibility as parents, family planning ultimately strengthens the Filipino family. The severe economic pressures of recent years have seen many families fractured by the need to send family members to jobs abroad so all the children can go to school and be provided with their basic needs. Today, a lot of Filipino families are headed by a single parent while countless homes have been broken by the prolonged absence of one or both parents.

Limiting the number of children to that which a couple can safely manage is a better assurance of family well-being. There is less strain on family income and parents and children would have more time for each other instead of constantly being harassed by the need to earn more to make ends meet. Such families are in a better position to contribute more to society.

Isn't contraception anti-children?

No, and in fact it may be one way to ensure the best care for children. UNICEF notes that the main cause of death among children under five is the birth of another sibling: the new baby takes the toddler's place in the mother's breast and he/she is left to survive on poor diet and unclean water because the mother's time is spent mostly on the new baby. Also, getting pregnant too often weakens a mother's health and affects the health of her baby who will most probably be born early, small and underweight.



But why should women be concerned about population growth when both men and women share the responsibility of planning the number of children they'd have?

That is true. And in fact, the government's population campaign in recent years has targetted men as well. But family planning is first and foremost a right of women. Unless women have a real choice with regards to deciding how many children to have and when, their ability to enjoy other rights (to health, education, employment, etc), will be inhibited.

Women should especially be concerned about the issue because they bear the extra burden that a rapidly growing population brings with it. Having too many children without proper spacing affects her health and that of her child. It takes about two years for a woman's body to fully recover after a pregnancy.



Caring for too many children cuts into the amount and quality of childcare that a mother can give. This is particularly harrowing for many women who, because of economic exigencies, have had to work a double day—in the office or factory, and at home.

As bearers and rearers of children, women are caught in a cycle of pregnancies, childbirths, lactation, malnutrition, infection, fatigue and emotional

stress due to double-burdened work. They suffer from many conditions of ill health connected with being women, with specific health needs and problems related to reproduction.

Getting pregnant too often also exposes women to the complications of childbirth. About 2000 Filipino women die yearly (at least five women a day) due to causes related to or aggravated by pregnancy or childbirth.

But with modern medicine and rapid advances in medical science, high-risk pregnancy should no longer be a problem among women.

That is true. Deaths of women due to pregnancy, labor and puerperium (maternal mortality) have been declining considerably. Starting from the postwar period to the mid-80s, the maternal mortality rate has declined by 78 percent. Despite this marked reduction, the country's present level of mortality is still much higher compared to developed

countries. The risk of dying for a pregnant Filipino woman is still 100 times more than for her counterpart in developed countries.* And this may partly be because only 62% of around 1.5 million Filipino women who get pregnant every year are attended to by qualified medical practitioners (Parlcon Bulletin).

Aren't the health and safety of third world women also at risk because runaway population has been used to justify the marketing of banned contraceptives in third world countries by the multi-billion dollar pharmaceutical industry?

That is why there is a need for more information and public discussion on contraceptives, so that women can be made aware of contraceptive choices available to them and the risks involved with some choices. There is also need for the government's health department to be very vigilant in monitoring the local sale and use of methods banned abroad. The solution to such fears lie not in disallowing the use of contraceptives, but rather in making sure that all information—good or adverse—are freely disseminated and discussed among users and marketers.

How does the government know that Filipino women want less children these days? Filipino families have always been large.

A 1987 study revealed that 63 percent of Filipino urban poor women of reproductive age no longer want additional children. Of those pregnant during the survey, 41% admitted that their pregnancy was unwanted. This could mean that out of 1.4 million babies born yearly, 574,000 are unwanted. This number falls within the estimated 155,000 to 750,000 induced abortions per year estimated by Dr. Martin dela Rosa in a paper read at the recent WHO conference on Safe Motherhood held in Manila. *

Another Department of Health-Family Planning situationer cites that 62% of women eligible for family planning did not desire to be pregnant, and 2/5 did not plan their last or current pregnancies. It also stated that half of mothers surveyed tended to favor having only two to three children.*

Why should we seek to limit our children, when they are an extra pair of hands, a comfort and a much-needed resource in one's old age?

Of course they are. But children should not only be seen for their utility. People, parents especially, must be educated now to stop regarding children as mere insurance for old age or mere tools for economic production for the present. Nothing can be more dehumanizing than to be treated as mere object by anyone. Too, children have rights and deserve the best care that parents and society can give them, not because they are expected to reciprocate this care but mainly because they are loved and wanted.

But children are God's blessings and large families have traditionally been a preference among the clannish Filipino.

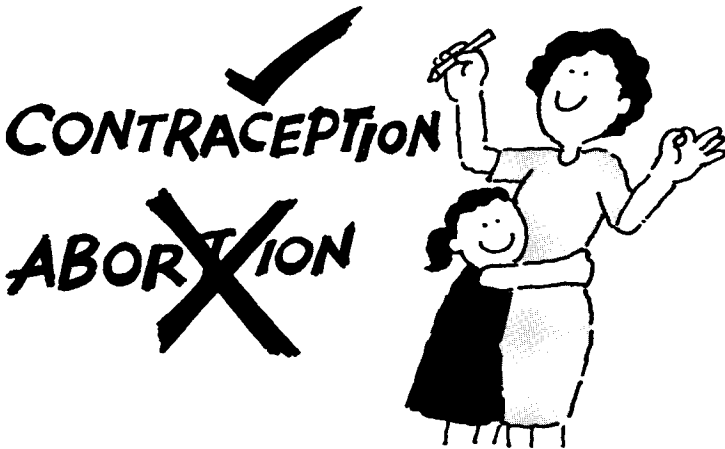
The preference for large families was originally meant to ensure the survival of some children and especially one's bloodline. We inherited this value from the past when the world was mostly rural and lacking in technological tools and medical care so a high death rate was offset by a high birth rate.

But the social and economic situation of the country and the world has changed especially in the last 100 years. The average life span now is 60 years, and with technological innovations, we don't need as many hands for a household to function.

Likewise, the Filipino tradition of having large families should be reexamined in the face of changing realities. With both parents employed outside the home out of economic necessity, there is simply a very limited amount of time, energy and money to take care of a large brood. Extended families, this network of relatives, in-laws and neighbors who used to double as caregivers to one's children and even the "yaya" are fast disappearing from the scene. This is because most families are city migrants who've left their informal support system back in the countryside, while most young girls prefer to work in factories than take care of babies. With such factors to consider, most parents have chosen to limit the number of their children.

Wouldn't family planning, more specifically contraception, lead to abortion?

On the contrary. Contraception prevents abortion. One consequence of the failure of a woman to prevent an unwanted pregnancy is induced abortion. A study of maternal deaths at the Philippine General Hospital showed that 16% of maternal deaths were due from induced abortion, a waste, cited the authors since these deaths could have been prevented by contraception.*



A UN Report in 1986 said that in Poland, when contraceptives were introduced, the incidence of abortion decreased. This is just logical because contraceptives either suppress ovulation or prevent the meeting of the egg and sperm. As such, there is no conception and therefore, no human life to abort.

But some sectors have labelled contraception and sterilization as abortion, and contend that there are NGOs and family planning clinics which are in fact abortion clinics.

Abortion is illegal in the Philippines and as such, is not part of the government's family planning program. If people know of family planning clinics being used for such a purpose, their duty is to report these criminals so

that they can be punished. But to accuse NGOs, foreign funding groups and legal clinics of being abortionists without proof is unfair, to say the least.

Some groups contend that lumping contraception with abortion is a tactic meant to smear this option with the stigma that many believe is attached to abortion. Such irresponsible claims therefore criminalize what are perfectly legal choices.

Wouldn't the use of contraception encourage promiscuity since women are now assured that their illicit liaisons won't lead to pregnancy?

That is too simplistic. There are many factors involved in promiscuity: dysfunctional families, industrialization and urbanization, anonymity in society, mass media and the hedonist values they project, materialistic values, etc. Instead of encouraging sexual irresponsibility, contraceptive use trains a woman to exercise responsibility at the most immediate personal level—her body.

What about a senator's claims that "when contraceptives fail, it will teach the young how to kill unborn babies. In the end, it will promote the spread of AIDS, other venereal diseases, unwanted teenage pregnancies, abortion, suicide and other evils."

Using contraceptives is in fact an indication that couples are well aware of the consequence of their action, are acting responsibly and are making conscious choices in their life. How can they resort to abortion when conception by using contraception has been avoided in the first place? As for AIDS and other venereal diseases, they are spread because of ignorance and the lack of protective barriers—like condoms and spermicides, and indiscriminate sexual coupling. Unwanted teenage pregnancies and abortion may likewise result from ignorance and not using contraceptives. Suicide and "other evils" may be the end result of guilt feelings, dejection or low self-esteem arising from unwanted pregnancies or abortion. Now these are twin "evils" that contraceptives may be able to prevent.

women and population

When people decide who will live and who won't based on their own standards of what should be a perfect world, isn't that comparable to euthanasia (mercy killing) or even genocide?

The way some people describe it, "the contraceptive mentality" would lower our regard for all human life so that soon, we'd have no compunction about killing the aged, the hopelessly ill, or the seriously handicapped. But many couples decide on contraception precisely because they want to enhance the quality of life of the children they choose to have. And doesn't that in fact raise the value they place on human life and not cheapen it?*

But isn't such reasoning selfish and anti-children?

"Why punish the children of the future for the mistakes of today?" has often been used by some sectors in attacking family planning. But in fact, we are punishing the children of today by allowing approximately 73,000 children under the age of five and 44,000 babies under one to die every year. Pushed by poverty and their parents' need to sustain so many children, these kids are often subjected to early labor in the streets or even prostitution. The luckier ones suffer malnutrition and stunted physical and mental growth.



So couples who limit the number of their children are not necessarily selfish beings who think only of their worry-free pleasures. They are in fact only being fair and realistic, knowing full well that it takes time, physical care, food, shelter and money—all limited resources—to bring out the best in the children of today and of the future. The really selfish couples are those who, to quote one senator, “have sex with anyone, anytime, anywhere” without regard for the consequences, such as the creation of an unwanted child who does not deserve the fate such irresponsible behavior creates.**

What is the government’s stand on the population issue?

According to President Fidel Ramos, the government is leaving it up to married couples to decide whether or not to use contraceptives and to choose which contraceptive method to use.

What is the government’s official population policy?

The Philippine Family Planning Program (PFPP) created by Executive Order 119 identifies family planning as a priority health issue. The Program is under the supervision of the Health department in collaboration with local government units, other government agencies, non-government organizations as well as private and commercial sectors.

The PFPP is based on three policies:

- the improvement of family welfare with main focus on women’s health, safe motherhood, and child survival;
- freedom of choice (or respect of the couple’s right to decide how many children they want and when to have them based on their health, moral convictions and religious, cultural or social beliefs), and
- the promotion of family solidarity and responsible parenthood.

How is this policy being carried out?

Because the policy is not coercive and is meant to encourage couples to freely choose and decide which method to use based on their needs, the Health

NATURAL

- ABSTINENCE
- BILLINGS
(MUCUS
METHOD)
- RHYTHM



ARTIFICIAL

- PILLS
- CONDOM
- IUD
- VASECTOMY
- TUBAL
LIGATION

department is advocating the “cafeteria approach” to family planning. This means presenting couples the full array of contraceptive technologies available—from the natural methods such as abstinence, the Billings or mucus method and the rhythm or calendar method, to artificial ones like the pill, condom, IUD, ligation, vasectomy, etc.

What is the public’s assurance that the policy is not coercive?

Unlike in the Marcos years, couples today are no longer given material incentives to undergo ligation or vasectomy. Health workers too are not given quotas of family planning receptors as a gauge of their effectivity. Another assurance is the Constitution which guarantees freedom of choice.

Of course it wouldn’t hurt to constantly monitor public health clinics and health workers to make sure that they adhere to President Ramos’s public commitment as quoted in newspapers: “The philosophy of the government,” FVR said, “is to let the couples decide.”

Where does the government get its funds for its population program? Is public money being used for a project that may in fact be contrary to the dictates of one's conscience?

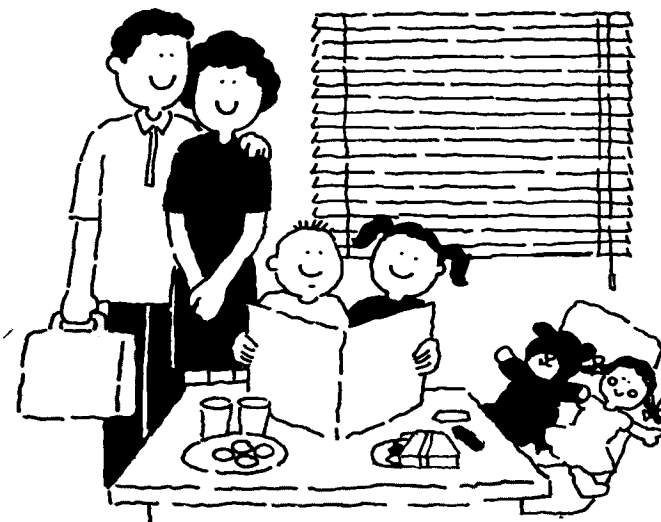
The government has been relying mainly on external funds for its family planning projects. The percentage of the national budget for family planning programs has declined from 0.7% in the 70s to 0.3% on the average in the 80s.

Meanwhile, from 1973 to 1988, the United States Assistance for International Development (USAID) accounted for 34.7% of the funds, with the World Bank shouldering 8.7%, and the UNFPA 6.5%.

But again, isn't childbearing an issue that couples must settle between themselves? Why should the government, or even the Church for that matter, meddle?

Because childbearing is also a social function, humankind's unique way of perpetuating itself. Since government has most of the resources and has a stake in ensuring that future generations will be of good physical, mental and emotional health, its duty is to provide today's children with

the best health care, adequate food and shelter, clean water, formal education, etc. With a manageable rate of population growth, the country is more assured of healthy, well-cared for children who are our future leaders and



citizens. Children are definitely a national investment and therefore the government's responsibility. Healthy and fulfilled families likewise mean a rich human resource for national development.

But what right does the government have in limiting the number of children that a couple should have?

You're right. Government has no right to do so, as this would violate one's human right. According to the UN Population Fund in its 1993 State of the World Population report: "The right of individuals and couples freely and responsibly to decide the number and spacing of their children and to have the information, education and means to do so was first recognized as a human right in 1968 and over the past two decades, has attained almost universal acceptance."

The Philippine government is also a signatory to international treaties, like the UN Declaration on Human Rights and the UN Conference on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which specifically recognizes the rights of women to decide whether and when to have a child. Our Constitution itself guarantees the right of every couple to found a family—which presumes the right to determine just how many, or how few, children they want to have.**

If women are really inclined to reduce the number of their children, why must the government wage an all-out campaign to convince them to use contraceptives?

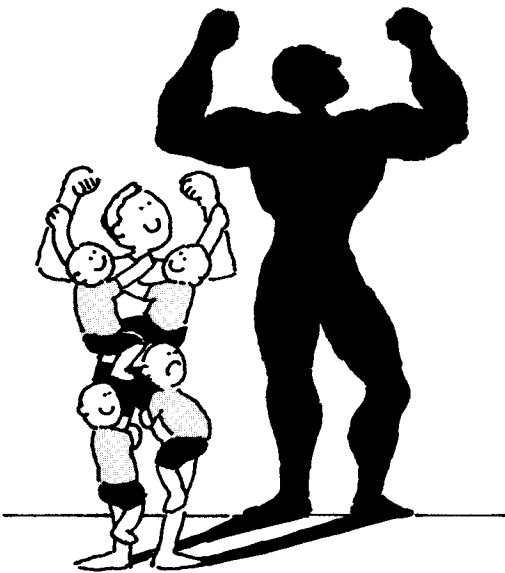
Because using contraceptives to reduce the number of one's children remains a complicated issue for most women, and the process of having to decide for themselves is often fraught with guilt feelings, doubts due to social conditioning, cultural pressures, and so on. In the end, some women leave everything up to fate and end up with unwanted pregnancies, when the right information and crucial reassurance would have made a difference.

What are some of the pressures that prevent women from readily using contraceptives?

Here are some of them:

- Since contraceptive use has been associated with prostitution and infidelity, some women can't use contraceptives without their husbands' permission because the men fear that its use would lead to their wife's promiscuity.
- Previous economic difficulties have resulted in health care cuts, so that women's access to family planning services have also been curtailed. As a result, birth control has become an unaffordable luxury for most families.
- The neglect of the government's family planning program during the previous administration has also limited the choice and availability of contraceptives offered by public clinics. The lack of health personnel to serve needy clients and the maldistribution of health centers and workers has likewise curtailed women's access to such health services. When

Health Sec. Juan Flavier took office in 1992, the number of government population control workers has dwindled from 10,000 during the Marcos years to about 200.



- The dominant macho culture that defines maleness based on the number of children, especially male children, one has, prevent women from fully exercising their right to decide if, when, and how many children to have.
- The Catholic Church's opposition to artificial contraception has induced guilt feelings in many women

who feel they are sinning when they use methods other than those endorsed by the Bishops.

What is the Catholic Church's stand on family planning?

Bishop Teodoro Bacani in his book, "The Church and Birth Control" says that the Philippine bishops "are not all averse to the deceleration of our population growth rate."

What they reject, though, is "any determination or imposition by the State on the number of children a couple may have."

The Church also rejects contraception as a method because it interferes with the "procreative potential of the conjugal act," or put simply, with God's creation.

But Bacani himself admits that there are exceptions to the dominant teachings of the Church on contraception and the use of condoms: when a woman is coerced by an intoxicated husband, it would be "morally allowable" for her to use contraceptives.

The Church also accepts the existence of a population problem and sees that rapid population growth contributes to the country's underdevelopment, but holds that a large population is more symptomatic, than a cause, of poverty.

What family planning methods are acceptable to the Catholic Church?

Only so-called natural family planning (NFP) methods are considered moral by the Church. These would be celibacy, abstinence, the Billings or mucus method, and rhythm or the calendar method which is sometimes used in conjunction with the basal temperature method.

What are the other methods?

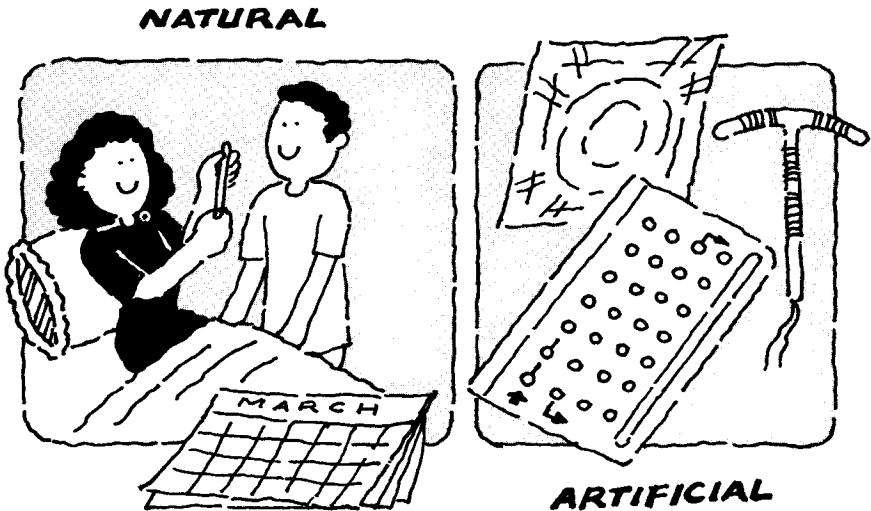
Other than natural family planning methods, there are the artificial methods like the pill, the intrauterine device or IUD, the condom, diaphragm,

spermicides, tubal ligation, vasectomy, injectibles, etc. *(Please see enclosed leaflets on different family planning methods for details on their use, their effectiveness and risks involved).*

Is there any difference between natural and artificial methods of family planning?

Basically, natural family planning methods like the Billings and rhythm involve the avoidance of sexual contact during those days when a woman is deemed to be fertile or unsafe. Using her menstrual period, the sudden jump in body temperature within a month and the consistency and amount of her vaginal mucus, a woman can determine whether she has just ovulated and is therefore fertile.

Artificial methods usually involve devices (condoms, creams, foam, etc.) that act as a barrier to prevent the meeting of egg and sperm during sexual contact. Ligation and vasectomy on the other hand, involve permanently cutting off the passage way of either the ova or the sperms so that again, eggs and sperms don't meet and conception is avoided.



According to the Church position, creating such artificial barriers or “maneuvers” are immoral because they tamper with natural processes. Other quarters however point out that in both natural and artificial methods, the intention is the same: that is, the prevention of a new life. Only the method differs—natural family planning involves the manipulation of time (when a woman is safe or fertile), while artificial methods manipulate space (where barriers should be placed). Thus, the difference is not so much moral as it is technical, some observers note.

Can't the government also promote NFP to head off any conflict with the Church?

But the government does promote NFP along with artificial means of conception. It will not however limit couples only to NFP because the government believes in allowing couples as many choices as possible based on their needs, lifestyle, and their knowledge of the risks involved in each method.

The government's position is based on studies which show that NFP methods may be too messy, inconvenient or ineffective for most women. The methods only work for those with regular menstrual periods and those with cooperative husbands.

Other advocates of artificial means of contraception also point out that NFP may be anti-woman because it prevents woman from having sex at a time when she can enjoy it most.

Is there no way to reconcile the Church position with that of the government?

The government has in fact made some initiatives in this area. President Ramos has been quoted as offering government support to open up NFP clinics to be staffed and run by the Church or church organizations. Health Secretary Juan Flavier meanwhile assured Catholic health workers of their jobs even if they refuse to promote artificial methods of family planning. Flavier said these health workers can be trained to be experts on NFP which they can then push

to couples receptive to the method. Such open-mindedness should lead to some settlement between Church and state soon enough. Let's just wait and see.

***How do I go about availing myself of family planning services?
How do I know which method is best for me?***

You (and hopefully, your partner) can go to the nearest family planning clinic in your area and consult its health workers. An interview to find out details about your monthly period, your medical history, lifestyle, budget, personality and other similar information can help them determine which method will work best for you and your partner. You can also ask for brochures and other printed materials that you can take home and discuss with your husband or partner so that his cooperation and your mutual satisfaction are assured. Do not hesitate to ask government health workers for follow up assistance should questions arise in your choice.

Remember, you have a right to a safe, affordable, accessible and effective family planning method and to complete information on their relative advantages, health risks and drawbacks, before you make your decision. *(For more information on natural and artificial family planning methods, please refer to enclosed pamphlets).*

*(Sources: Francisco, Josefa S. "Women's Reprod. Health Care: Research Notes. Inst. for Social Studies and Action (ISSA), 1989; Saniel, Ofelia P. and Baltazar, Jane C. m.d. "The Health Status of Fil. Women Today and Risks to their Reproductive Health," ISSA, 1989; Tadiar, Florence Macagba, "Population and Reproductive Rights," UP Center for Women's Studies, 1990., Aldaba Lim, PARLCON bulletin **Rina J. David's "At large" columns, Phil. Daily Inquirer, 1990-1993)*

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