

## FILIPINO VALUES IN PHILIPPINE DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSFORMATION

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### INTRODUCTION

Most people think demography is just mathematics in disguise – a form of dry social accounting that tallies numbers of people in a given place and time from national censuses and surveys. However, once exposed to the subject, many change their minds and come to appreciate the profound impact demographic forces have on societies. Many do so only after recognition that it is likewise fascinating because it deals with many personal elements of a woman's and a man's life. For the same reason, it is a discipline both controversial and misunderstood.

It is controversial because in essence, it deals with the most intimate elements in one's life: sexuality, reproduction, geographic mobility, life span, mortality among others. All these are highly emotional events imbued with joy, pleasure, pain and anxiety.

It is often misunderstood because it is at one and the same time a discipline, an interdiscipline and a subdiscipline. It is clearly a discipline because it has its own body of concepts, techniques, journals and professional associations. On the other hand, it is also very much an interdisciplinary field because it draws its subject matter and methods from many disciplines including sociology, economics, biology, geography, history and the health sciences. And still, it is considered a subdiscipline within some of the major disciplines. In most universities, demography programs are housed within the sociology department, perhaps because population phenomena have been linked to social causes and consequences for so long now.

Wherever the place of demography in the social sciences the fact is there are demographic events that raise significant questions requiring careful examination. Indeed, if people are not interested in these demographic questions, they are not interested in themselves. The urgency of dealing with the country's demographic phenomena has never been more true than during the past half-century, a period of unprecedented social and demographic change.

In line with the theme of this annual meeting, allow me to comb through some major issues and processes in social transformation as they relate to what I prefer to call social demography. At this instance, I am convinced there are at least two pertinent issues in the field of population studies which have significant implications for social transformation. The first is the Filipino woman's status as it relates to reproduction and woman's reproductive health. The second is adolescent sexuality as it pertains to the youth's overall development.

Of all the things women are supposed to be, being a mother comes first. Here, the connection with nature is indubitable: only women can become mothers. As such, women's reproductivity is as powerful a cultural myth as their perceived non-productivity. Becoming and being a mother is held out as the primary feminine goal in the 1990s, as it was in the 1920s or in the 1850s. This brings us to concerns about women's status, reproduction and maternal health.

Maternal mortality has recently become another indicator of disadvantage within and between the developing and developed countries. Over 99 per cent of the estimated 500,000 maternal deaths that occur annually take place in developing countries, with ratios ranging from 760 per 100,000 live births in West Africa to 120 in East Asia (WHO, 1988). By definition, a maternal death is defined as the death of a woman while pregnant or within 42 days of a termination of pregnancy, from any cause related to or aggravated by the pregnancy or its management but not from accidental or incidental causes (WHO, 1977). What is unfortunate is that most maternal deaths could have been prevented if only these women had access to reproductive health information and services.

Vigorous efforts to advance women's social and economic position could probably guarantee for them the right to reproductive health. Even when the commitment to women's overall equality seems firmly entrenched, at least in the language of women and development plans, the question of control over reproduction remains a highly explosive issue.

Questions are many. So are the arguments. The more important questions are embodied in the central problem of reconciling individual human rights with government actions to influence population trends. More crucial is the question of who, between husband and wife, is to determine, freely and responsibly, the number and spacing of children. Here, the Filipina is caught in a tension between local customs and norms and individual preferences. One has to recognize the fact that once reproductive health is understood to involve more than just the physiological workings of a woman's womb, men have the power to shape the world in which women live.

When all the rhetoric is done with, the true key to improving women's reproductive health is AUTONOMY. This means enabling women to assume control over their reproductive lives by entrusting to them the authority to decide when to have a child and how many to have. Women should not merely subscribe to men's desires and dictates. Perhaps, the commitment to women's autonomy – giving them ability to decide about reproduction based on access to adequate information and

appropriate services and on emancipation from a husband-oriented decision-making process – is the value that can bridge cultural divides and ideological borders. In a society where the norm is that women are subject to men who are perceived as the AUTHORITY FIGURE, most Filipino women in reality have no opportunity for real individual choice.

Given the normative structures surrounding decisions about reproduction that promote over-dependence, if not a false sense of resignation, to authority figures such as the PADRE DE FAMILIA, a commitment to woman's autonomy can greatly increase control over their lives and can inspire self-discovery. This is an essential ingredient if women are to contribute to socially desirable development directions and goals such as improved maternal and child health. Ultimately, the problem of too rapid a population growth can be modified by an awakening of Filipino women, sustained by a favorable response and support to a basic value modification by Filipino men.

One cannot talk about women and development in the Philippines if Filipino women are still obsessed with "good" and "attractive" physical appearance to please men as a major health concern (Baltazar, 1992). Neither would it be to the credit of women and development advocates if women are exposed to the risk of HIV infection just because of high levels of non-monogamous sexual contact and resistance by Filipino males to use protective devices for safe sex. This situation is even worse among commercial sex workers who are "unable to bargain for safe sex with their partners and allow the customers to determine how the services will be rendered" (Dominguez et al., 1992). For as long as women view the locus of control over their lives as residing outside of themselves, low self-esteem could impair the much needed awakening of women necessary for improved maternal and child health. Consequently, reduced probabilities of infant and child deaths may not be forthcoming. Then it becomes rational to have a large family size to ensure replacement of deceased children. How then can our demographic transformation from a regime of high fertility to a regime of low fertility proceed?

### **Adolescent Sexuality and Development of the Youth**

That lifelong values and habits are developed during the formative years of adolescence is incontestable. As such, the adolescent period in one's life is distinct from other life cycle stages and leaves much of its character in later years.

Adolescence is said to be the process through which an individual makes the transition from childhood to adulthood. Some demographic changes in the country -- like increased rural to urban migration coupled with sweeping social changes brought about by modernization such as longer stay in school – have resulted in increased incidence of early sexual activity among the adolescents aged 10 – 24 years. While the transition into sexual activity is a natural transition made by nearly all humans, it is the timing and the circumstances surrounding the transition which have significant implications for the welfare of the young adolescents.

Childbearing by women below 20, i.e., adolescent fertility, is not a new phenomenon in world history. What is new in the past decade or so is the growing recognition of, and concern over, the adverse health, social, economic and demographic effects of adolescent fertility. Given the current stock of adolescent population estimated to be at least a third of the total population in 1990 and a relatively high fertility rate among women in the reproductive ages, adolescent fertility needs to be addressed to cushion its impact on population growth. Even if fertility rates drop, the sheer numbers of adolescent women mean a continued impact on population growth. Cushioning the demographic as well as social and economic impacts of adolescent fertility entails that adolescents, boys and girls, are ensured adequate education, including family life and sex education, to instill in them positive and healthy attitudes toward sexuality.

Today's youth encounter social, technological and demographic changes that have in recent years weakened family and social structures required for the development of positive attitudes toward sexuality. Such attitudes are necessary where the objective is to reduce early pregnancies. There seems to be a dual character in the average Filipino male who demands a virgin for a wife while wanting to "deflower" a girl when given the chance. In a survey of adolescents aged 10-24 in 1982, data showed early ages at first premarital sex, ranging from 13 to 17 years (Raymundo, 1982).

It used to be that boys were warned by parents against taking advantage of girls because they might be drawn into an unwanted marriage. Girls on the other hand, were often likened to plates or mirrors, which once "broken", cannot be put together again. But in a fast changing society, the Filipino parent-child dyad has been loosened by many existing alternative non-kin social allies in an open community. Of significance to the adolescent is the peer group or the "barkada" which could effectively erode the "close family ties." Where the peer group acts as confidant on personal experiences such as first sexual encounter, one can expect inadequate and inaccurate information on sexuality and reproductive behavior and its consequences on the individual and the general society.

Pregnancy and childbirth are likely to interrupt if not totally disrupt educational and career opportunities. Whatever the case, adolescent fertility spells some form of socioeconomic cutbacks in the future. Early pregnancies likewise have been implicated in a host of other social problems ranging from increasing school drop-out rates, rising numbers of households headed by single women, persistent poverty and one that is transmitted across generations.

The prominence of unwanted pregnancies as leading to abortion certainly merits attention. The struggle between conformity to cultural traditions of refraining from sexual activity outside marriage and escaping the strong social stigma of being an unwed mother and exposure to health risks is indeed reflected by Abad and Sandoval (1990). Perhaps unknown to the Filipino public, abortion ranks as the third highest among the 10 leading causes of hospital admissions in the Philippines: about 8.2 per cent of abortion cases are admitted in government hospitals and that

one out of every four (24 per cent) maternal deaths in the Philippines is attributable to induced abortion.

With an eye to the future, let us assess what values need to be strengthened among adolescents, in battling the ill consequences of early and unplanned adolescent pregnancies. This could forestall what could be a generation of a "reproductive underclass" comprised of disadvantaged teen mothers.

We have a deeply ingrained attitude reflecting basically a risk-taking behavior which at its negative aspect is a kind of blind faith in fate. To my mind, this *bahala na* attitude is an escape from decision-making and planning for the future. Some sociologists have alluded to it as the principal factor for the absence or lack of social responsibility and a paralysis of collective action for the common good. This, in fact, could be the reason for the apparent inability of the Filipino to transcend a certain brand of preoccupation with the self. Thus we almost always feel the powerful presence of a *kanya-kanya* mentality.

Nothing is more appropriate than the *bahala na* attitude which holds two population subgroups – i.e., the women of reproductive ages and the young adolescents – together at a demographic crossroad: planned or fate-driven pregnancies? Who could be more predisposed to this risk-taking behavior than the young adolescent – bombarded by media's effective tools for promoting acceptability of modern values such as sex before marriage? Who could be more resigned to fate about having as many children as God allows, not recognizing that the marital sexual act is not necessarily there for procreation alone than the typical submissive Filipino housewife?

## CONCLUSION

No social transformation is without a parallel demographic revolution in fertility norms. Once again we are confronted with the difficulty of slowing population growth quickly under the present trying circumstances. Attempting to decelerate population growth when living standards are deteriorating is one of the most politically complex undertakings our government must face. What we should strive for is a value reformulation. At the heart of this value reformulation is the development of a sense of collectivity above and beyond the self. Amidst such a demographic emergency, one can shift the focus of childbearing decisions. Couples should be made to understand the need to go beyond the narrow confines of self-interest. This means shifting concerns from how many children they would have who could support them in their old age to how the size of their family would affect the world in which their children would live. This should enable us to grapple with a social reality that there are indeed external costs to every individual action. Too much of such costs can endanger the common good and hamper the much needed demographic transformation for the country's overall development.

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### **SYMPOSIUM III**

**Symposium Title :** Filipino Values in Philippine Demographic Transformation  
**Moderator :** National Scientist Carmen C. Velasquez  
**Rapporteur :** Academician Carmen Ll. Intengan  
**Speaker :** Dr. Aurora E. Perez

### **SUMMARY/HIGHLIGHTS OF DISCUSSION**

The discussion highlighted the need for more rights of women in their role as mother.

Parenthood is a dual responsibility of both father and mother.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Men should be included in the formulation of population programs.

There is a need to reformulate demographic values especially as they affect the health of mothers.

