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ZENIA G. MOSTOLES, Ed.D., CESO V
Schools Division Superintendent
Schools Division of Bulacan

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HUMAN RIGHTS ADVISORY
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**ADOLESCENCE PREGNANCY AS AN EMERGENCY SITUATION
DURING THE PANDEMIC**

INTRODUCTION

The Commission on Human Rights (CHR) as the National Human Rights Institution of our country is mandated to protect and promote the rights of every individual-- including the younger sector-- in any situation and event. Inspired by the Scandinavian Ombudsman in the promotion and protection of children's rights, subject to the eventual passage of the law for the separate office of the children's ombudsman¹, the CHR declared itself, in the *interim*, as Ombudsman for Children.

Similarly, the CHR, as a Child Ombud, has promoted and emphasized its role in dealing with children's rights through in-depth collaborative work and continuing partnership with civil organizations, other stakeholders and duty bearers. Moreover, CHR does not only perform its investigative powers, but also monitors the government's compliance on international treaties and obligations and the domestic laws as well.

On this basis, the CHR functions as a human rights lens at the same time establishing and proving its role in the community in preserving and protecting the rights of every Filipino, in every sector especially the younger generations.

THE DATA

The country's population remarkably grew at a total of 110,543,706 or 1.41% of the world population.² According to Commission on Population and Development, the Philippines' population will continue to grow at a projected number of 110,881,756 next year.³ With the number of women in reproductive ages between 19 and 49, The PoPCom Chief Juan Antonio Perez III, MD has expressed his concerns over the continuous increase of the population during his interview with ABS-CBN's Teleradyo.⁴ Such projection is expected according to Chief Perez, that "although at a slower pace," the country's population will drive the population momentum because of the increased proportion of women who are in their childbearing age and state.⁵

¹ Reif, Linda C. "The Ombudsman for Children: Human Rights Protection and Promotion. In: The Ombudsman, Good Governance and the International Human Rights System. International Studies in Human Rights, vol 79." https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-5932-8_9

² Philippines Population (LIVE). Worldometer. Accessed March 01, 2021. <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/philippines-population/>

³ "POPCOM: Number of Filipinos in 2021 Estimated at 110.8 Million, Sizes of Families Trending Lower at 4 Members." Accessed March 4, 2021. <https://popcom.gov.ph/?p=1470>

⁴ Cathrine Gonzales, "PopCom clarifies: Teen pregnancy rate much worse," Sept 19, 2020, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1337228/popcom-clarifies-teen-pregnancy-rate-much-worse>

⁵ Ibid, POPCom.

In consideration with the 2013 results from the Philippine Statistics Agency's census whereby it reported that 1 in 10 young Filipino women aged 15-19 has begun child bearing, while 8% are already mother and another 2% are pregnant with their first child.⁶ Chief Perez has categorized teen pregnancy as a "national social emergency" because of the projected 64,000 minors (18 years old and below) giving birth every year.⁷

THE SITUATIONER

Pregnancy at the early age, whether intentional or unintentional, yields negative results for the teenage mother, the child, family members and the community. Some of the notable problems encountered relate to health issues, sexually transmitted diseases, unsafe abortion and depression.

There are various factors that contributed to teen-age pregnancy. Some are under pressure to marry and bear children early, while some struggle to obtain educational and employment prospects. Others, however, do not have access to information and support on reproductive health thereby, unknowing how to avoid a pregnancy or their inability to obtain access to contraceptives.

Moreover, with the effect of 2020 lockdown due to COVID 19 pandemic, the public has been limited to health care and family planning services. Consequently, an unexpected 2.5 million unplanned pregnancies projected at the end of 2020. The 42% population spike compared in 2019 has been reported in the South China Morning Post on Oct 18, 2020.⁸

THE SHARED OBLIGATION

The Commission on Human Rights as a Gender Ombud ensure the rights of this vulnerable sector on the basis of equality and non-discrimination (Article 7, UDHR). Further, every organ of our government has one objective in the *performance* of their duties and obligations for the common good of the people. In order to address the escalating concerns about teenage pregnancy, this Office has determined the importance of social awareness on the risks confronting the teen population and that an important course of action must be considered.

Former Secretary of Department of Health (DOH), Dr. Paulyn Jean B. Rosell-Ubial, identified the pressing issues surrounding the adolescents such as "early pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, including HIV and AIDS, substance use disorders, violence, and mental illness." These issues have prompted DOH to respond and provide health care services and directives like the Republic Act 10354 or Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act of 2012 and other related policies.⁹

As the lowest tier of public administration, the local government is an important channel in bringing the government to the people from the community/grassroots. The local authorities are closer to the citizens, and they deal with human rights issues on a daily basis. Given this mandate, the local government personnel are at the better position to give guidance and services that will benefit their citizens.

The emphasis on the obligations and responsibilities of every line agency of our government with regard to adolescents' health care and development, is actually a shared and complementary action between the government and the family as an institution. Hence, a Joint Memorandum Circular No. 2020-01 dated 15 July 2020 has been signed by Secretary Eduardo Ano of the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) and Chairperson Jose Luis Martin C. Gascon of the Commission on Human Rights, designed to enjoin all the local

⁶ PSA. One in Ten Young Filipino Women Age 15 to 19 Is Already A Mother or Pregnant With First Child (Final Results from the 2013 National Demographic and Health Survey). Aug 28, 2014. <https://psa.gov.ph/content/one-ten-young-filipino-women-age-15-19-already-mother-or-pregnant-first-child-final-results>

⁷ Ibid, Gonzales.

⁸ Elyssa Lopez. "Amid coronavirus lockdown, Philippines sees pregnancy boom and little progress in family planning," Oct 18, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3105856/amid-coronavirus-lockdown-philippines-sees-pregnancy>

⁹ Adolescent Health and Development Program - Manual of Operations. (2017)

https://doh.gov.ph/sites/default/files/publications/WHO_DOH_2017_12082017_full.pdf. Accessed Mar 4, 2021

government units to ensure gender-responsive interventions to COVID-19 and the new normal including ensuring prompt, effective, and survivor-centered response to all forms of gender-based violence.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Young girls all over the world, not only in the Philippines, are facing the same predicament on adolescent pregnancy. It is a global issue. The local laws and statutes on child protection have been installed in our social system. These girls' opportunity to enjoy their lives as members of the society, in an environment free of stress and conflicts and to be educated, is dependent on their stewards, guardians, and parents. The duty bearers and other stakeholders on the other hand, are equally obligated to promote the rights of the youths, protect them from all forms of abuses, exploitations, and other situations that can destroy their development.

As partners in the promotion and protection on the rights of the youths, this regional office focuses its attention in helping the local government address the adolescent pregnancy issue. The Office recommends the following key activities and mobilize the stakeholders with the help of the local government units:

1. "Listening to Teen Perspective"- Conduct surveys using any feasible and available platform focusing on teen pregnancy prevention. The said survey will be conducted by health care workers at the local government units.
2. Community-wide teen pregnancy prevention collaboration, broad-based youth development programs – mobilize the health care providers who are familiar with the families, relatives and friends in the community and are deemed closer to their clients in their area.
3. Information dissemination on Reproductive Health and Rights and Responsible Parenthood by the local government units. This activity is designed to reach as many youths as possible therefore, the use of social media platforms is of primary consideration in this regard. Further, this Office eyes on passing an ordinance, re-educating the youths and their stewards/guardians/parents of the existing provisions and executive orders so that adolescents have informed choice, acquired knowledge and skills, for them to protect themselves. Targeted population are those young girls who are at risk of being exposed to teenage pregnancy and sexual exploitation.
4. An intensified information campaign to parents, stewards and guardians on the effects of teen pregnancy and the social issues involved, development and accessibility to health care services.
5. The local government units are encouraged to collaborate with the civil society organizations in training the Barangay Health Workers on Sexual Reproductive Health Rights issues and the prevention of gender-based violence.
6. Establish a strong support system with the Department of Education to adopt or initiate/promote a Peer and Parents Club to help young mothers to continue their education with the help of the local civil society organizations or non-government organizations.
7. Mobilization of the local council for the protection of children and their counterpart civil society organizations, non-government organizations at the barangay level and lined national agencies.

8. Provision of incentive or reward program for the health care workers at the municipal and *barangays* for better performance in health care. The objective is to motivate and encourage health workers to perform well. This may include monetary or non-monetary incentives.

Issued this 4th day of March 2021 in the City of San Fernando, Pampanga.

Prepared by:



FLORDELIZA N. DEALAGDON
Chief, Human Rights Promotions and Advocacy Division

Approved by:



Atty. LEORAE D. VALMONTE
Officer-in-Charge



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Human Rights Promotions and Advocacy Division at (045) 961-4830

For inquiries, please call Human Rights Promotions and Advocacy Division at (045) 961-4830 or e-mail us at chrrreg3pld@gmail.com.