

## THE DEBATE ON SENATE BILL NO. 1979

by:

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The Philippines has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy among Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, with alarming statistics showing that approximately 9% of teenagers aged 15 to 19 have begun childbearing, with 2% currently pregnant with their first child (Pepito et al., 2022). One of the possible reasons for this problem is limited access to education and reproductive health services (Kefale et al., 2020). Additionally, studies have shown that teenagers living in communities with high poverty levels face increased risks of early sexual initiation and unintended pregnancies (Kefale et al., 2020; Habito et al., 2019). Furthermore, family dynamics significantly impact teenage pregnancy, adolescents who do not live with both parents are at a higher risk, likely due to reduced communication about sexual health and decision making (Tabei et al., 2021). This situation is made worse by a lack of access to comprehensive sexual education and family planning resources, particularly in rural areas where traditional norms often prevail (Ibita, 2024).

Today, one of the hot issues in the Philippine senate is the Senate Bill No. 1979, also known as the "Prevention of Adolescent Pregnancy Act", sponsored by Senator Risa Hontiveros. The primary objective of the bill is to prevent teenage pregnancy through Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE). Hontiveros said the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health (RPRH) Law requires CSE beyond basic biological facts. According to the bill, standardized education about human sexuality would be provided according to age for all basic education institutions from both the public and private sectors. Human sexuality must be taught in the CSE curriculum, along with topics like informed consent, effective contraceptive education, HIV/AIDS and other STDs, how to

identify sexual abuse and exploitation, gender equality, and preventing gender-based violence.

Although the bill intends to prevent adolescent pregnancy, there was a provision on the CSE in the bill that raised concerns. Lawmakers, different groups, and even President Marcos vow to veto the bill. In an interview, President Marcos said that “This is ridiculous, this is abhorrent. This is a travesty of what sex education should be to the children.” The President spoke about issues like educating young children about masturbation and encouraging exploration of various sexual orientations. He emphasized the importance of a responsible and morally based approach to sexuality education, making sure that it protects and guides young people instead of exposing them to possibly harmful influences. Contrarily, Senator Risa Hontiveros explained that the words "masturbation" and "try different sexualities" are not included in the bill. CSE curriculum is age-and culturally appropriate, emphasizing fundamental subjects like anatomy, the risks of early pregnancy, and prevention of STD.

The Philippines continues to face teenage pregnancy as a big problem, which stems from poverty, along with insufficient educational access and constrained reproductive health service availability. The Senate Bill No. 1979 fights this challenge through its requirement for CSE delivery in every school to give standardized educational content about reproductive health and consent together with gender equality knowledge to young people.

Multiple groups, including lawmakers, advocacy organizations, and President Marcos, form a firm line against the implementation of sex education programs. All sides agree that teen pregnancy rates should be reduced, but the education strategy for this purpose remains controversial. Finding the right balance between providing educational demands and upholding Filipino morals and cultural values is essential for the future. The country needs to manage adolescent pregnancy while maintaining traditional Filipino values, which requires open dialogue and competent policymaking.

A curriculum that strikes a balance between cultural values and educational needs must be developed in collaboration with the government, educators, parents, and religious leaders. Parents and adolescents may benefit as well from community-based education programs that emphasize the importance of making responsible decisions and the risks of being pregnant at an early age. The country can lower teen pregnancy without compromising its cultural values by enhancing education, encouraging open dialogue, and making sure that young mothers receive the assistance they need. Through responsible policymaking and open communication, the Philippines must find a solution to this problem and make sure that young people are given the direction they need to create a better future.

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