
Manila Women's Forum

A Network of Women Professionals

November 2010

Saving Poor Filipino Mothers

By Nancy Turner

Passion. Compassion. These are two words that describe Suneeta Mukherjee's quest in trying to answer the question: Will poor mothers continue to die in the Philippines because society has not decided to save them?

The Manila Women's Forum October meeting was held at Michelle McGonagle's home with Suneeta Mukherjee, UN Population Fund (FPA) Representative to the Philippines, speaking on the controversial topic of women and reproductive rights. Her speech included astounding facts and figures that beg the question: How can this continue?

Here are some of the revelations from her speech.

- 11 mothers die every day in the Philippines (4500 each year) due to childbirth complications;
- 3 babies are born every minute;
- 3.4 million pregnancies in 2008, 560,000 ended in induced abortions;
- 1.9 million pregnancies were unplanned or unwanted;
- Family planning costs about P800 million annually but savings resulting from a lower growth rate can cover 70% of the cost;
- Access to voluntary contraception can reduce maternal deaths for all women up to 40% 1.9 million.

Suneeta started her talk by introducing three primary problems:



MWF speaker Suneeta Mukherjee

The first problem is high maternal mortality, as shown in the statistics above. Millennium Development Goal 5 is to improve maternal health. Target 5A for the Philippines is to reduce by three quarters the maternal mortality ratio. To achieve this, the Philippines' maternal mortality rate (MMR) must

decline by 5.5 percent per year. Since 1990, however, the annual world decline has been less than 1 percent. Target 5B is to increase access to reproductive health services to 100 percent by 2015. Given progress to date, the Philippines is unlikely to meet
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November MWF Meeting ■ **When:** 6:30 p.m., Wednesday, November 17. **What:** Rachel Wee, a property and real estate development consultant based in Singapore, will speak about the foundation she formed to provide assistance to those in need, including projects in Davao and Thailand to keep poor children in school and a soup kitchen in Victoria, Australia. She will also speak about fund raising strategies, including selling Burmese paintings. (She will display some of Zaw Zaw Aung's paintings. All proceeds will go to the artist and the three charity projects.) **Where:** JeanMarie Diskin's home, Rizal Tower, Unit 26C, Rockwell. **Bring:** Something to share for the potluck dinner. **December Meeting:** Monday, 2010 December 6.

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Target 5A or 5B by 2015.

The second problem presented was population increases. The Philippine population increased tenfold during the last 100 years from 1900 to 2000. It is expected to further double its 2000 level after 40 years. In the year 2000, the population was estimated to be 76.5 million, and by 2040 will likely reach 141 million! Recent estimates place the population at 92 million (2009).

Population and GDP change was the third problem presented. In 1950 and 1975 the populations of the Philippines and Thailand were nearly equal. In the year 2000, the Philippines had 16 million people more than Thailand (a 92% increase), reflecting a much faster growth rate than Thailand's (73% increase). At the same time, Thailand's GDP started out much lower than the Philippines, but by 2000 it was nearly double that of the Philippines (8% vs. 4%). Thailand has ended up with a much stronger economy and a reasonable growth rate, especially in the last 25 years compared to the Philippines.

Suneeta contends that Philippine society has decided not to save poor Philippine mothers. While the Philippine growth rate continues at a fairly high rate, the nation has begun a contentious debate on the need for reproductive health education, training, and assistance programs. There is also an issue of whether the government should have a stronger role in legislating, funding, and administering such programs. The

national debate centers on the role of the government and the morality of the reproductive health issues, as put forth by the Catholic Church. While the debate goes on, many families continue to be left without access to family planning means and reproductive health education. This has led to a high and increasing number of unintended pregnancies, related health complications, and maternal deaths. Related health complications include sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS, especially among teenagers.

Concerning the HIV/AIDS issue specifically, the following facts reflect a view that reproductive health education should be a priority:

- 47% of the population is below 19 years old;
- 23% have early sex;
- 30% are young mothers;
- 62% of young people have sexually transmitted diseases;
- 5 new HIV cases per day;
- 30% of total new cases are young people;
- 27% of young people believe AIDS is curable;
- 78% think young people will not get HIV.

The three solutions Suneeta presented in her talk included:

1. Planned families, taking population factors into account.
2. Deliveries attended by skilled health personnel (doctors, nurses, skilled midwives).
3. Easy access to essential and emergency obstetric and newborn care with post-partum services in a gender responsive and culturally sensitive

health system.

Suneeta closed with a quote from Rafael Salas, first UNFPA Executive Director, "All couples and individuals have the basic right to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children and to have the information, education and means to do so."

We thank Suneeta for her excellent presentation and wish her well in her retirement starting in November. ■

Manila Women's Forum

Manila Women's Forum (MWF) is a cross-cultural network for women. It provides opportunities to build friendships, talk to women of various cultures, and share information about resources. Our meetings are intended to provide intellectual stimulation and lead to personal and professional development. All women are welcome to join.

The current officers are: **Amy Alexander**, Message Board. **Julia Holz**, Treasurer, Membership and Programs. **Lisa Lumbao**, Chair. **Junie Navarro**, Message Board. **Lisa Stuart**, Message Board Moderator. **Beulah P. Taguiwalo**, Newsletter, Website.

Cost of membership is P300 per year. Members receive a copy of the current mailing list in addition to the newsletter, which is also sent to non-members. A contribution is collected at each monthly meeting: P20 for members, and P50 for non-members. For more information about MWF, please contact Lisa Lumbao at Tel. 813-0168, or at lumbao@mozcom.com.

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