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No legal access: How bitter herbs and botched abortions kill three women a day in the Philippines

Wednesday 12 July 2017, by [SPERA Claudine](#) (Date first published: 10 July 2017).

In a country where more than 65% of women don't use contraceptives and terminating pregnancy is illegal, 'torturous' practices are often the only option.

Outside the gates of Manila's Quiapo church, deals are being done. Bitter herbs and abortion medication are traded illegally.

Next to an imposing statue depicting a foetus clasped in the hands of Christ, stalls offer an array of rosary beads, amulets, mangoes and songbirds. Here, the abortion pill misoprostol is on sale for just \$5 (£3.90), as well as the herb pamparegla, which can induce menstruation and end pregnancy. All this goes on in the shadows of the largest Catholic church in Manila.

The irony is not lost on women's rights activists who want legal access to abortion.

Marevic Parcon has been called an abortion cheerleader. It's no understatement. In a country with an outright ban on the procedure and conservative views on contraception, she is defiant in the face of criticism.

"I mean, why not? Is it shameful? At the end of the day abortion is about human rights," she says. "No matter how much they deny the existence of abortion in the country, it's happening under their noses."

Parcon is programme coordinator at the Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights (WGNRR). "If you are for women's rights, it is inevitable to talk about sexual and reproductive health and rights. And you cannot talk about sexual and reproductive health without talking about abortion rights."

Her views don't go down well in a country where more than 80% of the population are Catholic and the church holds tremendous sway.

Such conservative attitudes kept an act granting universal access to family planning at bay for 14 years.

More than 65% of women don't use modern contraceptives, and maternal mortality rates are still high in the Philippines, standing at 114 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2015 [\[1\]](#).

It was the efforts of women like Parcon that eventually helped drive the law over the line. The Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act – also referred to as RH law – was finally passed in 2012.

"This whole culture of patriarchy controls women's bodies. Women ... should be able to exercise their own sexuality and they should be able to enjoy sex," says Parcon, who has been on the frontline of women's rights activism for more than 20 years.

Although it's against the law to end a pregnancy in the Philippines, an estimated 610,000 abortions take place every year.

It's an open secret that methods are available, albeit unsafe ones.

As well as the herbs and medicines on offer at Quiapo, women who want to end unplanned pregnancies have their stomachs massaged hard every day for a week, in the hope of inducing abortion.

"It is horrific. It is tantamount to torture," says Parcon. "Unsafe abortion is torturous to women, especially the massage kind, because it is so painful."

Others resort to barbaric methods such as inserting barbecue sticks or coathangers into their womb, or throwing themselves down the stairs. Three women die every day from post-abortion complications in the Philippines.

The job of campaigning for women's reproductive health and rights there is tough. But it's about to get tougher. Although the work of Parcon's organisation, WGNRR, is not funded by the US, Donald Trump's decision to reinstate the Mexico City policy, also known as the "global gag rule", will bolster her opponents.

The gag rule bans foreign aid to international healthcare providers who discuss abortion or advocate abortion rights.

"It will definitely make it more difficult for any reproductive health NGO," says Parcon.

"When you talk about reproductive health you will always touch on abortion. The global gag rule says that even the mere mention of abortion is not allowed. It is a challenge - a big, big challenge. But it's not something we should be afraid of."

On paper the Philippines looks like it's making progress on upholding women's rights. In 2009 the Magna Carta of Women was introduced [2], promising to "eliminate discrimination against women by recognising, protecting, fulfilling and promoting the rights of Filipino women". The country has also ratified the Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (Cedaw) [3].

But the fight over the introduction of the reproductive health law clearly showed that the country still has a long way to go.

"Everything was reduced to the debate of whether or not contraception was [causing abortion] ... [but] how can you enjoy life if you have 12 kids?" asks Parcon.

There are other hurdles ahead: the supply of contraceptives is poor, and legal challenges from religious groups are blocking distribution of the contraceptive implant.

But Parcon remains positive.

"My hope is that one day Filipino women can say 'abortion' and that there's no shame in the word. Before, we couldn't even have this conversation. But right now we are having it, so there is hope."

P.S.

* The Guardian. Monday 10 July 2017 10.38 BST Last modified on Monday 10 July 2017 18.30 BST:
<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/jul/10/how-bitter-herbs-and-botched-abortionns-kill-three-women-a-day-in-the-philippines>

Footnotes

[1] <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.STA.MMRT?end=2015&start=2015>

[2] <http://pcw.gov.ph/law/republic-act-9710>

[3] <http://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/cedaw/pages/cedawindex.aspx>