

# One step ahead of unplanned pregnancies: a deep look into reasons for non-contraception use among young Filipina university students\*

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## Short Abstract

In this paper we analyse the results of a questionnaire developed to go beyond looking at the use of modern contraceptives at the time of the survey, to explore the reason for non-contraception use, something often missing in studies on women empowerment and family planning in developing countries (Prata et al. 2017). The university dropout rate in the Phillipines is very high, namely among women (Harum and Ibrahim 2022; EDCOM II). By focusing on university students, we seek to explore the barriers they face in pursuing their individual autonomy. The Phillipines - where Catholicism is so strong that divorce is outlawed - has some of the most strict laws in Southeast Asia on abortions, and the access and use of reproductive health care is severely conditioned by religious and social norms (Radics 2024). At the same time, the Phillipines is also a country showing a high percentage of teenage and single mothers. We aim at disentangling external barriers to the use of contraception, such as access to health care services, from (eventual) internal barriers – while delving on the origins of the latter.

## Extended Abstract

Teenage pregnancy is particularly high in the Phillipines. So much so that it was considered a “national and social emergency” (Cordero 2024). According to the last available data, from 2017, adolescent birth rate is 47 per 1,000 women aged 15–19 – cf. 43 per 1,000 observed globally in 2023 (World Health Statistics 2024) – and whereas it decreased until 2021, there is some evidence that it may have increased afterwards (Cordero 2024).

Unintended pregnancy is an important factor driving highschool dropout in the Phillipines. In secondary school attrition is also due to the need to work and lack of motivation, that disproportionately affects students from more disadvantaged backgrounds - all this resultig in just 54% enrolling in tertiary education in 2024 (World Bank<sup>1</sup>). Also at that higher educational level, there is a substantial attrition rate - 39 %, according to findings of the Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM II) - and, despite the selection, unplanned pregnancy continues to be an important driver. This begs the question: why is an important share of college students becoming pregnant? This assumes particular policy relevance for the effective implementation of the Republic Act 10354 (Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act of 2012) and the Adolescent Health and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/indicator/se-ter-enrr>

Development Program, which aim to empower young people to make informed reproductive choices and complete their education.

To understand this, one must think about the proximate determinants of fertility such as whether young women are sexually active or not, and then to whether they use contraception or not. Data from 2022 shows that the proportion of sexually active unmarried women aged 15-49 that uses any modern contraception method is the same as the proportion not using contraception at the time of the survey: 42% (NDHS 2022).

When studying individual reproductive behaviour, it is important to acknowledge that it is influenced both by the individual background and the context. In other words, the action results from a complex interplay between individual and macro-level conditions, as evidenced by the micro-macro model of fertility (Testa et al. 2011).

Given the extreme difficulty for most young women in pursuing studies after having giving birth, also due to economic reasons (World Bank), it is important to understand the circumstances that lead these women to behave in ways that apparently may compromise their goals. So, a starting point is to ask the extent to which unplanned motherhood and graduating from university are conflicting goals.

A first exploratory study was conducted among 131 indigenous women at Palawan State University in June 2025 (Kalyankar and Ferrer 2025). A questionnaire was administered to all students in PSU Roxas Bachelor's degree classes at the 1st, 2nd and 3rd/4th years who were enrolled in 'Elementary education' and 'Business/Criminology'. Data collection followed rigorous ethical protocols. After obtaining written informed consent, trained female enumerators administered the questionnaire in person. The enumerators provided comprehensive explanations of each question while maintaining a supportive environment to ensure respondent comprehension and comfort. The questionnaire was composed of basic respondent information and demographic profile, and 30 questions on women's empowerment and reproductive autonomy.

The large majority reveals that their career should determine childbearing timing (69%), while fearing that a pregnancy will affect their education plans (77%). In fact, three quarters of these young women declared not using any contraception at the time of the survey (75%), and only 14% were taking the pill.

In this paper we seek to study these exploratory results further, namely the apparent contradiction between the young women's goal of graduating from university and their reproductive behaviour. One first step is to probe into their sexual behaviour, something that was not done in the first study. It is key to ascertain whether these young women who are not using contraceptives are taking the risk of an unplanned pregnancy (or not). For that, we need to know whether they were sexually active at the time of the survey, as well as more details about their sexual relationships.

The theory of planned behaviour (Fishbein and Ajzen 2010) can help in understanding the apparent mismatch between intention and behaviour, giving clues about potential sources such as (lack) of actual control or external barriers, and what the authors call perceived behaviour control, that relates to internal barriers that can result from external factors/pressures. We are interested in exploring the latter. This is a crucial point as we do not focus on choice and abortions rights only but take a Reproductive Justice (RJ) approach instead. According to the RJ framework, one should take equally into consideration the rights to have children, to have the deemed suitable conditions to have and raise them, or not to have children (Nadagari et al. 2025).

## Methods

The new sample will be composed of a total of approximately 600 young Filipino women, who are attending Palawan State University (PSU) in 2025/26 – the field work is scheduled for November and December 2025. We will collect data from three different campuses: Roxas Branch (where the first study was conducted), Puerto Princesa, and El Nido Palawan. Collecting observations from these other two campuses increases the heterogeneity of the overall sample. PSU Puerto Princesa (Main campus) represents an urban and central population reflecting broader national influences; PSU El Nido captures a globally influenced, tourism-driven economy that blends global exposure with local values; and PSU Roxas provides a rural and regional agro-industrial hub characterized by traditional norms and distinct economic structures.

The focus on university students allows us to focus on students who revealed an interest in pursuing studies. This is an important point as an important factor in high school dropout is, precisely, lack of interest (World Bank). On the other hand, this positive selection may have as caveat some social desirability bias - to the extent that respondents may overstate their will to graduate - to which we must pay attention to.

## Expected findings

Based on preliminary evidence and theoretical framing, we anticipate identifying a significant paradox wherein young women with strong educational aspirations frequently engage in sexual activity without contraception, thereby risking unplanned pregnancies that directly threaten their academic goals. We hypothesize that non-use stems not only from access barriers but from complex internalized factors, including religious norms, relationship power dynamics, and persistent misconceptions about contraceptive safety. Furthermore, we expect variation across campuses, reflecting how distinct institutional environments - urban, tourism-driven, and rural - shape differing patterns of constraints on reproductive autonomy. Finally, we expect the findings to confirm the need for a reproductive justice approach, demonstrating how the interplay between individual agency and structural constraints creates reproductive outcomes that conflict with stated life objectives.

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