

Rights group slams Philippine abortion ban

August 2 2010, By TERESA CEROJANO , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- A U.S.-based rights group urged the Philippines on Monday to reform a tough anti-abortion law that it says has spawned widespread underground procedures that kill about 1,000 women each year in the predominantly Roman Catholic country.

An estimated 560,000 women in the Philippines in 2008 sought [abortion](#) involving crude and painful methods such as intense abdominal massages by traditional midwives or inserting catheters into the uterus, said a report by the New York-based Center for Reproductive Rights.

About 90,000 women suffer from abortion complications and an estimated 1,000 die each year, the report said, adding that complications are among the top 10 reasons women seek hospital care.

The Roman Catholic church in the Philippines has stridently opposed the use of contraceptives and abortion. The existing law forbids abortion and is unclear about any exceptions in which it might be permitted, effectively making it a total ban, the report said. The law imposes up to six years imprisonment for women who commit intentional abortion and for doctors or midwives who help them.

And while post-abortion services are legal, women who seek them are often harassed or stigmatized even by [health care workers](#), the report said.

The Center for Reproductive Rights is an [advocacy group](#) that says it works to advance reproductive freedom as a human right. It said its

report was based on interviews with women who had had abortions, hospital authorities, political leaders, law enforcers and secondary data. A 2008 report by the U.S.-based nonprofit Guttmacher Institute in cooperation with the University of the Philippines Population Institute, cited the same figures as Monday's report.

Philippine health and justice officials did not immediately respond Monday to requests for comment.

Melissa Upreti, one of the new report's authors, said the Philippines is among a handful of countries including Nicaragua, Chile and El Salvador to prohibit and criminally punish abortion without providing clear legal exceptions including when a pregnancy poses a risk to the woman's health, if the woman is a victim of rape or incest, or in cases of fetal impairment.

Even Spain, whose 1870 Penal Code provision on abortion became the basis of the Philippines' 1930 law, has reformed its laws to recognize abortion on several grounds, said Upreti, the Center's Asia program regional manager.

The World Health Organization says worldwide, the impact of unsafe abortion was "a major health concern" that claims the lives of 67,000 women yearly. It has urged countries to deal with the preventable problem that stems from reasons including unmet family planning needs and restricted access to safe abortion services.

"Access to safe, legal abortion is a fundamental right of women," a WHO journal added.

"The Philippine government has created a dire human rights crisis in the country," said Nancy Northup, president of the Center for Reproductive Rights

She said it was "time to break the silence around abortion in the Philippines and for the human rights community to put pressure on the government to decriminalize abortion and immediately improve the medical care that women receive."

Florence Tadiar, a physician who heads the Institute for Social Studies and Action, said the ban has scared doctors and health workers from performing abortion even for medical reasons. Women who have had unsafe abortion, meanwhile, "will not go to the hospital unless they are dying."

Alfredo Tadiar, a former judge and adviser to an international lawyers' group said while [women](#) have been charged for abortion in the country, he has not heard of anyone actually sentenced or sent to jail.

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