

Philippines' Duterte launches birth control push

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Women's rights groups on Thursday applauded Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's vow to deliver free contraceptives to six million women in a bid to salvage the government's floundering family planning programme.

Governments and the dominant Catholic church have waged a bruising struggle over the issue for years. The church has long opposed efforts to make birth-control more available.

Foreign and local authorities have long cited the need for improved birth control in the Philippines which has one of Asia's highest birth rates as well as high maternal mortality rates.

The country has a population just over 100 million with about 25 percent living in poverty.

Duterte ordered government agencies on Wednesday to "intensify and accelerate the implementation of critical actions" to address the "unmet" family planning needs of up to six million Filipina women.

Aida Santos, president of the European Union-funded women's rights monitor WeDpro Philippines said it was a timely boost to a reproductive health law that in 2014 gave millions of poor Filipinos access to free contraceptives for the first time.

"There is such a huge need for it right now to address serious problems

such as teenage pregnancy," Santos told AFP.

Despite the law, millions of Filipino women still cannot obtain contraceptives.

This is partly due to the family planning programme running on a shoestring 500 million-peso (\$10 million) budget, according to the health department's Commission on Population.

"The important part there is that all [government agencies](#) will start inputting funds for the programme in their 2018 and 2019 budgets," the commission's executive director Juan Antonio Perez told AFP.

The government's annual [family planning](#) budget could now increase four-fold to the ideal level of two billion pesos, Perez said.

But he warned contraceptive drugs, all of them imported, were under threat due to pending Supreme Court cases involving the reproductive health law.

In 2015 the court indefinitely banned government health workers from injecting progesterone subdermal implants, one of the country's most popular contraceptives, while judges studied a petition to outlaw their use.

The government was also banned from renewing the licenses of 47 other contraceptive drugs in use in the country, pending the resolution of the subdermal implants case.

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