

## Community Group Helps Urban Poor Avoid or Cope with Teen Pregnancy

MANILA, Philippines — “My advice to other teens is, ‘Think before you act.’”



So says Janice Banaag, a new mother at 18. She used to counsel her peers about preventing unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). But “accidents happen”, she admits with a laugh, and now Janice is a living lesson in how adolescent sexuality and poverty interact in Tondo, a densely populated district of slums and industry.

Janice, husband Joell and baby Janelle are ‘bat people’. That is how the 10,000 squatters packed in a ramshackle settlement beneath a bridge on the C3 Road are known. The family occupies a small windowless room lit by a bare suspended bulb. They live on what Joell earns driving a pedicab – about 100 pesos a day, the equivalent of two dollars,.

“I only dream of eating three times a day,” Janice says.

While most births in Tondo take place at home without a skilled attendant, Janelle was born on 23 April at a mother-child clinic run by the Zone One Tondo Organization (ZOTO), an activist group serving the urban poor. Luidia Bacalso, a trained midwife, delivered the baby.

**“Are the poor any different than the rich? Is having a home merely a dream? ”**

On a weekday morning the clinic is crowded with women waiting for pre- and postnatal exams. Like Janice and her sister Jennifer, half of the mothers holding infants are teens.

They also come for family planning services. Janice, who doesn’t want to have another child until her family has some savings, has decided to use an IUD.

She is lucky to get one. An executive order by ultra-conservative Mayor Lito Atienza bans contraceptives in Manila’s public health centres and hospitals. Staff cannot inform clients about methods other than so-called natural family planning or provide condoms to prevent HIV.

Although the ZOTO clinic continues to offer family planning, other Manila non-governmental organizations have faced official harassment, according to the Philippines Centre for Investigative Journalism. As a result, the Centre reported last year, “NGOs giving out contraceptives have been forced to do so on the sly and under the table.”

That is a problem, especially for poor teenagers with high fertility rates. Every year, among the poorest fifth of the Filipino population, 13 out of 100 girls aged 15-19 give birth. (Among the richest fifth, the figure drops to 1.2 out of 100.)

### **TEEN CENTRE, HOTLINE AND ROCK BAND**

With the support of UNFPA, the United Nations Populations Fund, ZOTO is involving scores of Tondo young people in an intensive effort to reduce teen pregnancy and promote responsible behaviour. Next door to the clinic is a teen centre, a base for peer educators who provide information and counselling to young people from the community.

“The teen centre is our second home,” says Prolet Panis, 21. “Most of us are out-of-school youth. Every Saturday we conduct classes. We teach other youth to be aware about their reproductive health and rights. We make posters about HIV and family planning. And we teach young people how to play the guitar and drums. Most of the students are too poor to come to the centre, so we also travel to their communities.”



Teenage mothers with their newborns at the ZOTO clinic.  
*Photo: William A. Ryan/UNFPA*

“At first, youngsters get shy, especially when we talk about body parts,” says Beth Nofias, 20. “It is taboo to mention sexuality in our community. But as we discuss things and they get more understanding, they lose their shyness and get the courage to ask for support. They realize the counsellors will keep their information confidential.”

The volunteer educators cover a range of topics, from sexually transmitted infections to domestic violence to child labour. They also rebut misinformation about contraceptives, which is widespread in the Philippines, and talk about how to properly use a condom.

“We teach that the first option is abstinence,” Prolet reports. “But if they cannot do that, we encourage them to use condoms for safe and protected sex.”



Beth Nofias, peer educator and lead singer.

*Photo: William A. Ryan/UNFPA*

clinic.

But condoms are not always easily accessible to those who cannot afford to buy them, the educators acknowledge, particularly since they are no longer available in neighbourhood health centres. The ZOTO clinic usually has them, but demand sometimes exceeds supplies.

The volunteers also operate a telephone hotline, promoted through posters and flyers. Callers may ask about conflicts with their parents or premarital sexual relationships. Those with health problems like sexually transmitted infections are referred to the clinic.

A ZOTO song-writing contest led to the formation of Zone One, a teenage rock band that sings topical songs about family planning, prevention of HIV and other STIs, and safe motherhood. The band, whose members are all peer educators, practise in the teen centre and perform in poor neighbourhoods throughout the district. They are in the midst of a series of 25 local concerts. Audiences, sometimes up to 500 people, are given handouts with information on teen pregnancy, STIs and the services available through ZOTO's teen centre, hotline and clinic.

Their current repertoire includes songs linking each of the UN's anti-poverty Millennium Development Goals to human rights. One is about violence against women. Another tells the story of a poor girl who sells herself to sailors to put food on the table, and gets infected with HIV.

Janice Banaag was a singer with the band until accidental motherhood limited her mobility. Sitting next to Janelle's crib on the floor of their tiny, cave-like home under the bridge, she says her wish is to have a big house someday and enough money to educate her children; in that case, she would like to have four.

She recalls Zone One's song comparing the lives of squatters to that of people who live in large houses, singing a cappella in a sweet but plaintive voice:

"Are the poor any different than the rich? Is having a home merely a dream?"

— William A. Ryan