

PHILIPPINES: Steep rise in gender-based violence

By IRIN

30 May 2012



MANILA, 30 May 2012 (IRIN) - Authorities in the Philippines are reporting a sharp uptick in the number of gender-based violence cases over the last five years.

“From 2006 to the present, there has been a constant increase,” Senior Superintendent Theresa Ann Cid, of the Philippine National Police (PNP), told IRIN.

In 2011 there were 12,948 reported cases, up from 4,954 in 2006 - a rise of more than 150 percent - the [PNP Women and Children’s Protection Centre \(PNP-WPC\)](#) noted. From January to April of 2012, 5,629 cases have been reported.

The [2008 National Demographic Health Survey](#) estimated that one in five Filipino women between the ages of 15 and 49 had experienced physical violence, while 14.4 percent of women have been physically abused by their husbands.

The World Health Organization described the level of sexual violence in the Philippines as “a serious cause of concern”.

The Philippines has a population of more than 100 million and is a traditionally patriarchal, male-dominated society, but there are no ready answers to explain the recent spike. “Yes, there is an increase in reported cases, but we cannot say why. Part of it may be a natural development due to the increased awareness of the laws meant to protect women,” said Elizabeth Angsioco, chairperson of the [Democratic Socialist Women of the Philippines \(DSWP\)](#), a national federation of women’s grassroots communities.

The Republic Act (RA) 9262, known as the Violence Against Women and their Children Law, was passed in 2004. It broadened the definition of abuse to include physical, emotional and economic harm. It also made violence by an intimate partner (anyone with whom a woman has a sexual relationship) a public crime, and made it possible for anyone -not just the victim - to file a case against a perpetrator.

Since the legislation was passed, the number of cases of reported intimate partner violence has been steadily increasing, from 218 in 2004 to 9,021 in 2011. Violations of RA 9262 make up the largest component of reported acts of violence against women (VAW), including rape, sexual assault, and physical injury.

Gender-sensitive police

The authorities have taken a number of measures, mainly gender-sensitive interventions, to encourage women to come forward. “Before the law [RA 9262], domestic violence was seen as a private issue. Some [police] officers were confused about their role and would reconcile couples,” said PNP Senior Police Officer Helen dela Cruz, who oversees one of the PNP women’s desks in the capital, Manila.

The PNP established Women and Children Protection Centres (WCPC) in 2007 to deal with crimes involving the exploitation and abuse of women and children. There are now more than 1,800 such centres throughout the country, staffed by 3,038 policewomen trained in the laws that protect women, such as RA 9262, and gender sensitivity. Some police stations have been equipped with child-friendly interview rooms for minors, and pink interview rooms for women.

Still a long way to go

Despite these measures there are still huge challenges, including a shortage of staff to handle the volume of cases. Some police stations are not open 24 hours a day, and most policewomen take on additional functions, such as community relations, apart from handling the women's desk. "These policewomen are overworked and we are understaffed," said Cid.

Of the 140,000 PNP personnel, only an estimated 15,600 are women. "We only have the reported cases," said Nharleen Santos-Millar, Policy Development and Advocacy Division Chief of the [Philippine Commission on Women \(PCW\)](#).

Since the passage of RA 9262, there have been a number of convictions, but getting the exact numbers would involve the arduous task of going to individual Family Courts, said Santos-Millar. The systematic compilation of data lags behind and means the success of the measures to protect women and children cannot be accurately monitored.

In 2009, Amnesty International, the human rights watchdog, published a review on the implementation of RA 9262, and noted that a deterrent in reporting abuse was often the distance of a woman's village to the police station.

In response, the PCW and other government offices rolled out guidelines in 2010 for the establishment of a VAW desk in every barangay, the smallest government unit. As of December 2011, out of the 42,025 barangays in the country, 27,705 barangays (or 66 percent) have set up a VAW desk.

"Violence against women is a societal concern. Everyone needs to be sensitized - judges who think they need to save the family no matter what, communities who pressure women to stay with their abusive husbands - you can't undo a mindset like that overnight," Santos-Millar noted.

Many people speculate that despite the laws, abuse often still goes unreported simply because violence against women is accepted.

Tet Balayon, the Knowledge Management Officer of the [Women's Crisis Centre](#), an NGO providing assistance to the victims of violence, commented: "There is too much tolerance for violence in our culture. Men think it's part of being a man, women think it's part of being in a relationship."

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Interview rooms meant to look like playrooms provide a protective environment for minors who are victims of violence and abuse