

Focus on the *Mother*

LACK OF ACCESS TO CONTRACEPTION HAS BURDENED MANY WOMEN IN THE PHILIPPINES WITH FAMILIES THEY STRUGGLE TO SUPPORT. BUT IN A COUNTRY WHERE RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL CONCERNS CLASH, IT CAN BE HARD TO BRING FAMILY PLANNING INTO THE PICTURE.

ROSAVILMA LOPEZ IS sitting in the back of the room, out of focus, with her face turned the other way. One of her children stands close to the camera and stares defiantly down the lens.

The image's composition reflects Lopez's predicament: so far, her needs have not been the centre of attention. Although she is only 36, she's already given birth nine times. One child has since died; the others are aged from one to 15 years old. She told the photographer, Christina Simons, that she doesn't want to fall pregnant again.

The Philippines is teeming with people. Although the islands' combined landmass is equivalent to Victoria and Tasmania, its population of 94 million is nearly 16 times larger.

But about eight in 10 Filipinos are Catholic and that means contraception is controversial. For the poorest people, it can be inaccessible or prohibitively expensive.

Simons travelled to the country last year with Marie Stopes International, a charity that provides sexual and reproductive health-care services in developing countries. The organisation says 2.4 million women in the Philippines have an unmet need for contraceptives. Both maternal and infant mortality rates are high.

Legislation before the country's congress, known as the *Reproductive Health Bill*, includes public funding of birth control pills and distribution of condoms, as well as family-planning education. The measures were first introduced in 1998, but are still to pass into law. The current version has prompted bitter public debate between church leaders and the country's president, Benigno Aquino.

Before Simons arrived, she hadn't fully grasped the issues she was about to document. "I didn't know what to



ONE OF ROSAVILMA LOPEZ'S NINE CHILDREN



PHOTOGRAPHER
CHRISTINA SIMONS
SHARES HER
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expect," she says. "For me, it was a real insight into poverty and the impact of overpopulation and how it affects families."

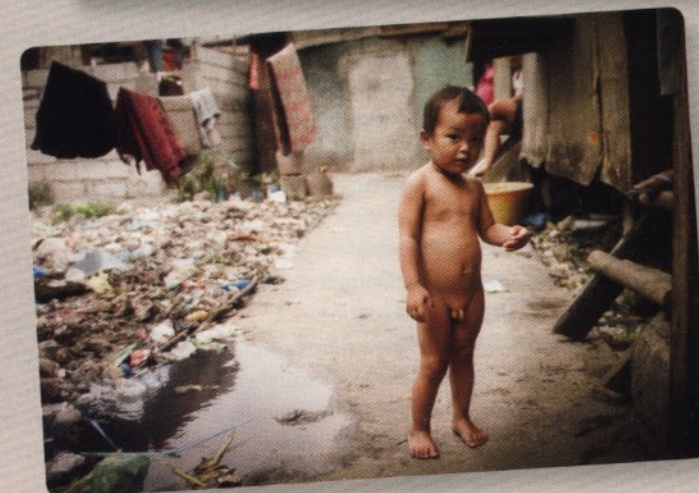
Simons photographed a team of doctors from Marie Stopes International performing tubal ligation surgery, which prevents further pregnancies. "In our culture, getting your tubes tied seems like such an extreme measure," she says, "but these women were in their early twenties and they'd already had four or five children. It was amazing to see how happy they were to have the operation."

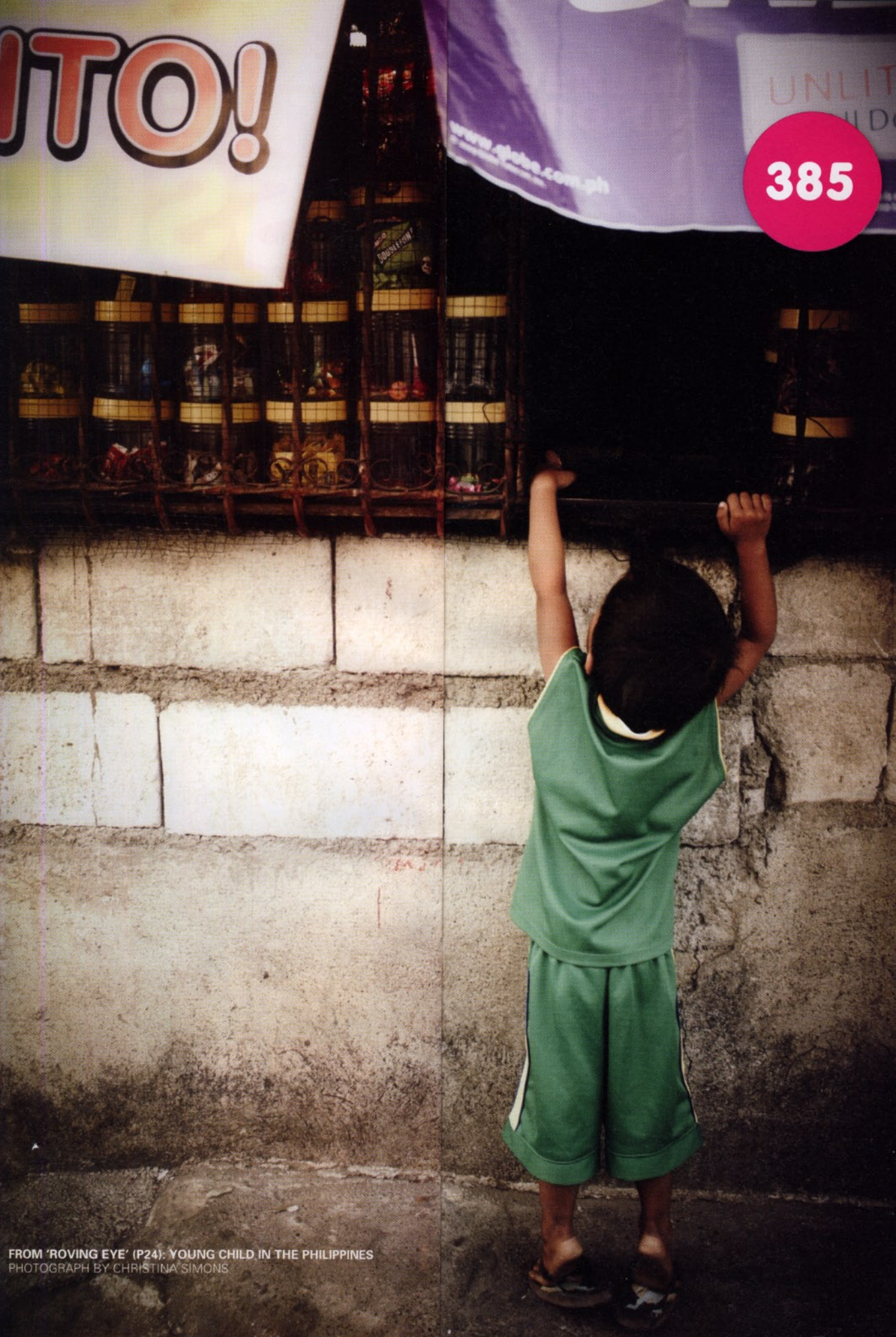
Afterwards, the Melbourne-based photographer visited some of the women in their homes and saw their cramped living conditions. "These families were beyond their capacity to cope with having more children. They weren't able to educate and feed them," she says.

When Simons visited Rosavilma Lopez, she'd just had her tubes tied. "She was so overjoyed she started weeping, because she knew she wouldn't have any more children," the photographer says. "She was relieved that she could now focus on the family she had, rather than worrying about getting pregnant again."

by **Michael Green**

You can see more of Christina Simons' photos of the Philippines on her website: christinasimons.com. For more information about the work of Marie Stopes International, see mariestopes.org.au.





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FROM 'ROVING EYE' (P24): YOUNG CHILD IN THE PHILIPPINES
PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRISTINA SIMONS