# Facts, not histrionics | Inquirer Opinion

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President Marcos did not hide his aversion to certain provisions of the Prevention of Adolescent Pregnancy bill or Senate Bill No. 1979, a measure that seeks to make sex education mandatory in public and private schools to, among others, help curb the alarming increase in the incidence of teenage pregnancy in the country.

Said Mr. Marcos: “I was appalled by some elements … all this ‘woke’ that they are trying to bring into our system … That every child has the right to try different sexualities … It is abhorrent. It is a travesty of what sexual (orientation) and sex education should be to the children.”

Sen. Risa Hontiveros, the main proponent of SB 1979, swiftly rebutted these claims, assuring the President that the bill has no provisions that teach young children inappropriate acts.

Despite repeated reassurances and Hontiveros debunking the “lies” being spread against the bill, criticisms continue to rain on the bill that proposes to make comprehensive sex education (CSE) “compulsory … (and) integrated at all levels (of school) to normaliz(e) discussions on adolescent sexuality and reproductive health, and to remove stigma at all levels.”

Former chief justice Maria Lourdes Sereno has been most vocal against the bill, claiming that CSE was “not compatible” with the local culture and was a form of “cultural imperialism” being pushed by the United Nations.

## Power imbalance

“It has to be junked,” said Sereno, a convenor of the conservative religious group National Coalition for the Family and the Constitution, which has launched a social media campaign against CSE.

Under Department of Education Order No. 31 issued in July 2018 by then Education Secretary Leonor Briones, sex education is already taught in schools to address the same issues being cited now: the rising incidence of early pregnancy, the spread of HIV/AIDS among the youth, and sexual violence sometimes perpetrated by family members.

“(I)t is imperative to enable (the young) to develop into responsible adolescents capable of making rational decisions based on adequate information and a better understanding of reproductive health,” Briones said.

Seven years since her expression of concern, the Philippine Statistics Authority and the Child Rights Network (CRN) have reported that one in 20 Filipino babies are born to mothers 15 to 19 years old, with registered births among 10- to 14-year-olds on the rise. Some of these babies were “fathered by men significantly older than the (teen mothers), highlighting disturbing power imbalances that often lead to abuse,” the CRN said.

“Teen pregnancy accounts for almost 60 percent of school dropouts among young girls, severely limiting their potential and costing the country billions in lost opportunities,” the group added.

## Word war

It cannot be emphasized enough that sex education helps the youth understand how to take care of their bodies even before puberty; recognize and refuse what feels like an uncomfortable touch even from relatives; learn how certain intimacies—sometimes disguised as play by predators—can get one pregnant; learn that diseases can result from unsafe sex; be informed of the health risks of early pregnancy, and realize how being a young mother can severely compromise the prospects of a better future.

Additionally, as Health Secretary Teodoro Herbosa has pointed out, unplanned pregnancies, including those among minors, are among the main reasons why a staggering 30 percent of Filipino children are stunted. Being too small and underweight for one’s age can later lead to lifelong problems like mental retardation.

Given these dire prospects, the word war that has erupted over the pending bill must give way to a sober and facts-based discussion on how the bill can address the concerns expressed so far, without diluting its laudable objectives.

## Bigger picture

This seems like a welcome possibility, what with Mr. Marcos expressing belief on the importance of sex education in terms of teaching the youth about the reproductive system, the consequences of early and unplanned pregnancy, and the prevalence of the human immunodeficiency virus. Hontiveros has also signified her willingness to “accept amendments to refine the bill (to) steer it to passage.”

Such coming together of involved parties to thresh out their varying viewpoints and address reasonable concerns is definitely the more productive way to tackle this bill instead of using social media, where fearmongering lies, misinformation, and disinformation are easily magnified.

Cooler minds must prevail, and information shared must be based on actual facts and scientific data instead of divisive speculations and religious beliefs. Legislators tasked to go through SB 1979 should shut out the noise and histrionics, taking care that relevant points are deliberated on in the appropriate venue where mature minds can hopefully resolve them.

The focus should be on the bigger picture: how the rising trend of early pregnancy adversely affects not just young mothers, but the country’s future as well.