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Divorce bill to free women from spouse abuse — lawmaker

By DELON PORCALLA

The recently approved consolidated divorce bill in the House of Representatives aims to free women from abusive husbands who may be inflicting not only physical but also emotional harm, one of the bill's proponents said yesterday.

"A divorce law liberates a wife from an abusive relationship and helps her regain her dignity and self-respect," Albay Rep. Edcel Lagman said.

He said the bill is a "sister" measure of another pro-woman legislation, the Reproductive Health (RH) Law, which he helped pass in 2015.

The RH Law guarantees a woman's right to determine the number and spacing of her children to mitigate maternal death.

"Divorce is an exception for irremediably broken and lost marriages, and the state has a continuing mandate to protect and preserve marriage as a social institution and foundation of the family," Lagman said.

The Bicolano lawmaker authored House Bill 116. Speaker Pantaleon Alvarez authored HB 6027 on dissolution of marriage and Surigao del Norte Rep. Robert Ace Barbers sponsored HB 1062.

Women's group Gabriela pushed the passage of HB 2380.

Barbers proposed that at least five years of actual separation should be valid ground for annulment.

He said the measure was meant to help alleviate the lives of many estranged Filipino couples, who suffer from the effects of failed marriages.

Alvarez said the lawmakers consulted overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) in Hong Kong, Japan and Malaysia.

He said the approval at the committee level of the substitute bill shows the House recognized the clamor of the OFWs, endorsed by many officials of the Department of Foreign Affairs stationed abroad.

They all wanted a less expensive and faster mode of dissolution of marriage compared to the lengthy and costly annulment process under the Family Code.

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What is more significant is that lawmakers crossed party lines to join in the effort to craft the bill.

To make the process less costly, the bill exempts indigent couples, or those with properties amounting to P5 million or less, from paying legal fees.

House Deputy Speaker Pia Cayetano explained that the P5-million ceiling is based on the committee's consultation abroad, where a majority of the OFWs requested for an affordable process of marriage dissolution.

The substitute measure also provides for summary judicial process of marriage dissolution on certain grounds.

Deputy Speaker Raneo Abu, who was part of the delegation in Hong Kong, said the present House leadership would do what is right and practical for the benefit of the people.

Senators cool to divorce bill

Meanwhile, senators gave a cold welcome to the House efforts to come up with a divorce law in the country.

Senate Majority Leader Vicente Sotto III said he would not support the bill, noting it has a slim chance of getting the approval of the Senate.

Sen. Joel Villanueva said that he is against divorce and would rather have the existing law on annulment simplified.

Sen. Francis Escudero pushed for amending the provisions of the Civil Code and Family Code on annulment to make it more affordable and accessible.

He said that he would rather see this than "expanding the grounds provided therein through a new law on divorce."

Sen. Panfilo Lacson said he would take a look at the provisions contained in the bill being taken up in the House.

He said his primary concern would be for the preservation of the sanctity of marriage.

Sen. Sherwin Gatchalian likes to view divorce as a process meant to provide protection for women just like annulment.

He clarified that he does not want to see an "express divorce" like in United States, where it is easy for any couple to break their marriage.