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Ilka Bailey-Wiebecke

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Ilka Bailey-Wiebecke



Women in Asia suffer from triple oppression—as citizens of developing countries in an unjust global economic system, as workers in paid or unpaid domestic work, and as women. This was the conclusion of women attending a consultation held in Bombay in 1984 on the theme of Asian Women and the Struggle for Justice (AWAKE 1985). Elements of Third World feminism therefore stem from the fact that feminists are often mobilizers and organizers pertaining to specific issues of immediate importance rather than First World women who tend to extend their influence by lobbying in parliament or the academe (Tiglao-Torres).

In the Philippines, a former colony of Spain, anticolonial women's organizations were part of the Philippine independence campaign. The women's suffrage movement from 1906 to 1935 was carried by various women's leagues and auxiliary women's organizations of political parties. Thus, even today, women's clubs and women's organizations in the Philippines are offshoots of national and political movements (Gomez 1989).

In the 1980s the anti-Marcos movement spawned women's organizations with a common base for unity, i.e., antiauthoritarianism. Some of these groups such as the General Assembly of Women or GABRIELA, articulated antiimperialist goals alongside feminist aspirations. These are principally the groups that continue to be active today (Tiglao-Torres). As one result of their struggle, the 1987 Constitution gave recognition to the role women have played and continue to play in the task of nation building. It declared that "The State recognizes the role of women in nation-building, and shall ensure the fundamental equality before the law of women and men."

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It also guaranteed equal access to opportunities and public services, and mandated the state to take appropriate steps to make quality education accessible to all (Feliciano 1990–91).

The concept “women in development” (WID) refers to a systematic consideration of women and their concern in the development process. Its operationalization, however, has taken a two-pronged approach: the initiation of women-specific projects or activities and the integration of women in general or gender-neutral projects (Enrile and Illo 1991). In many Third World countries like the Philippines, however, subsistence crops have given way to cash crops aimed at better export returns, and consequently, higher productivity. Thus, women’s labor was redirected from achieving self-sufficiency to satisfying the demands of the market economy. In order to counteract this trend, WID was created. It was first criticized in the 1970s by European and North American women who insisted that development had actually harmed women. The hallmark of a new strategy was feminism, that opposed the utilitarian view that women’s labor should not be wasted.

The alternative concept “women and development” (WAD), which saw development as a way to empower women, emerged. In the Philippines, a fledgling women’s movement began development for women in the mid-80s. Women’s groups organized various types of socioeconomic projects at the grassroots level, perhaps not primarily to intervene in mainstream, integrationist development work but to respond initially to immediate needs of their organizations (Women and development 1991). However, it was also thought that women must assert gender sensitivity, even in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) critical of the mainstream development view, because they, too, make mistakes and launch projects that are, for example, away from the fields in the Cordillera. As a synthesis of a sort of WAD and WID, “gender and development” (GAD) was born. The GAD framework encourages the participation of men and women in the struggle of gender oppression (ibid.).

Women’s Work

Kapit sa patalim means clutching a knife or being driven to despair by the human desire to continue living today and perhaps for another day. This was used as a term to describe the fate of 16,000 Filipino girls, mostly coming from landless peasant families in the

provinces, who became prostitutes and sold their wares to the American servicemen of Clark Air Base and Subic Naval Base (Sancho-Liao 1992). From the 1970s to the 1990s, there have been no reliable estimates of the number of prostitutes, but there must have been tens of thousands who were engaged in some form of sexual trade as massage attendants, club waitresses, bar dancers, and so on, based on the large number of establishments and enterprises connected with the trade. The magnitude of this problem, perhaps more than any other economic activity by women, is indicative of the lack of options they have for productive work (Eviota 1992). In addition, campaigns against prostitution by the mayor of Manila in 1992 were couched in terms of the morality of women, while customers were left untouched.

Government encouragement, coupled with deteriorating living conditions of the working class, resulted in a tremendous increase in the number of overseas workers. From 36,035 in 1975, the number of overseas contract workers processed increased to 477,264 in 1988. This figure, however, excludes Filipinos working illegally overseas (Encarnacion and Tadem 1992). By 1992 the overall figure of all overseas workers amounted to 4.5 million, but unfortunately the proportion of overseas domestic workers is not available. However, it is known that women constituted 49 percent of the major categories of overseas workers. This was already the trend in the 1970s. In 1991 it was reported that there were 32,530 Filipino domestics in Europe, 216,222 in the Middle East and 433,469 in Asia, and nearly all of them (98.42 percent) were women. Sixty-two percent of all domestic helpers worked in Asia, while 30 percent were based in the Middle East (*ibid.*).

Evaluation feedback forms showed that around 9 percent of overseas domestic helpers desperately begged to be returned to the Philippines; 23 percent wanted to return home, but upon thinking of their families and loans, were willing to stay and suffer; and 68 percent described their situation as tolerable or even lucky because they had good employers. The 9 percent who cried for help all worked in the Middle East. The more fortunate domestic helpers were employed in countries such as Canada and Hong Kong (Palma-Beltran n.d.).

The distinction of minority cultural communities lies not only in their religious diversion from the majority of Christian Filipinos but also in the fact that the majority is advanced economically and technologically and is integrated into the national political system. Approximately 16 percent of the Philippine population can be considered members of distinct minority cultural communities (Eviota 1992).

Apart from the Muslim cultural group, which makes the headlines almost everyday, the most outspoken ethnic community is the Igorot community, especially the Igorot women, from the Cordillera region. They are trying to manifest their alternative culture against foreign domination and toward women's liberation in search of a culture that will empower the oppressed and the powerless. Women's culture is thus described as a culture which values life over death; healing over destroying; nurturing and sharing more than controlling and dominating; expressiveness, gentleness, and sensitivity to others over force, aggression, and violence (Tauli-Corpuz 1992).

Recently, a campaign to stop ethnocide and development aggression was launched by various people's organizations and NGOs in the Cordillera region. They defined six specific objectives, among them the exposure of the link between ongoing military operations and plans of the government and big business to push through with the extraction of the remaining natural resources in the region (Women's campaign 1991).

Government Policies

At the outset of the International Women's Decade in 1976, the Philippine government established the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women (NCRFW), a mechanism under the Office of the President. It was mandated to review, evaluate, and recommend measures, including priorities, that will ensure full integration of women in economic, social, and cultural development at all levels and promote further equality between men and women.

The setting up of national machinery was also a result of some eight years of agitation by women's organizations, especially the Civic Assembly of Women in the Philippines (CAWP), an umbrella of 74 affiliated national women's organizations. It called for a body composed of representatives of government, the private sector, and civic and religious organizations so that it could be the highlight of the observance of the International Women's Decade in the Philippines (NCRFW 1985).

The Philippine Development Plan for Women (PDPW) for 1989–1992 was the result of extensive consultations among different government agencies, NGOs, and women experts. The Cabinet Assistance System (CAS), the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA), and the UN, through the United Nations Fund for Women

(UNIFEM) and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), also extended their support.

The PDPW is a document that concretizes the government's political will to advance the situation of women. It is a translation of the constitutional policy on women and the statement in the Medium Term Philippine Development Plan (MTPDP) that "Women, who constitute half of the population, shall be effectively mobilized." The 17 chapters of the PDPW parallel those of the MTPDP, except for five chapters on special concerns for women: migration, prostitution, violence against women, media, and arts and culture (NCRFW 1992).

Noted as one of the significant pro-women laws enacted under the Aquino government, Republic Act 7192, or the Women in Development and Nation-Building Act, is a broad package of provisions that include the setting aside of Official Development Assistance (ODA) funds from foreign and multilateral agencies; the review and revision of government policies to remove gender bias; the monitoring, formulation, and prioritization by the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) with the NCRFW of rural development activities; the collection of sex-disaggregated data; the equal capability of married women to enter into contracts; and equal access to membership in organizations (GABRIELA 1992).

Women's Rights as Human Rights

In other countries, women's rights have been marginalized by women's commissions or centers set up by the state, which in many cases ended up denying the integration of the women's agenda in national policies. The situation of women in the Philippines, no matter how positively pursued, is therefore under criticism from nongovernmental organizations, in particular from GABRIELA. The latter complains that it is not necessarily consulted as called for by governmental policies.

At the international level, although much lip-service is being given to women's rights, there is an increasing tendency on the part of the international community to marginalize the issue of women's rights. As a concrete example, when the United Nations Commission on Human Rights was moved from New York to Geneva in order to primarily consider human rights matters, it established the United Nations Branch for the Advancement of Women (then headed by a Filipina, Leticia Shahani) and the Commission on the Status of

Women in Vienna, far away from decision-making centers. The division of concerns between the two bodies has complicated the resolution of women's rights as human rights as part of the human rights agenda (Jimenez 1993).

In 1993, at a regional meeting for Asia in Bangkok, held in preparation for the World Conference on Human Rights, NGOs were united in proposing a way of dealing with women's rights at the World Conference. The issue of women's rights, they stated, has not been sufficiently visible in human rights discourse, in human rights institutions and practices. Patriarchy, which operates through gender, class, caste, and ethnicity, is integral to the problems facing women, while development problems further worsen the situation in Third World countries. Patriarchy, they stated, is a form of slavery and must be eradicated. Women's rights must also be addressed in both public and private spheres of society, particularly in the family.

To provide women with dignity and self-determination, it is important that women have inalienable human rights, including the right to development, as it is included in the right to agricultural land, housing, and other resources and property. The meeting therefore concluded that crimes against women are crimes against humanity, and the failure of government to prosecute those responsible for such crimes implies complicity.

The blatant violation of the universality of human rights continues in the use of cultural relativity to excuse the perpetuation of various forms of abuse against women. For example, systematic violations of women's basic rights, like genital mutilation, have resulted from fundamentalism in many religions and cultural traditions. Thus, the international community has overlooked various violations of women's rights, such as restrictions on the access to education, food, and employment, and has neglected the issue of gender equality in the development process, especially in decision-making processes.

Turning back to the unique human rights situation in the Philippines, the burden of human rights violations committed against women is particularly heavy. Women who have become internal refugees amount to 20 percent of around 1.4 million from 1986 to 1993. The considerable number of fifty-five women political prisoners were detained from January 1992 to April 1993—of which thirteen remain in detention and thirteen still missing.

Details about the plight of the internal refugee women are hard to come by since that type of human rights violation usually happens in remote areas of the country. A report by the GABRIELA Com-

mission on Womens' Political Rights focuses on the impact of militarization on women in Negros, one of the most militarized provinces. This report might serve as an example because it describes that, in 1992, 780 families or 4,195 persons were staying in 14 relocation sites, 227 families or 890 persons were scattered, 976 families or 3,350 persons lived in strategic hamlets in Negros Oriental, while 199 families or 1,007 persons lived in the forest.

During military operations, women stop farming, hide their animals and feed them secretly, and disperse the children to prevent them from making noise. They have learned to organize and face up to military interrogations while their husbands are hiding. In behalf of the women burdened with this type of life, demands have been made to: (a) allow the women and their families to return to their original homes and communities, (b) remove the military, the CAFGUs, the fanatics, and criminals from their communities so that they can return to a normal life, and (c) give them and their loved ones justice in full measure.

Human rights organizations in the Philippines believe that if the war fought in the countryside is ended, these types of violations will also come to an end. In that respect, the Philippine situation resembles other countries where "dirty" wars are being fought. It appears that as a consequence, these violations are not the concerns of official governmental policies pertaining to women. There lies another weakness of Philippine national institutions—they deal only with economic and social rights, instead of embracing the whole range of civil and political rights as well.

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