

GENDER SENSITIVITY IN THE COURTS

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We in the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women congratulate the UP Law Center and the UP Center for Women's Studies for taking a bold and critical step towards understanding gender bias in the judiciary through their book, *Gender Sensitivity in the Court System*.

Gender bias does not only exist in the way women who seek justice are questioned and treated in the courts. Unfortunately, it also shows in the kind of decisions made by both male and women judges, especially in rape and other cases of violence against women. Ironically, sexist thinking, attitudes and behavior that perpetrate the denigration of women and gender inequality permeate the courts of justice — the very same institution tasked to uphold human rights and equality before the law. Women tell of their intimidating experiences in the courts, and how they are regarded with suspicion and disbelief when they file cases for rape or for support.

This book will undoubtedly raise the awareness of judges and lawyers to the reality of women's experiences. With a more gender sensitive judiciary, it is our hope that victim-survivors will not be discouraged from filing cases and to fight for their rights because they will be assured that their dignity will be respected. We also hope that more women judges and justices will be appointed

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by the President, with the advocacy of no less than the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

In the bigger picture, this book fits in the government's blueprint for action called the Framework Plan for Women, which identifies the protection and fulfillment of women's human rights as a priority concern. One of the objectives of this Framework Plan is to promote a gender-responsive delivery of justice. We hope that with this Plan, and with the help of this book, all men and women who believe in the same cause can begin to eliminate gender bias in the courts and in the Prosecution Service.

This book will be very useful in implementing the following interventions included in the Plan:

- Awareness-raising seminars for court officials and staff;
- Integration of gender principles in court protocols and standards for delivery of justice;
- Conduct of capacity-building programs on gender-sensitive case handling for court social workers, judges, and the police; and
- Upgrading and installing survivor-sensitive facilities.

The judiciary, however, is but one of the institutions responsible for the big challenge of curbing violence against women. In December 2001 in the National Socio-economic Pact signed last December 10, 2001, the NCRFW's oversight function was strengthened to implement measures to curb violence and direct relevant government departments and agencies to support them. The NCRFW therefore initiated the creation of an Inter-agency Committee on Violence Against Women (IAC-VAW) composed of 14 government agencies that have mandates to address VAW. Through this inter-agency mechanism, we hope to have more systematized and coordinated Government Actions to stop vio-

lence against women. The committee tackles ways to improve services offered to victim-survivors such as health, counseling, legal aid, shelters and rehabilitation, including economic self-reliance. Protocols, tools and guidebooks on handling VAW, and training programs for health and social workers, the police, crisis counselors, court officials, and other advocates are being reviewed.

We all know that changing societal norms and values and achieving an adequate understanding of the nature and causes of violence against women require massive information and education campaigns in all levels across class and sectors. We need to do the same not only in the Executive, but also in the Legislative and Judicial branches of government. As a step towards these efforts, the NCRFW will be initiating the development of a national action plan to eliminate VAW to be launched on November 25, the UN International Day of Action to Eliminate Violence Against Women in partnership with NGOs, the media, the private sector, and the academe.

As the premier state university, the University of the Philippines has again produced a groundbreaking piece. The things written here about insensitive judges may hurt, but that is the truth. Often, it is only through honest and objective criticism that we can begin the process of change.

We thank you for this chance to be with you today to reaffirm our commitment to end violence against women and make this government work for women's empowerment and gender equality.