

# FILIPINO WOMEN AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT\*

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## INTRODUCTION

What I thought I might do today is to give you a sense of Filipino women's political engagement during much of our country's recent history, and some of their salient accomplishments as a result of such engagement. The vitality and success of Filipino women in just about every field of endeavor has been the subject of much comment in the existing literature on Third World women. The Philippines has produced the only woman president, Corazon Aquino, in Southeast Asia and East Asia thus far. In the 1992 presidential elections, there were two women who ran, with one doing extremely well. The major Philippine political institutions like the legislature, bureaucracy, courts, local governments, and the professions have higher percentages of female participation in their ranks than even more advanced countries in the West. The number of deans and other high-level administrators in public and private colleges and universities is far higher than what you would find on Manoa and other campuses in the United States. The Philippines also produced the first woman police general in the whole world in 1989. The country has also produced someone like Imelda Marcos who defies description in any language.

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At the same time, however, this is the country that provides the world with the biggest supply of domestic helpers, entertainers who are actually doing the work of prostitutes, mail-order brides, blue-collar workers, and other low-level functionaries. We are also looking at a country where poverty is staggering, and every administration coming on board hides it, saying it is only 49%, but in fact it is estimated at 70%. Women and children bear the brunt of that poverty. How can one explain all these paradoxes?

Before venturing into some possible explanations, I would like to give a brief overview of the areas that have engaged the political energies of Filipino women, and where they have reasonably done well. I am using the word *politics* or *political* in a very broad sense, not just in the formal seeking or exercise of power in electoral campaigns and public spheres of decision-making. The broader political realm includes activities of women in grass-roots organizations, social networks, cultural associations, religious circles, and even the streets and the underground. My judgment is that, from the time Filipino women began to participate in public life in one way or another, they have been more successful in non-conventional or anti-establishment forms of politics, rather than in the formal arena of power, which is still dominated by the men.

Women's political roles in the Philippines, particularly in the 20th century, have revolved around, but not been limited, to five general categories, namely: 1) the struggle for nearly three decades to achieve women's suffrage, which was granted in 1937, one of the earliest in the Third World; 2) the resistance to authoritarian or oppressive rule especially during the 14-year martial law regime under Ferdinand Marcos from 1972 to 1986; 3) the mobilization of popular resistance on a wide range of issues, such as the U.S. military bases in the Philippines, multinational corporations, militarization, human rights violations, the Bataan nuclear reactor built by Westinghouse, prostitution, the country's huge foreign debt, poverty, crime, and other social problems; 4) the organization of working women to fight for their rights and secure better conditions; and 5) the promotion of alternative mechanisms of political or popular participation, such as non-governmental

organizations (NGOs), people's organizations, zones for peace, basic Christian communities, and so on.

It will not be possible to discuss all of these because there is such a long history and wide array of women's political involvement in the Philippines. I would like to stress particularly the achievements that have come about as a result of the conscious decision of the women themselves to confront conventional notions of power and established structures of male domination in Philippine society.

### THE WOMEN'S VOTE

The protracted struggle for female suffrage in the decades covering the 1910s to the 1930s was essentially a middle-class women's movement. At the turn of the century in the Philippines, there were already, unlike in other countries in Asia and elsewhere, hundreds of Filipinas who had finished college education, and entered public life by establishing schools, orphanages, hospitals, and other social institutions. They had also done political work against Spanish colonial rule in the Katipunan (a secret society of Filipino revolutionaries) and in other organizations.

In 1900 the *Instituto de Mujeres* (Institute of Women), an exclusive school offering college courses, was founded by Rosa Sevilla (later Alvero), Florentina Arellano and Susan Revilla. This was followed by the establishment in 1903 of the Insular Normal School to prepare future teachers. In 1906 a bill proposing to set up training schools for nurses was passed.

The women leaders at the time extended their work to social service. In June 1905 Concepcion Felix (later Rodriguez) and a group of "prominent ladies" at the time organized the *Asociacion Feminista Filipina* (Association of Filipino Feminists), aimed at securing reforms in schools, prisons, factories and other institutions employing women. It also undertook campaigns against prostitution, gambling, drinking and other vices.

In 1906 Pura Villanueva Kalaw, another pioneer in the women's movement, formed the *Asociacion Feminista Ilonga* (*Ilonga*

Feminist Association), which made women's suffrage one of its goals. The use of the term "feminista" says a lot of the orientation of these early women leaders. They were simply not content to use "mujeres" (women), which conveyed a more passive connotation. It was only a matter of time therefore that with the increasing visibility of women in public life, they would soon ask for the right to vote. One woman civic leader complained bitterly that her driver could vote and she could not.

The high points in the struggle were played out in two arenas: 1) the national legislature and other official circles; and 2) the grass-roots and remote regions across the land, where scores of women had gone to campaign for ratification once the law mandating female suffrage was passed. These two "fields of battle" brought out for the first time under American colonial rule, the tremendous energies and talents of women which were to change the character of Philippine politics in terms of expanding their opportunities to develop careers in public life. Before World War II broke out, women had been elected to public office, not in great numbers, but it was an auspicious beginning.

The legislative struggle was a direct confrontation with entrenched male attitudes of superiority and condescension towards women. The all-male National Legislature used everything to belittle the escalating struggle for female suffrage, from ridicule of women's ability to hold office to fear of Filipino family values disappearing if women were to vote or be voted into office. In 1919 the leading feminists of the time, such as Pura Kalaw, Concepcion Felix Rodriguez, Rosa Sevilla Alvero, Encarnacion Alzona, Natividad Almeda-Lopez, and others held a rally in Malacañang, the presidential palace, at the invitation of the First Lady Elizabeth Wrenmore Harrison, wife of American Governor-General Francis Burton Harrison. This may have been responsible for the introduction of several pro-women's suffrage bills in the Senate, although the Lower House remained predominantly anti-women's suffrage.

The women's next "big move" was in 1920 when the Manila Women's Club invited all its provincial chapters to a general convention in Manila, the first time in the history of the country.

The convention resulted in, among other things, the formation of the League of Women Suffragettes. The following year, the women organized themselves into a National Federation of Women's Clubs, which, as it turned out, "became the vanguard of a more successful suffrage movement from 1921 to 1937, the year the Woman Suffrage Law was passed."

After this, more women's organizations were founded, such as the National League of Filipino Women and the Philippine Association of University Women, the latter obviously patterned after its American counterpart. Incidentally, the American feminists during this period, like Carrie Chapman Catt, visited the Philippines to give moral encouragement to the incipient women's movement. Finally, in December 1933, the suffrage bill was signed into law by Governor General Frank Murphy, but the struggle had really only just begun.

The new law which was to take effect on January 1, 1935, was superseded by a constitutional provision of the Commonwealth, which was established as a 10-year transition period to Philippine independence from the United States. The women had to start all over again, from the time of the Constitutional Convention for this Commonwealth status in 1934, to the passage of the same Suffrage Law in 1937. But this time the anti-suffrage committee in the Constitutional Convention attached an onerous provision to the law, which stated in effect that the National Assembly would extend the right of suffrage to women, "if in a plebiscite which shall be held for that purpose within two years after the adoption of this constitution, *not less than three hundred thousand women would vote affirmatively on the question.*"<sup>2</sup> The committee thought this requirement would be virtually impossible to meet because women had never voted before. And that would be the end of this pesky suffrage issue, which had been blowing hot and cold for two decades.

Undaunted, the early Philippine feminists became more determined. They mobilized the General Council of Women and its provincial branches to sign up women voters to meet the 300,000 quota. Propaganda work was done through the press, radio, posters, rallies, house-to-house visits, speaking tours,

distribution of sample ballots, informational lectures, and so on. They covered the entire country — a remarkable feat given the fragmented geography and primitive modes of transportation at the time. They even formed the Junior Federation of Women's Clubs, which would take care of the children when their mothers went to vote on the day of the plebiscite. They covered everything from providing food to transportation services to women who would go out and vote.

The supreme moment of victory had come after the relentless campaign. In the end, the suffrage movement registered 500,000 women voters, of whom 447,725 voted affirmative in the plebiscite on April 30, 1937. The momentum had begun for other struggles to follow, such as repealing provisions in the Civil Code, which were clearly discriminatory or oppressive to women and children, and getting women themselves to run for public office.

## **PROTEST POLITICS**

A second area of political activism among Filipino women involves social protest, especially against authoritarian or oppressive structures, of which there are plenty in Philippine society. Because the Philippines went through a very lengthy period of colonial rule under the Spaniards, Americans, and Japanese, spanning more than 400 years, its history witnessed countless uprisings and revolutions in which women played a vital role. There were 200 local rebellions, for instance, against Spain, culminating in the Philippine Revolution of 1896. Though women did not participate in great numbers as combatants in these upheavals, they performed certain tasks that were crucial to undermining or defeating the enemy.

In its more recent post-colonial history, the country again witnessed several political upheavals in which the women were once more in the forefront. The foreign oppressors were gone but their legacy and continuing power maintained old structures or created new ones dominated by the native elites and their following. Space limitations allow only one example of women's

struggle in each of the general categories mentioned earlier. Omission of other major or important activities of Filipino women on a political scale is not deliberate.

### **WOMEN IN THE UNDERGROUND**

The period between 1972 and 1986 was the peak of women's protest politics in recent years. This covered the martial law regime of Ferdinand Marcos, which was unprecedented in the country's history since gaining its independence in 1946. The Marcos dictatorship abolished Congress, political parties, elections, and other institutions. It suspended civil liberties, enforced media censorship, and took over business establishments owned by Marcos' opponents. His political opponents either disappeared or were incarcerated, tortured, exiled, murdered. Under Marcos, the military establishment grew in number and became the regime's dreaded instrument for numerous atrocities and human rights violations against innocent civilians, including women and children.

The various forms of resistance that the women engaged in during the stressful period under Marcos may be simply grouped into two categories, namely, underground and aboveground. The underground activities were mostly in conjunction with the larger insurgency movement led by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its military arm, the New People's Army (NPA). The CPP and NPA, which were formed in 1968-69, actively recruited women cadres who became couriers, writers and producers of underground publications like *Liberation* and *Balita ng Malayang Pilipinas* (Free Philippines News Service), organizers, and soldiers. Lorena Barros, founder of MAKIBAKA (New Women's Free Association), the militant feminist group in the late 60s and early 70s, which espoused radical measures similar to those of the women's liberation movement in the U.S., became an NPA squad leader in the Southern Tagalog underground. "From accounts of former guerrillas, an all-woman detachment at one time during the martial law years was formed within the

NPA in the Cordilleras. In the NPA guerrilla zones in the countryside, its Barrio Organization Committees (BOC) included Women's Committees composed of women."<sup>3</sup> The women cadres also formed extensive urban underground networks which maintained contact and received financial and other kinds of support from sympathizers and organizations operating aboveground. Apparently, there were also attempts to create a "Women's Bureau" in the CPP, but this was overtaken by the arrest of the latter's top leadership between 1974-76.

Space does not allow a detailed discussion of women in the underground movement during the Marcos years, but one point may be emphasized. It was not unusual for young and college-educated women to leave the comfort of their homes and security of their middle-class upbringing to join the resistance in the hills. They were products of the 60s, a time of resurgent Philippine nationalism. They were following the long tradition of revolutionary Filipino women who had joined previous struggles for emancipation, independence, or equality. However, the women in the underground during this period before and during martial law were much more ideological than their predecessors. They were not just fighting the Marcos dictatorship, but against historical injustice, inequality, poverty, and all the structural elements that had become second nature to Philippine society. Their political consciousness was based on a socialist understanding of the fundamental problems of society.

But much remains to be done in terms of research to answer questions like, what attracted them to the socialist ideology in the first place, and what problems had they encountered with the men in the movement. An observation has been expressed that, despite the vitality of feminism in the socialist critique of Philippine culture, "the gravitational pull in analysis toward the national sphere of the productive structure indicative of orthodox Marxist dogma remains overpowering."<sup>4</sup> As a result, this view concludes, "a popular consciousness that is disturbingly retrograde exists side by side with a potent left insurgency."<sup>5</sup>



**“PARLIAMENT OF THE STREETS”**

The catalyst for the escalation of popular opposition to the Marcos dictatorship was the assassination at high noon on the tarmac of the Manila International Airport of Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino, leading opponent of Marcos, on August 21, 1983. Outraged response by Filipinos from all walks of life to the brutal murder was instantaneous. Overnight the enraged population organized and mobilized the so-called “Parliament of the Streets.” From August 1983 to April 1984, more than 200 mass actions, such as demonstrations, rallies, boycotts, marches and other protest activities calling for the ouster of Marcos, were carried out. It was the beginning of the end of the regime, which was at this point already nearing economic collapse.

It was in this context that women’s organization and mobilization efforts were galvanized. A dozen or so women’s groups mushroomed in Metro Manila alone. Actually many of them had been organized earlier and were already engaged in protest actions in factories and other institutions. The La Tondeña strike in Manila in 1975, for instance, was organized by women for better wages and conditions for workers, but it was brutally suppressed by the police. The *Katipunan ng Bagong Pilipina* (KABAPA or New Women’s Association), which attracted a majority of rural or peasant women, had been in existence since the early 70s.

The biggest alliance of women’s groups that was crystallized by the Aquino assassination was GABRIELA (General Assembly Binding Women for Reforms, Integrity, Equality, Leadership and Action). It derived its name from the best known woman warrior in Philippine history, Gabriela Silang, who carried on the Ilocano revolt against the Spaniards started by her husband Diego Silang in 1762. In choosing the name, the group organizers sought to honor Gabriela Silang, “the great Filipino heroine who was able to transcend the traditional supportive role allotted to women”.<sup>6</sup> The major objectives of GABRIELA when it was organized in 1984 included: 1) articulating the issues that affect Filipino women; 2) drawing Filipino women into the mainstream of

national life and articulating their perception of their role in the present Philippine struggle; and 3) joining forces with the rest of the nation in the struggle for truth, freedom, justice and genuine democracy.<sup>7</sup> By 1985, GABRIELA had added more specific objectives, such as: 1) providing a framework/perspective for an analysis of the problems of Filipino women; 2) forwarding women's demands through a 1985 Declaration on Rights and Welfare of Filipino Women; and 3) building an international network of solidarity.

Among the founding incorporators of the GABRIELA coalition were:

1. SAMAKANA — Association of United Nationalist Women
2. WOMEN — Women in Media Now
3. CAP — Concerned Artists of the Philippines
4. AAP — Art Association of the Philippines
5. NOWRP — National Organization of Women Religious of the Philippines
6. PILIPINA — No equivalent of acronym given
7. KAMAY — Society of Women Religious in Manila
8. FAB — Farmers' Assistance Board
9. KMK — Working Women's Movement
10. SAMAKA — Association of Women Students
11. KAKAMPI — Filipino Nationalist Women's Group
12. KALAYAAN — Association of Major Religious Women Superiors in the Philippines
13. SJCAA — St. Joseph's College Alumni Association
14. AMRSWP — Association of Major Religious Women Superiors in the Philippines
15. ALSWAM — Association of Women Local Superiors in the Archdiocese of Manila

By 1985 GABRIELA had expanded to include more than a hundred groups across a broad spectrum of women in the country. Its essential membership, however, remained relatively middle class.

GABRIELA's achievements during the martial law years may be summarized thus:

- playing a leadership role in mobilizing or crystallizing protest against the Marcos dictatorship, the U.S. military bases in the Philippines, sex tourism, prostitution, the Bataan nuclear reactor built by Westinghouse, and other issues;
- developing a *national* women's movement based on the concept that "a nation can not be free unless its own women are free;" and
- raising the consciousness of Filipino women to political and ideological levels.

Today, nearly a decade later, GABRIELA remains the most militant of the feminist organizations, although its activities have shifted to other concerns now that the U.S. bases and the Marcos dictatorship are gone. In its fourth National Congress in 1987, GABRIELA saw itself as working toward a "higher phase of struggle". The Congress theme was "women's empowerment for land, jobs, homes, health and equal rights." These were seen as basic women's issues. "Faced with a new Aquino government still indifferent to the legitimate demands of the poor sectors in our society, the militant women's movement is determined to achieve no less than these demands for the women masses whose number and strength is the main sustaining force of the movement."<sup>8</sup> The GABRIELA Congress examined the role of the organization in 1986, the year of the "people power revolution" which ousted Marcos, when it spearheaded, among other things, the drafting of a "Women's Agenda for a Full and Lasting Peace." One of the GABRIELA founders and Secretary-General, Nelia Sancho, was to run for the Philippine Senate, along with some leaders of the Philippine Left, in the May 1987 national elections.

#### **RIGHTS OF WORKING WOMEN**

By 1988 women constituted the majority of workers in four major occupation categories: clerical, sales, service, and

professional, technical and related jobs. Traditionally these are the lowest paid occupations. And to make matters worse for women, they are paid much less than their male counterparts across the board in these occupations.

Women working in factories, export processing zones, manufacturing industries, and other industrial enterprises constitute the vast majority of the urban female labor force. Women in factories in turn are concentrated in the garments, electronics, and food processing industries. In 1984 about 85% of electronic plant workers and 80% of export processing zone workers were women. The proliferation of multinational industries has given rise to the unprecedented growth and employment of the urban female labor force in recent years. The majority of the women workers in the garments and textiles industries are unmarried and between the ages of 16 and 25. But a good percentage are also married and in their prime childbearing years between 24 and 44. This situation places a double burden on them, since they have to work as much as possible without interruption during these years to survive. "Employers claim to prefer women for their manual dexterity, neatness, meticulousness, patience with monotonous and complex work, and docility."<sup>9</sup>

These women workers earn below minimum wages usually on a piecemeal basis, suffer extremely oppressive conditions for long hours in the workplace, are often denied maternity and other health benefits, and worst of all, are subject to sexual harassment. Workplaces are often dirty, congested, hot, poorly lighted and ventilated, and noisy. The electronic assembly lines expose workers to radiation and toxic substances that are hazardous to health. In the agro-industrial workplaces, such as those in Mindanao, herbicides, pesticides, and other chemicals used often lead to various health hazards for women workers and their babies.

The subhuman conditions of the workplace for most of the country's women workers have naturally led them to organize, and in many cases to go on strike or work stoppage. The 1975 La Tondeña strike, which occurred despite the ban on strikes and mass actions during martial law, was a landmark decision of

working women, who began to realize that only political action could redress their oppressed condition. In 1979, women union organizers and members continued to discuss the plight of women workers. But it was not until 1983, three years after the founding of *Kilusang Mayo Uno* (KMU or May First Movement), that the women workers formed their own organization called the Women Workers' Industrial Alliance. A year later, the Alliance met with other women workers and formed the *Kilusang ng Manggagawang Kababaihan* (KMK or Women Worker's Movement). KMK symbolically announced its birth on March 8, 1984, during the International Women's Day protest rally in Manila. And in February 1988, KMK held its first National Congress with 250 delegates from 40 factories. It expressed its major goals as the "elimination of sexual inequality and all discrimination against women by winning full access to and participation in productive labor, just and equal compensation and educational opportunities for women, and the realization of full potential in leadership, organization and mobilization."<sup>10</sup> The organization joined others which were in the forefront of the anti-Marcos, anti-martial law struggle.

Starting with 5,000 women, KMK now has about 24,000 members nationwide. KMK is also affiliated with GABRIELA. KMK members work in manufacturing sectors and in the services involving retail, banking, communications, commerce, tourism, restaurants, hotels, transportation, and related industries. Its education campaign focuses on the situation of women workers and the need to participate in efforts to redress their grievances. They have articulated several demands, such as provision of day-care centers, longer maternity leaves, protection against hazardous working conditions, and an end to sexual harassment on the job. Evidently, in such work sites as the Bataan Export Processing Zone, sexual harassment is almost routine with some supervisors demanding women workers "to get laid or laid off."<sup>11</sup>

KMK organizers have met even more dangerous situations, such as being harassed by employer-organized goon squads, paramilitary units, and vigilante groups, which proliferated during the early years of the Aquino administration in the late 1980s.

These instruments of state and vigilante terrorism have targeted women activists with abuse, including sexual assault and murder.

The KMK in recent years has actively participated in campaigning against the U.S. bases in the Philippines, the "total war policy" against the underground insurgents, the policies of the World Bank and the IMF, and the rate increases in oil that always hit the poor the hardest. However, as active as it has been, KMK still has few women in leadership roles in the labor movement. The KLU has only five women in its 45 member National Council. This shows that one of the areas that women workers should be working towards is to get men in the trade union movement to be more supportive and open to women's leadership roles.

#### **NGOs AND PEOPLE'S ORGANIZATIONS**

There is no reliable count of how many of these NGOs and people's organizations exist in the Philippines today. They range between 10,000 to 20,000 all over the country. But regardless of the numbers, the NGO phenomenon has become a major factor in the Philippine political landscape, even during martial law when it was extremely dangerous to organize and conduct public meetings that could be interpreted as anti-regime. Again, women have been very visible and active in these NGOs, which cover a wide spectrum of social issues and concerns. A directory of NGOs specific to women published a few years ago lists 183 such organizations in the Philippines, and 40 in other countries, particularly in Asia.<sup>12</sup>

The list divides according to these general categories: 1) alliances and movements; 2) development centers for women; 3) direct services for women in distress; 4) resource centers for women's studies; 5) sociopolitically oriented women's organizations; 6) women's civic and professional associations; 7) women's programs in mixed organizations; 8) women in arts and media; and 9) advocacy groups for migrant workers. The size of the NGOs range from very large, such as GABRIELA and

KABAPA, to smaller, very specific groups, such as Women in Finance and Entrepreneurship (WIFE) and Seamen's Wives Association of the Philippines. The "mixed organizations" mentioned above handle anything from prostitution to Muslim women. For instance, the Alliance vs. Institutionalized Dehumanization is a coalition of groups involved in prostitution and AIDS-related issues. And STOP (Stop Trafficking of Pilipinas) was formed under martial law to tackle problems of women in the sex industry and child prostitution. These are just two examples.

Other major categories covered by NGO activities are: 1) food and nutrition needs; 2) income generation of families; 3) child development and family life; 4) resource utilization; and 5) household economics and environmental sanitation.

The political orientation of these NGOs reflects the entire spectrum, from left of center like GABRIELA, to centrist like Women in Nation Building (WIN), to right of center, such as the various Catholic-oriented groups. But the interesting thing is they have been able to work together in the area of protest politics, particularly against the repression of the Marcos regime.

### STRANGE PARADOXES

The seemingly strange paradoxes mentioned earlier are worth exploring because it is here where we can probably find some of the contradictions in Philippine culture that underlie political events. Every culture, of course, has its own contradictions, paradoxes, anomalies, and extremes. Why have Filipinos, for instance, accepted, encouraged, tolerated and maintained women leaders as diverse and antithetical as Cory Aquino and Imelda Marcos in positions of power? How did these two women leaders handle power?

The case of Cory Aquino seems easier to explain. After the assassination of her husband by elements of the Philippine military, she became the symbol of the escalating resistance against Marcos. Never mind that she did not have any political experience or charisma, or that she was just a "simple housewife," according to

her own self-characterization. She had become a powerful symbol overnight against repression. When Marcos announced the holding of a “snap election” in 1986 in a show of supreme arrogance, close to a dozen opposition male politicians indicated their intention to run. The infighting was bitter but in the end they all gave way to a reluctant Cory Aquino, who was seen as the last hope of the opposition to topple Marcos. The public response to her acceptance of the draft for the presidency was overwhelming. Her victory in the 1986 “people power revolution” was dramatic and Filipinos were euphoric. They had great hopes for the future that were exaggerated and unrealistic. But Cory was the deliverer from the evil that was Marcos. She had the moral high ground which became the basis of her political legitimacy.

While she was a quick study for the revolution, she was a slow learner in the real world of power politics. As people got used to her, she became more and more uncomfortable in, or probably resentful of, public life and its demands. Six months into her term, she was already saying she did not want any unsolicited advice. This distance, this lack of openness, was reflective of her bourgeois and cloistered upbringing. Born into a wealthy elite family, she had a sheltered socialization, going only to convent schools and hardly mixing with groups other than her family and close friends. She lived in the shadow of her husband for 28 years. She brought much of this outlook into the presidency. One of her close advisers in Malacañang would eventually attribute Cory’s serenity and inaction to a sense of fatalism. She accepted her fate, the assassination of her husband, the threats to her life as part of the political game. “When your time comes,” she would say, “it comes!”<sup>13</sup>

To what extent, one might ask, was Cory’s timidity or diffidence due to her “proper” upper class upbringing? Or was it simply a case of not knowing how to use the power that she did not seek to begin with? It is difficult to answer these questions categorically. But a glimpse into her background may be instructive.

She came from a traditional Chinese-Filipino business family that kept to themselves pretty much. She went to Catholic schools



where feminine values of obedience and respect for authority were emphasized. She always seemed pleasant and not assertive. Even after she married Ninoy Aquino, who was often referred to as a dynamo, an "element of nature," she was always in the background. She never developed a political dimension to her personality. She was rarely seen in public.

Her presidency was lackluster, and when it came to women's issues, it was even more dismal. She appointed only one woman to her cabinet of more than 20 people. She did not support population control, undoubtedly due to religious reasons. She never pushed legislation related to women who were her natural constituency. Her role with regard to the women's movement was largely ceremonial or peripheral. For many women who supported her candidacy and presidency, they were greatly disappointed to say the least.

If Cory disliked power, Imelda loved it to excess. There are similarities in their conservative background and Catholic schooling, but the difference between them is like night and day. Imelda would do or use anything, especially her being a woman, to achieve publicity, fame, or power. The conventional explanation for her insatiable taste for power, money, clothes, jewelry, shoes, and other worldly goods in incredible quantities, and for social approval, is her deprived childhood and the way she was treated by her richer relatives when she was young.

It is difficult to assess the validity of this theory unless we have a lot of systematic psychological data. But a book written by Imelda's niece may offer some plausible explanations of Imelda's bizarre behavior in public life. Anyone who had collected close to 5,000 pairs of shoes, 1,000 nylons, 500 black brassieres, 1,200 gowns, 20 boxes of jewelry, and other items too numerous to mention had to have a strange hoarding malady.

The book, which could have been entitled *Auntie Dearest*, proceeds from the observation that Imelda was the "provincial innocent who came to Manila, the big city, was corrupted and aggravated its corruption in turn."<sup>14</sup> She was "hypnotized" like many Filipinos at the time by "Hollywood visions of opulence" and "beguiled by Western dreams." She was an avid fan of Tagalog

movies and radio soap operas. She became obsessed with class and wealth. Years later she would say, “*Daig ko pa si Cinderella.*” (“I have surpassed Cinderella.”)<sup>15</sup>

After marrying Ferdinand Marcos and becoming a powerful celebrity, she would invite her friends to the Marcos home in San Juan in Metro Manila and show off her newly acquired wealth. One time she invited her cousin-in-law Amy Austria, the mother of this niece who wrote the book, to her bedroom and she said, “You see, Amy, whenever I’m depressed, I spread my jewelry out on my bed, it cheers me up quickly.”<sup>16</sup> Then she followed up that remark with, “You’ve been secure all your life. You don’t know what it’s like to be insecure.”<sup>17</sup>

Though the comparison is overdrawn, Imelda’s rise to power is similar to Eva Peron’s at an earlier time. Eva and Imelda both married corrupt, strong men, but eventually became powers in their own right. Eva was a saint (“Santa Evita”) to the masses in Argentina. Imelda claimed to be both a “star and slave” to the Filipino masses. But the power of Eva and Imelda was emotional, irrational, intuitive, instinctive, and at times incomprehensible. It was outside the institutionalized realm of power in society. In her fascinating work on Argentina’s “Lady of Hope,” anthropologist Julie Taylor says Eva Peron acted outside the frameworks and categories of society and of intellectual analysis, the masses offer a mystic and fanatical adoration to the woman who has “legitimately assumed or illegitimately imposed her power over them.”<sup>18</sup> Taylor’s thesis is that Eva Peron embodied an enigma of power attributed to a woman in a traditionally patriarchal society that devalues women as against men, and this power could be malevolent.<sup>19</sup>

In the myth-making about Imelda, her propagandists projected her as the archetypal Mother Philippines in the *Malakas at Maganda* (“Strong and Beautiful”) epic on the creation of the country. Ferdinand was the brain, Imelda the heart. Ferdinand was the body, Imelda the soul. When it suited her, Imelda subsumed herself in the Marcos shadow. She knew she derived her social standing from the Marcos connection. But she also became very adept at political maneuvers, using her feminine charms and wiles. She was in many ways the *de facto* president.

Seen as someone with "edifice complex," she ordered the construction of mammoth or extravagant buildings, such as the Cultural Center of the Philippines, Philippine Heart Center, and the "University of Life." The latter had a Greek amphitheater and a strange project on raising earthworms. There was no foreign demand for the worms, and the "University of Life" staff admitted that no one "had witnessed a Filipino actually eating a worm."<sup>20</sup>

The Imelda saga is by no means over. In the 1992 presidential elections in the Philippines, she had the audacity to run. To everyone's surprise, she still polled more than two million votes, more than what veteran politicians Jovito Salonga and Salvador Laurel garnered. Filipinos are speculating that she will run for the Senate in the 1995 elections.

#### CONCLUSION

Generally, it can be said that the participation of women in Philippine politics is more advanced than their counterparts in other countries. Though relegated to subordinate status socially and legally by centuries of Western colonization, they retained much of the dynamism and vitality observed in pre-Hispanic women in the Philippines. Over time they have distinguished themselves in struggles for equality, such as in the women's suffrage movement, in resistance to authoritarian rule, in mobilization efforts for women's rights in the workplace and other issues, and in organizing alternative, creative formations that are more in accord with people's needs and sentiments on health, education, housing, employment, and other areas. The emergence of modern Philippine nationalism at the turn of the century produced the first wave of feminists who cracked the sex barrier in the country's public life. The second wave came with the resurgent nationalist movement of the 1960s with a more ideological agenda.

They have achieved a limited measure of political success or influence in elective and appointive positions in the formal structures of power in both national or local settings. Again, compared with other societies in the Third World, or even with

more advanced Western countries, Filipino women are more fully represented in the political system and in the private sector.

However, there is a need for caution in interpreting the visible and active forms of women's political engagement in various aspects of Filipino life. Some groups or classes of women are quite articulate and politically influential. They have the ability to organize and participate in a number of causes, or to challenge traditional structures. Certain women, mostly coming from the elite ranks, stand out as exemplars of achievement in their professional or personal lives.

These tend to be the exceptions rather than the norm. The majority of Filipino women are still on the edge of economic survival in a country where poverty is all-pervasive. The feminization of poverty is an international trend. It is true in the Philippines as well. One only needs to look at the hundreds of thousands of Filipino women leaving for overseas as maids, prostitutes, mail-order brides, and so on, as an index of this phenomenon. Filipino emigration in recent decades has been predominantly female. Philippine feminist activities have confronted this and other social problems related to women. But the larger problem, which is much more formidable, is to get the Philippine economy out of the doldrums and arrest the outflow of human resources and talent from the country.

On a more theoretical level, one can ask what effect gender ideology has had on women in Philippine politics. Is there a "feminist politics" at work now in Philippine society? At best the answer is ambiguous. On the one hand, there is a continuing tradition of female authority in Philippine history, in spite of colonizing and "civilizing" experiences, which actually repressed women's roles. One can call this a strong feminist indication in one sense. But on the other hand, that authority and influence have not been politicized enough to penetrate the sectors of the modern society controlled by men and raise the status of women as a whole. It has not translated to political power in a real sense. The struggle for meaningful, not necessarily one-to-one, equality must go on.

**Endnotes**

1. Tarrosa Subido, *The Feminist Movement in the Philippines 1905-1955*. Manila: National Federation of Woman's Clubs, 1955, pp. 31-32.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 35. Emphasis provided.
3. Aurora J. de Dios, "Participation of Women's Groups in the Anti-Dictatorship Struggle: Genesis of a Movement," in *Women's Role in Philippine History: Papers and Proceedings of the Conference Held on 8-9 March, 1989*. University of the Philippines: Center for Women's Studies, 1989, p. 98.
4. Delia Aguilar, *The Feminist Challenge*. Manila: Asian Social Institute, 1988, p. 20.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *GABRIELA Assembly Proceedings*. Manila: St. Scholastica's College, 10-11 March, 1984, p. 7.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Proceedings: GABRIELA 4th National Congress*. Davao City, Philippines, 14-15 March, 1987, p. 2.
9. *Philippine Labor Alert Newsletter*. Honolulu: Philippine Workers Support Committee, June 1992, p.5.
10. *The Rise of Women in the Philippines Workers Movement Primer*. Manila: Kilusang Mayo Uno, n.d..
11. *Ibid.*
12. See *Women's Diary and Directory 1987*. Quezon City: Third World Movement Against the Exploitation of Women, 1987, Appendix (no pagination).
13. See Belinda A. Aquino, ed., *Presidential Leadership and Cory Aquino*. University of the Philippines: Center for Integrative and Development Studies, 1990, p. 26.
14. Beatriz Romualdez Francia, *Imelda and the Clans — A Story of the Philippines*. Manila: Solar Publishing Corporation, 1988, p. 23.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 158.
17. *Ibid.*

18. J.M. Taylor, *Eva Peron — The Myths of a Woman*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
20. Francia, *op.cit.*, p. 317.