

# **Women Empowering Women: The Cebu Experience**

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## **Introduction**

For too long, Cebu women have been a people without a face, without a voice, without a history. We are now slowly breaking the centuries of silence to tell our stories, stories about our lives, our experiences, and also how we discern the social reality — of development models used, of technological choices made, of militarism, of the nuclear option. We are speaking and writing not only of our sorrow and our tears, but also of our struggles, our triumphs, our visions. It is this feminist sensibility which has found expression in poetry, oral history, fiction, theoretical research, a sensibility that has been both a reflection of the changing perceptions of women about our reality and an attempt to search for and to create alternatives.

This report looks into the struggles of women in the women's movement of Cebu. It also shows the blatant marginalization of women in the course of rapid urbanization and industrialization and the efforts to empower women. The presentation is in three parts: the first part presents the situation of women in Cebu, the second takes a look into the women's movement in Cebu, and the third features two of the leading women's organizations in Cebu — the Lihok-Pilipina Foundation and Women's Resource Center of Cebu.

## **The Women Situation in Cebu Province**

Women comprise almost half of the 2.65 million total population of the province of Cebu. The majority are peasants, urban poor, and workers.

Since 1984, the province of Cebu has been registering a positive growth pattern in its exports, investments and Gross Real Domestic Product (GRDP). According to NEDA figures, the province GRDP increased by 3.59% in 1990 complimented by a 14.99% growth in export earnings and a 17.41% increase in investments. Encouraged by a so-called "boom" in the local economy, the past administration of the province launched a massive campaign to attract local and foreign investors, selling Cebu as the rising economic superstar of the south.

The other side of the "boom" is the image of poverty. The Philippine Commission on Urban Poor reported a total number of 37,857 urban families in Cebu City alone as of 1988. Annual population growth rate in the province was registered at an average of 2.3% from 1980 to 1990 (NSO Region 7). At present, 52% of Cebu's inhabitants are concentrated in urban areas.

In its pursuit of industrialization and economic development, Cebu keeps up with the demands of the export companies and other business firms in the province by providing an ample labor supply. This has made Cebu the hotbed of trade unionism in the south. Unfortunately, women in the labor sector have not been organized to address common gender-specific problems that they face such as sexual harrassment in the workplace, inadequate benefits, non-provision of day care centers or maternity benefits, lower wages and other gender-biased labor practices. They are very hard to unionize because they are doubly burdened with caring for their families and working at the same time. Attempts have been made to unionize the women workers in the Mactan Export Processing Zone (MEPZ) but the strict labor policies make it difficult for the union organizers to follow this up.

In the labor industry of Cebu, the women comprise 38.95% of the agricultural sector, 14.98% of the industrial sector, and 45.69% of the service sector. At present there are only 36,000 women in the manufacturing sector of Cebu (VIHDA). An increasing number of women have opted to seek better options abroad as Overseas

Contract Workers (OCWs). Close to 55% of the total OCWs in the country are women. In Cebu province alone, the POEA reported a total of 383 women OCWs deployed as of December last year. 74.15% of these women are rehires. They work either as domestic helpers, nurses, service workers, or entertainers.

### **Women in the Claws of Tourism**

Part of selling Cebu to foreign investors and tourists is the prostitution and trafficking of women. The Department of Tourism has for its major project the development of the Mactan International Airport to accommodate international flights coming to Cebu. Tourist arrivals in Cebu province increased by 55% in the early part of 1992. Of foreign visitors, the Japanese registered the highest number — 13,943 in 1992 and 7,972 in 1991. With these trends, sing-along bars, hotels, entertainment establishments and beach resorts have proliferated. Alongside this, the magnitude of prostituted women and children in the province has increased.

In Cebu City alone, the City Health Office reported a total of 1,557 *commercial sex workers* (CSW) duly registered in the office. Not included are those working as part-time call girls and those victimized by sex slavery. CSW is the term used by government doctors to refer to those women working in bar joints, night spots, massage parlors, and prostitution dens. The figure has doubly increased due to the influx of CSWs from calamity-ravaged Central Luzon and Ormoc. The Department of Health in Region 7 also reported that there are 2,678 registered CSWs in the province of Cebu.

As a consequence, there is a growing threat of AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) contamination in the province. As of August 1992, the Cebu City Health Office's Social Hygiene Section reported that 345 of the 2,031 patients who underwent diagnostic tests were positive for STDs. Meanwhile, the Department of Health in the Central Visayas Region reported that there are seven known cases of AIDS in the province of Cebu, ten in the Region and of these, seven are women.

## **Rape and Domestic Violence**

From June 18, 1991 up to early August 1992, the Women's Resource Center of Cebu collated from selected local dailies a total of 20 rape and assault cases in Cebu, two of sex slavery and four cases of murdered women. Data on domestic violence is scarce. A study conducted by Lihok-Pilipina Foundation, another feminist NGO in the province, revealed that out of ten women in urban areas in Cebu, five or six have been at one time or another victims of domestic violence. There are, however, unreported cases of wife battering which the police would consider as "family matters."

## **Health and Reproductive Rights of Women**

Conservative estimates from several research studies indicate that the maternal mortality rate in the country is 1 per 1,000 live births. In Central Visayas, it was estimated at .80% as of 1991 by the Department of Health (DOH) Region 7. Cebu province has a .54% maternal mortality rate. The three leading causes are hemorrhage, complications arising from hypertension and septicemia, and induced abortion.

## **Political Scene**

The province of Cebu has only 45 women in the seats of local government units including one woman in the House of Representatives.

## **The Women's Movement in Cebu**

The outbreak of the genuine workers' movement in Cebu took the form of the historic workers' strike at the Visayan Glass Factory in Guadalupe, Cebu City in 1983. This was fiercely met by the state and its military which agitated the workers' wives to organize in support of their husbands' demand for just compensation and benefits. INA-Sugbo was organized but it was short-lived due to the absence of direction and feminist perspective and of a continuing program for education.

In 1985, three women representatives from Cebu attended the second national congress of GABRIELA. Since then women organizing in Cebu has had the agenda for national liberation and genuine emancipation of women for its program of action . The urban poor women were quick to respond. The first progressive women's organization in Cebu took form under the name BAKKKUD — bakud in Cebuano means "strong" or "get up." It is the acronym for Babaye Alang sa Kauswagan, Kaangayan, Kalinaw ug Demokrasya (Women for Progress, Justice, Peace and Democracy). A series of meetings and consultations resulted in the establishment of five urban poor women's organizations in the province: three in Cebu City and one each for the cities of Toledo and Lapu-Lapu. BAKKKUD grew to become the first urban poor women's federation when it held its first provincial convention in February 16, 1986. On March 8, 1987, the streets of Cebu City were hit with an all-women march-rally for the first time when more than a thousand women joined the mobilization pressing for the respect and protection of women's rights and welfare. But the anti-communist vigilantism in mid-1987 brought havoc and terror to legitimate people's organizations. Vigilantes succeeded in terrorizing members and disintegrating the organizations. Women's organizations were not spared. Under the new dispensation and in spite of a woman president, oppression and exploitation especially of women continued to prevail. This served as a stimulus for women to regroup and organize knowing that the goal for a just, humane, nurturing and non-sexist society had yet to be reached.

From late 1988 to date, women organizing in the basic sectors in Cebu have slowly but surely gained momentum. Urban poor women organizing in particular started on its way in August 1989 when the second phase of the Urban Poor Development Center's Community-based Child Care and Enrichment Program was implemented. This paved the way for the organizing of mothers in 13 urban poor communities. Six months later, through the initiative of the Urban Poor Development Center's Women's Desk, a consultation was held on February 28, 1990 which dealt with the problems of impending demolitions faced by the urban poor vis-a-vis the local government's Metro-Cebu Development and Investment Plan, and what the women can do as organized forces in the slum communities. Confronted with the worsening economic and

political crisis, urban and rural poor settlers are greatly affected by the massive demolition of their dwellings. More than half of these poor settlers are women and children. Hence, the urgency to address these problems in the most significant way possible.

The first General Assembly of Urban Poor Women was held on March 5, 1990. Women organizations banded together under the Cebu Urban Poor Women's League (CUPWOL), a metro Cebu-wide federation of women organizations. AMIHAN, the peasant women organization in Argao, south of Cebu, has reached the municipal level in their organizing and is presently engaged in socio-economic projects. The women workers have banded together under the women worker's movement, KMK.

The Cebu Women's Resource Center was established on May 2, 1991 in response to the felt need for a women's resource center to attend to existing women organizations. First among its projects was to assist professional women in launching their organization, the Assembly for Women's Concerns, Cebu (AWC-Cebu) on June 8, 1991.

Women in the academe in Cebu did not stay in the background. In 1989, the Women's Desk of U.P. College Cebu was established after the seminar on Women Development for U.P. in the Visayas held in Iloilo. It has provided assistance to women's organizations in terms of venue, facilities, resource persons, publicity and coverage of activities, and sharing of current materials on women. It affiliated with the Women's Studies Consortium after participating in the Regional Consultation on women's Studies in Silliman University on November 27-28, 1991 and in the National Consultation on Women's Studies at the Ateneo de Manila University on January 29-31, 1992. The women's desk of U.P. College Cebu hosted two intensive consultations among professionals in April and May 1991 before the formal launching of the AWC-Cebu on June 8, 1991. Most of AWC-Cebu's elected officers are members of the Women's Desk. The Desk also facilitated the PWU Institute of Environmental Management's regional seminar-workshop on Women for Safe Environment held on March 19-21, 1992 at CENDET, Cebu City.

AWC-Cebu formed an Ad Hoc Coordinating Committee to prepare a well-packaged weeklong program of activities in celebration of International Women's Day on the theme "Build the

Women, Build the Nation.” It opened with a press conference, followed by contests, exhibits, film showing, symposia and climaxed with a parade and a cultural show. The same committee also composed the Ad Hoc Coordinating Committee on a Women’s Political Agenda and put up a candidates forum on April 22, 1992 at U.P. College Cebu . The forum was intended to give the candidates in the May elections a chance to present their views, stand and programs on women’s issues and to give the women of various sectors an avenue to articulate their concerns.

### **The Womens Resource Center of Cebu, Inc. (WRCC)**

The existence of thirteen urban poor women’s orrganizations under the federation of the Cebu Urban Poor Women’s League (CUPWOL) and the Panaghugpong sa mga Inahan sa Argao (PINA), an affiliate of AMIHAN, has prompted the progressive women in Cebu to establish a center that would support and respond to the needs of these organizations which are working towards women’s emancipation.

In the early part of 1991, a series of consultations with the leaders of the different women’s organizations was held to discuss their needs and problems. The need for a women’s resource center that would provide them with support services surfaced. A preparatory team was formed and tasked to prepare for the putting up of such a center. On May 2, 1991, the Cebu Women’s Resource Center was established. The Center was registered with the SEC under the name Women’s Resource Center of Cebu, Inc. (WRCC Inc.) on February 26, 1992.

WRCC, Inc. is a network of the Center for Women’s Resources (CWR) which serves as a resource center for sectoral women organizations in Cebu — peasant, urban poor, fisherfolk, workers and middle class. Its mission is to support the efforts of women in Cebu who are working for the advancement of the cause of genuine participation. It hopes to raise the gender consciousness of organized urban poor and peasant women, by rendering services to women and women’s organizations in the field of education and training, research, information and women’s advocacy work. Its existing beneficiaries are the urban poor, peasants, and fisherfolk.

In the urban poor sector, WRCC supports CUPWOL and urban poor organizations unaffiliated with CUPWOL composed of three chapters. For the peasant sector, it provides services to PINA, composed of three barrio chapters of peasant women organizations, including the Calajo-an Women's Organization (CAWO), Calajo-an, Minglanilla, Cebu and the Kalinaw Women's Association (KAWA), Tangke, Talisay, Cebu. For the fisherfolk sector, it assists three chapters composed of three barangays based in the town of Cordova, Cebu.

### ***Education and Training***

WRCC has conducted a three-day seminar on "Women and Environment" for the municipal and barrio officials of PINA, a peasant women's organization based in Cebu. It has conducted a three-day Comprehensive Women's Orientation seminar three times, participated in by urban poor women in Cebu; a seminar on Socio-economic Orientation attended by 12 urban poor women; an Organizer's Training Workshop participated in by various women from the different organizations; and a Leadership Training Workshop attended by women from Mandaue City. It should be noted that before formally launching the organizations, a sweeping, one-day Women's Orientation was given automatically.

### ***Research and Information***

WRCC has published the maiden, first and second quarter issues of the center's official publication, BAKUD. Bakud is a Cebuano word that means "get up." It connotes activity rather than passivity in resonance of the woman question today. WRCC has also consolidated the secondary data on women from government and non-government agencies for the Center's women's situationer in the province of Cebu. It established the Center's library with an exclusive collection of books, magazines and clippings about women (the first in Cebu). Students, professionals, urban poor and peasant women visit the Center to acquire gender sensitive data, information and reference materials not found in any school and library in the province. It has a special project, a participatory research project which is on its fifth month of fielding the survey questionnaire for the 10% of the total number of



women populating in five urban poor barangays in Cebu City and seven peasant barangays in Argao, Cebu. The study is entitled "The Political, Socio-Cultural, Ecological and Health Conditions of the Women in Five Urban Poor Barangays in Cebu City and Seven Peasant Communities in the Municipality of Argao, Cebu."

### ***Advocacy and Networking***

As mentioned earlier, WRCC facilitated the establishment of AWC-Cebu, an organization of women professionals in Cebu. It conducted two consultations with the officers of the urban poor and peasant women organizations in Cebu. It also established its network with the Women's Desk of U.P. College Cebu and assisted the activities launched by the Ad Hoc Coordinating Committee for the International Women's Day celebration and the Ad Hoc Coordinating Committee for the Women's Electoral Agenda for the Candidates Forum. At present, it is heading a group to handle the campaign on the Bataan Nuclear Processing Plant (BNPP) until December. WRCC has also facilitated exposure sessions with representatives of women's desks from different schools and universities in Manila to deepen their understanding of the conditions and lives of women in the urban poor and rural areas. WRCC is accredited with the provincial government of Cebu.

### **Lihok-Pilipina Foundation, Inc.,**

Lihok-Pilipina Foundation, Inc. is a foundation of, by, and for women and their concerns. Established in 1985, it aims to organize women into viable groups capable of directing and sustaining their own initiatives on issues like health, child care, laws, livelihood, environment and other concerns; and to promote, encourage, establish, foster and work for the acceptance by Philippine society of the central significance of a women's perspective in the national struggle for social transformation. It has four major programs and projects. The first is a Social Credit and Livelihood Program which provides non-collateral loans to urban rural poor women. This links urban women vendors with rural women producers, and provides product development and marketing assistance. The second program is the Water and Environment Program which facilitates water-well installation and

education seminars on garbage disposal, composting, greening and water maintenance. The third is the Women's Education Program which is a continuous information activity to update women on issues, support systems and laws closely related to women. It also involves preparation of modules with gender focus, e.g., Women and Health, Family, Women and Livelihood, Women and Environment, Women and Agriculture, etc. The fourth program is Community Organizing which is intended to organize and mobilize community members around issues and problems affecting the community.

Lihok-Pilipina has three special concerns — Kabataan sa Paglaum or Children of Hope, Domestic Helper Assistance and Legal Assistance. Specifically, Lihok-Pilipina attends to referrals and day care for pre-school street children and provides working children with educational loans, tutorials and savings. It documents cases and referrals of domestic helpers including possible assistance on livelihood activities as alternative sources of income. It also provides legal assistance to victims of rape and domestic violence.

### ***The Social Credit and Livelihood Program***

In 1991, the social credit program operated through 79 cells with a total of 946 beneficiaries, but now it has grown to 121 cells with a total of 1,027 beneficiaries. Recruitment, screening and collection are done by/through the cells which also assume responsibility for default. Payments are remitted weekly to the foundation. To ensure checking, a system of triple-record and passbook (individual beneficiary, treasurers and Pilipina) is practised. Remittances over a period of three months include payment for capital plus administration fee, group fund, emergency fund and capital build-up. It is hoped that with the bulk of money coming from the capital build-up, these women would be able to run the program by themselves considering the stake they have in the collection and management of the program. To enhance better operations, trainings/inputs are being conducted and these include product development, marketing, business and cooperative management.

The program also encourages savers. They do not borrow but they just save whatever they can set aside from their day to day income for emergency and other things. They do not go to the bank for it requires a big amount to open an account; the bank is also out of the way, requiring transportation expenses which could otherwise be saved directly. There are now 375 plain SAVERS with the foundation.

Several products have been developed and tested out in the market — bags, stuffed toys, candles, tamarind candy, peanut butter and recycled paper. Last summer, several groups of children were involved in the main production of candles and recycled paper so they could earn for the coming school year.

A total of 175 women have undergone a series of business, marketing and financial management seminars. Women resource persons were from Pilipina, Ramon Aboitiz Foundation Inc., and KADASIG.

### ***Water and Environment Program***

Sibonga, 50 kilometers south of Cebu City, has been chosen as one of the project sites for the Water and Sanitation Project, a joint project of the Philippine and Australian governments. Last March, four community organizers commenced their work for 18 months in Sibonga. Together with three other NGOs, the Lihok-Pilipina Foundation was tasked to organize water users cooperatives per barangay. The program thrust is to alleviate women's conditions and actively involve them in the process of development work.

The program's concerns also focus on waste management, greening and sanitation. Specifically, it addresses the problems of handling the degradables, the non-degradables, the filth around, human waste scattered all over and piped canals which overflow at the slightest rain. Most of all, it seeks to respond to the question of how the poor, especially the women who are the real home waste managers and sanitary engineers, can earn from their efforts. Some attempt is being made to hasten biodegradable composting through the use of trichoderma. The possibility of running toilets at busy or congested junctions of the town is also being studied.

Recycled paper processing continues to be tried, developed and improved. Finer products are mixed with fresh grass pulp while the coarser ones are thicker and darker in color. Mass production is being done by the Kabataan sa Paglaum. Each child is paid by the hour to collect waste papers from different offices in the city and shred them to pieces. Staple products are folders, envelopes, and paper bags. Stationery, calling cards, all occasion cards and posters are only available by order.

### ***Kuwarta sa Basura Project***

Several areas assisted by the Foundation have agreed to segregate garbage according to its composition into biodegradable and non-degradable substances. Biodegradable materials are intended for composting while non-degradable materials (polybags, broken glasses, etc.) are recycled according to their uses. A designated person sells them to junkshops. Used polybags are also being collected and sold to junkshops. In this way, they are helping clean the environment of plastic bags which are harmful and non-degradable and at the same time are able to earn a few more pesos.

### ***The Women's Support and Crisis Center***

Lihok-Pilipina put up the Women's Support and Crisis Center in September 1991. It works closely with the Urban Basic Services Program (UBSP), an inter-agency network composed of government and non-government agencies and people's organizations and is funded by UNICEF. This inter-agency network provides support services to the crisis center in the form of legal assistance, medical assistance and temporary shelter.

### ***Bantay Banay***

An initial survey of the incidence of battering was conducted by Pilipina in two communities. The result showed that five or six women experienced battering from the period 1990-1991. This does not include those who had been battered before this date. The result was presented to an assembly of representatives from NGOs barangays, police force, parishes and lawyers. As a

response, the group decided to form a body now called Bantay Banay (Family/Community Watch). A Steering Committee coordinates the activities and three working committees have been formed, namely: Legal Rights Committee, Family Day Committee, and Pre-Cana and Education Committee. The Legal Rights Committee concentrates on popularizing the Family Code to NGOs, police investigators and the barangays. A close coordination in communication has been established among the involved barangay captains, the police precincts and the Center.

### ***Handling Cases of Domestic Violence and Sexual Abuses***

Reported cases are referred to the crisis center staff by the barangay officials, police investigators, community leaders, GOs/NGOs, church workers and friends. Case processing includes interview, assessment of the case and documenting the case. Depending on the assessment, the following interventions/options/courses of action are taken: 1) Provision of temporary shelter in coordination with the FIDA crisis center and the Parian Drop-in Center; 2) Medical Assistance in coordination with the Federacion Internacional de Abogadas(FIDA) and the Cebu Lady Lawyers Association (CELLA); 4) Counselling in coordination with the psychology department of the University of San Carlos; 5) Livelihood Assistance in coordination with the Livelihood Component of the Urban Basic Services Program (UBSP).

To date there are 77 cases handled by the center. Most of the cases involve battering and three involve incest. Nine areas have been chosen for community watch groups. They are Alaska, Samburg II, Calamba, Labangon (Tres), Basak (Rubberworld), A.Lopez, B. Aranas, Guadalupe, and Mabolo. The first eight are densely populated urban areas in the south district of Cebu City while the ninth belongs to the north district of Cebu City where there is very minimal incidence of cases of domestic violence and sexual abuse. The main reason for the choice of the areas was their proximity to the office/Center. There are six direct full-time community organizers with a support personnel of one per program who handle the case processing. They undergo training in basic feminist counselling.

The community watch group has been established as a form of prevention. A survey is ongoing in nine police stations and two government hospitals. In the absence of data on women's crisis, Alaska was chosen as a pilot area for empowering women where all issues affecting the whole community would be addressed. Eventually some of the nine chosen areas will be phased out once empowered and all the Center will do is monitor their activities. In the pilot area, the clients after their crisis become the contacts of the community and the Center. They do house to house interviews with women from ages 20 to 35 to tackle issues affecting the community.

The Center has two big problems: one is that there are too many cases for its few personnel to process. Its project director, Kristi Laron, suggests that after the feminist counselling, the Women's Action Network for Development (WAND) should invite Lihok-Pilipina to give seminars to WAND members in consideration of WAND's broad membership. It could be a source of more personnel in the processing of cases of domestic violence and sexual abuse. The other problem is that the women clients themselves still adhere to the social stereotype; they accept their husband's philandering as his right and they channel their anger to the "other woman" rather than to their husbands. To counter this problem, it is suggested that there should be more frequent consciousness raising in the community and sharing with other clients.

Despite the above mentioned problems, the Crisis Center has its share of achievements. The first seminar on the Family Code was given to police investigators on March 21, 1992. Before the seminar, the center faced the problem of having to insist that police investigators blotter cases of domestic violence. After the seminar, the police investigators were the ones to call the Center themselves. An incident was reported wherein a husband was reported by the wife for battering. The husband was arrested by the police who called the center when the eight hour detention was nearing expiration and the wife did not want to file charges against the husband. The City Mayor also pledged his commitment to require all police investigators to undergo the sensitivity training slated in November 1992.

In the settlement of cases of domestic violence at the barangay level, lawyers are not allowed to attend but legal advocates and community organizers are. Their presence contributes a lot to the decision. The community organizers also undergo paralegal training, — i.e., procedural, affidavit-making, and substance. The plans for the community watch group include paralegal training following the gender sensitivity seminar and exposure to feminist education.

Mobilizing women support during court hearings also encourages the women clients to speak up. Some judges have been cooperative by referring cases to the Center. The church could be a strong venue for gender-sensitivity. The Guadalupe parish has been chosen as a pilot area for gender-sensitivity in the parish council. Hopefully, the program could enter the Pre-Cana seminar for couples planning to get married. For the Community Watch Group, the Family Code seminar and gender sensitivity training are a must. For those whose marriages are intact, there is an expressed need for marriage enrichment. Among professionals, couple to couple counselling is being started.

## **Conclusion**

In the midst of rapid urbanization and industrialization in Cebu, the struggle for women empowerment goes on. From the grassroots level, women are organizing themselves to address the various socio-economic and political problems confronting them. Professionals have banded together, honing their talents, skills and influences to advance the feminist perspective in the process of nation-building. The women in academe are not only setting up Women's Desks to tackle women's issues and concerns but also integrating gender in the curriculum.

*Women empowering women.* The Women's Resource Center of Cebu and Lihok-Pilipina Foundation in Cebu City do not only provide a meeting place for women but also the space for sharing women's experiences, for generating discussions, for creating the energy needed to envision new possibilities for change. Their efforts have become one face of the women's movement in the Philippines, one more of the many voices of women that refuse to

accept that we have become "pilgrims of darkness," for it is now time to turn our faces to the sun.

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