

# FILIPINO WOMEN'S POLITICAL AGENDA

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Let me first define what is meant by a "political agenda". Thereon, I shall present my own views about this agenda and then, discuss those issues which women see fit to be included in our agenda.

What does a "women's political agenda" mean? Does it preclude the "economic agenda"? the "social agenda"? the "cultural agenda"? Or does our "political agenda" encompass all these given that the economic, social, and cultural problems of women are in dire need of political action?

Does "political agenda" consist entirely of legislation, the making of laws, the formulation of policies and their enactment? Does the realization of a "political agenda" rest solely upon government functions and functionaries? Or should a "political agenda" include both governmental and non-governmental functions and participants? These are burning questions of our day, especially for us women, who are doubly oppressed in society, in politics and in decision-making.

This discussion is timely enough in consideration particularly of the coming national and local elections. *Ano ang gagawin nating mga kababaihan dito?* Dr. Tapales has enlightened us about the so-called "women's vote". (See previous article, this issue) I hope we all ponder upon those points she has raised.

With a "women's political agenda", do we merely work to get more women in elective positions? After that, what do we do? Time and again, it is lamented that we only have a small number of women in government, from the United Nations down to local women's groups. It is said that we need to elect more women to public office. But I still ask: what do women candidates do after winning in the elections?

Pardon me for sounding cynical as most Filipinos are wont to be about the coming elections, especially about women joining the electoral fray. We are all very suspicious about "politics". It has earned a very "dirty" reputation - - I know, I have been there. Even in City Hall, you can see so many "politicos". Our fears are not entirely baseless, I dare say. And women, with their political agenda, are not spared from this.

We have suffered under a 20 year dictatorship where political power was arrogated by a man, and may I add, by his wife, being a traditional politician's woman. We are just about to end six years of a presidential term held, of course, by a martyr's widow — a woman president. But women being elected to a political position—as practice while in office more than in theory has proven — is never a guarantee, I repeat, this is never a guarantee that women will work for social transformation.

Please don't misconstrue that I am against a "women's vote"; I am not. I am one, for sure, to campaign for more women in elective positions. I support COMELEC Commissioner Haydee Yorac who is so brutally frank about the battlecry "Vote for more women!" But our political agenda should go beyond the framework of elections. It would have to integrate the long-standing diversities of the socio-economic and cultural life of women in our society.

### **Beyond Elective Positions and Legislation**

Last February 12, the Women in Development and Nation-Building Act was signed into law. It is a product of many years of consultations with various women's groups, representatives, leaders and legislators. We are all part of that law. And it is said that it would imbue profound changes in the lives of Filipino women. Yet, beyond this piece of legislation, we would still have to work doubly hard to realize these meaningful changes in our lives.

Philippine politics, Philippine democracy, has never been as fragile as it is today. When confronted with crisis, the body-politic is immediately torn in social conflict. There is war going on, and a just and lasting peace is as elusive as ever.

At a National Peace Conference, women's issues were discussed. I will share these issues, not only for discussion, but to hope for most urgent and concrete actions to be taken regarding them. One weakness of the academic community, they say, is that many tend to sit isolated in their so-called "ivory towers". Numerous studies have already been made about women's issues. At countless seminars, workshops and congresses of all shades and color, the growing list of our problems has been spelled out. Indeed, for this list of issues to become a real "political agenda", it must be addressed squarely by decisive political action. If we fail to act on these issues, then we ourselves should be targets of political action. Let me call your attention then to real issues beyond the walls of this university.

### **Agrarian Reform**

- the elimination of obstacles to full equal rights of women to land ownership as tillers
- the valuation of the work of family members on the land and in all forms of agricultural production

- support services for women as well as men in terms of education, credit and marketing, and especially through the development of appropriate technology for women

### **Urban Land Reform**

- equal rights to land for urban poor women
- affordable housing and sufficient social services as priorities in urban development

### **Industrial Democracy**

- the recognition of gender specific issues in trade union issues, such as:
  - maternal and child health care through extending maternity leave and provisions for childcare
  - elimination of sexual discrimination in the work place and gender trafficking;
  - equal pay for equivalent work
  - criminalization of sexual harassment
  - protection from hazardous working conditions

### **Employment**

- the protection and valuation of domestic workers and informal sector workers
- the training of women in non-traditional trades or skills, including managerial and supervisory positions
- the protection of overseas workers, especially women, from exploitation, violence and sexual abuse and the development of employment opportunities for returning overseas workers

### **Towards Survival**

- recognition of the increasing number of female-headed households and response to this reality in terms of economic and social measures
- support of basic family living cost in terms of price controls, subsidies and provision of basic services
- implementation of a population program that prioritizes women's health and reproductive rights
- assertion of the priorities of food, fuel and family needs in ecological decision-making
- pursuit of a foreign debt relief such that the gains should first reach the women and children suffering most from the debt burden
- the immediate provision of alternatives for local women's livelihood and mode of production in the U.S. bases conversion plan.

## **Protection from Abuse**

- upholding international humanitarian laws, especially for women and children in situations of armed conflict
- exploration by women of new forms and strategies towards building a just and lasting peace in the country
- protection against domestic and sexual abuse; against wife battering, rape, sex trafficking of women and children, cultural exploitation of ethnic women, pornography and media distortions on the image of women.

These are the real issues that should be addressed decisively by our political actions, both by government and by the people themselves, both in legislation and in concerted mass action. Women can only take the forefront in these political actions if they are able to fulfill three interrelated conditions: one, if they are conscious enough of their problems; two, if they are organized as a strong political force; and three, if their concerted actions are sustained enough to make a difference.

Our immediate political agenda, therefore, is to educate, organize and mobilize as many Filipino women as we can, not only in the coming elections, but more so, before and after May 11 — to act on these issues. I hope we will be taking steps in carrying out the political agenda for women. By all means, let's debate and discuss. But let's also work on the agenda beyond the parameters of elective positions!