

The Philippines (2000) *

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The Philippines is on the threshold of yet another critical political upheaval. Waging a desperate battle to salvage what is left of his political and moral authority to govern is President Joseph Estrada on the one hand, and various civil society groups and breakaway politicians calling for his ouster on the other hand. Besides the President's attention is now focused on the Vice-President, who recently broke rank with the administration by resigning from the cabinet as Secretary of the Department of Social Welfare and Development. What is significant about this is that the Vice-President, the person most to gain once the President is unseated, is Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, a woman. But is it really significant?

Another political figure playing a major role in the unfolding drama of Philippine politics is former President Corazon Aquino, the first female to occupy the highest office of the land after a popular uprising toppled the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. But then again how significant is the role of these women in the current political equation of the country? Are they indicative of the status of women in Philippine politics?

What statistics belie

A breakthrough in the recognition of the contribution of women can be found in Section 14, Article II of the Constitution, which provides that "The State recognizes the role of women in nation-building, and shall ensure the fundamental equality before the law of women and men." This provision is cognizant of the contribution of women in the overall life of the country, and thus is supposed to signify the State's support in pursuing the general development of its female constituents.

From the time Filipino women were granted their right to suffrage in 1937, it has been consistently noted that female voter turnout proved to be higher than male turnout. Without basic reforms to our political structures and systems we cannot hope to achieve great improvement in the lives of women and other marginalized peoples. Electoral reforms are in order. The party-list system, introduced into Philippines elections only three years ago as a system of proportional representation, must be expanded and further democratized.

A system of representation in the various decision-making bodies of the local government units must be established. Local sector representation must be incorporated into the local government councils to ensure representation of marginalized sectors and groups.

The women's movement has done a great deal in working for the empowerment of women and gender equality. They have developed social support structures to increase gender awareness amongst women and men.

But the women's movement cannot do it all alone. There must be a consolidated effort between governmental and non-governmental groups to put flesh into the rhetoric of women's empowerment, with the eventual goal of making women into a genuine political force.

Government agencies such as the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women are developing, implementing and overseeing various programs on women. A gender desk can be found in other government line offices. The National Anti-Poverty Commission has included women as a disadvantaged group.

Quite a number of gender-related bills are pending in Congress. However they are likely to languish considering that our representatives are preoccupied with other concerns.

In the end, a law is only as good as its implementation. And its implementation will heavily depend on the political will of those in power, the resources they allocate, the efforts of various women's groups and the Filipino women who stand to benefit from it.

The political party Akbayan! is so far the only political group that has a constitutionally-mandated quota of thirty percent for women in its leadership in all of its party units. Akbayan! believes that women should be encouraged and challenged to take on more leadership roles, not only within the party, but also on the level of public governance.

Prospects of women in Philippine politics

While women have made inroads into such a male-dominated field as politics is, the challenges still remain great. The male-centered culture is still very ingrained in the consciousness of Filipinos, aided and abetted by deeply entrenched political structures.

The politics of patronage and personality still command the Philippines political landscape. It isn't likely to disappear anytime soon. But if we want our women to break free from the bondage of marginalization, gender stereotyping, subordination, multiple burdens and violence, we must somehow work to achieve significant political reforms. The income many women earn is not even enough to supplement the needs of the household, making them dependent on their spouses.

Because the productive sphere is given more societal importance, and women are viewed as the "weaker sex", women are generally ambivalent and unenlightened about their role in politics and governance, thus making them less confident compared to men in such engagements.

Women are associated primarily with their reproductive functions, although they perform a host of other activities that would be considered strictly within the productive domain. This is particularly true again in lower-income families where they can't afford to employ household help.

In general, women's personal views on power, governance and politics are largely associated with male characteristics, and given that, they do not enjoy the same level of confidence compared with men. Women would rather avoid conflict rather than engage in it, thus leaving the field freely open to the opposite sex.

What is being done

There have been some advancements in terms of policy advocacy for women. In 1995, former President Fidel Ramos signed into law Executive Order No. 273, also known as the Philippine Plan for Gender-Responsive Development 1995-2025 (PPGD). This law takes off where the Philippine Development Plan for Women (PDPW) left off after its four-year mandate expired in 1992. It is the government's 30-year framework for pursuing gender equality and development. A voluminous document, incorporated into its development framework is the vision of its contribution to the human, economic and industrial development sectors. The law names seven special concern sectors, namely: Women and Migration, Prostitution, Violence Against Women,

Women and Family, Indigenous Cultural Communities and Ancestral Domain, Peace, and Politics and Governance.

Owing to the deeply entrenched legacy of structure and perceptions that engender a culture of inequality, being a woman does not automatically guarantee a female will have a political consciousness. A bill on women in Congress does not get the automatic support of the female members of the House. Some may even be hesitant to support it.

Women cabinet members have also been relegated to traditional positions such as heading the Department of Tourism, the Department of Social Work and the Department of Health. A female Secretary of National Defense is not in the offing at any time in the near future. There might be exceptions, such as having a woman for a Director of the Bureau of Treasury. But still, they are exceptions.

Age does not seem to be a significant factor in gauging a female politician's approach toward politics. The strongest influence on her approach and position on issues would still be her family and other class considerations. Age would only be significant if we assume that younger women are more open to change and more likely to use reason than the older generations.

Obstacles and challenges

While there has been a significant increase in women's involvement in politics and governance, many women are still hindered from exercising their right to participation. This is particularly true for lower income women and those from low-income families. As economic power is a good indicator for a woman's access to political participation and power, the have-nots face numerous obstacles.

In workshops conducted through the Women in Governance project, which Akbayan is a part, dependence on husbands is one obstacle frequently identified by married women coming from low-income families. A number of them may hold odd jobs, but there were more registered male voters. Women in political posts have markedly increased over the years. The country's Vice-President is female. Of the 217 members of the current House of Representatives, 27 are women. One of them, Loretta Ann Rosales, is Akbayan's representative. In the Senate, four of 24 members are women.

Elected positions held by women at the local government level are steadily on the rise. Statistics show that in the 1997 elections female-headed barangays, or village level local government units were at 11.85%, while the total women barangay officials were slightly higher at 20.46%. Percentages of local chief executives who were women from the municipal, city and provincial levels were within more or less the same range.

A sizeable number of the bureaucracy is female. In fact, they were 54.32% of a total 1.32 million government personnel in 1996. Over the past decade, the diplomatic corps has doubled its female ambassadors. While as far as the judicial branch is concerned, there is only one woman in the Supreme Court, the number of female judges in the lower courts has doubled in less than five years.

What these statistics do not show is the quality of women's participation in politics and governance. While there may be more women in the government bureaucracy, they tend to occupy second-level positions, meaning men still hold key managerial and executive posts. Even the salary scales for women, which are pegged to positions and ranks, are lower than men's. A study by the Department of Labor – Institute of Labor Studies found out that access to opportunities was greater for men than for women (e.g. promotions, access to training, etc.)

In the legislative arena, of the 24 bills on women filed by a mix of both female and male members of the House of Representatives, not one has been passed thus far. In a few months, the country shall be facing another round of elections for representatives. At this early juncture, our members of Congress are already gearing up for that election. This has added to the present turmoil that the impeachment proceedings filed against President Estrada is causing. With this kind of scenario, chances are bleak for any of the women-related bills in this Congress, as they are not considered priority legislation.

The numbers illustrate that women are making some progress in the field of politics and governance, but what is still disturbing is the quality of their participation, which still has a long, long way to go.

Women in Philippine politics

Politics is mainly about power. And within the context of Philippine politics, as well as for a large of the world, women have not traditionally been the holders of power. Some countries are clearly more advanced than others in rectifying this historical error. In the Philippines, steps are also being taken towards this direction. How far this process goes depends on the political will of those in power, the support of the people and the conscious efforts of the Filipino women in general in working toward political, economic and social equality.

Politics, as in many spheres of life in the Philippines, is still very much a male enclave. From the smallest government unit to the national level, men dominate over men. Gender relations remain traditional and male-centered. The small number of women who are in power unfortunately are still devoid of genuinely enlightened consciousness on the subject of gender.

A number of women legislators for example, had very little reluctance to admit that they have been voted into position largely because their families wield either political or economic power, or both, and because they have been chosen to carry on the role of their male kin. Many of the female members of the Senate and House of Representatives are members of a political family or closely related to a male politician. They are the wives, daughters, or sisters of political figures.

This being the case, it comes as no surprise that their consciousness is largely male oriented.

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