

A Front Row Seat to Women's History

By Pennie Azarcon-dela Cruz

Being a feminist has its pluses; there's always room for one in the local women's movement

THERE ARE few words that evoke as much dread, distancing and recoil as the word feminist. (The other words include serial killer and actor-politician).

The F word conjures up images of bra-burning (which never happened, by the way), women screaming for their share of orgasm in public rallies, wife leaving husband and kids "to find herself," and Miriam Defensor Santiago using exotic language.

To be a woman and aware in these times, it's been said, is to be in a constant stage of rage. The corollary to that would be: to be feminist and outspoken in these times is to be spoofed on primetime TV. Trivialized as a woman's libber and suspected of being a man hater, the closet feminist carefully couches her speech with the limp disclaimer, "I'm not a feminist, but..."

Not a cop-out really, just a whipping out of the cloak of invisibility bequeathed us long ago by this well-meaning homeroom teacher who briefed us on the need to blend with upholstery for our own good. Look at the lilies of the field, she said, look at the furniture. Better to be seen than heard.

I'm not sure when the cloak became a shawl, a soft shimmering square we wrapped ourselves in when doubts assailed us. Why, we started to wonder, did boys get bigger allowances, were allowed later hours, had fewer chores and more perks? Like the shawl, the words comforted us for sometime. "Don't worry your pretty head about that. Filipino women, after all, are the most liberated in the world. They hold the purse and are put on a pedestal. And such personal freedoms! Imagine, no bound feet as in China, no bride burning as in India, no walking several paces behind a man as in Japan. Who could ask for more?"

Well, fortunately, some did. Minerva Laudico, Josefa Llanes Escoda and thousands of Filipino suffragettes marched in the streets, demanded, and won the right to vote in 1937. Their latter-day sisters discarded the shawl as well and turned the martial law years into a continuing consciousness-raising affair. Philippine history was never the same again.

IT WAS the late '70s and I was an early recruit. Having taken an interest in consumer issues, I had joined a breastfeeding coalition to counter the aggressive promotion of infant formula. I remember how, in one of our press conferences, a woman journalist had asked: "but what if a mother refuses to breastfeed?" "She should be shot!" a coalition member replied. I'm not sure it improved our image any, but it certainly prepared me for the hostility ahead.

Daycare centers, rooming in and breastfeeding, non-sexist education: they were literally motherhood statements. Who could be against them? we thought. Some of our political allies, it turned out. Ah, but your issues are too lightweight, too selfish, too narrow and personal, they scoffed. You're taking the easy way out, others chided us. Indeed, Marcos ignored the breastfeeding rallies and the phalanx of police moved back,

embarrassed, when the demonstrating women pulled out their teats and breastfed in public.

There were other serious charges. We were being "divisive" and sidetracking the women, other activists pointed out. Why fritter energy that could better be used in fighting the Marcos dictatorship? Didn't we realize that women's liberation would flow naturally from national liberation?

In the early '80s, few could understand--much less appreciate-- that the personal was political. Nor that the members and leaders of Pilipina—the first local feminist group--remained committed to fight the dictatorship. Indeed, Sr. Mary John Mananzan went on to become chair of Gabriela; Ging Quintos Deles still works for peace in militarized areas, Remmy Rikken headed the Commission on Women during the Aquino administration and started the process that would require local governments to set aside five percent of their budget for women; Irene Santiago recently run for vice president in tandem with Sen. Raul Roco. No pushovers these.

The lukewarm reception that greeted the feminist movement did not prevent women from talking among themselves and discovering that across time, classes and disciplines, they had much in common. Woman as priestess, healer and revolutionary supplanted Maria Clara as role model. Women's Studies became a buzzword. So did double burden. Lay-down or lay-off. Sex tourism and mail-order brides. And the tongue-tripping commodification of women.

Rallies, too, started acknowledging women's issues, with marching songs telling of rape and torture and of children orphaned by the endless war in the countryside, and Inang Laya singing "Titser," referring to the fate of teachers who ended up as domestics in Hong Kong.

And then Ninoy Aquino was shot. Overnight, women's groups bloomed and multiplied: Gabriela, Womb, Teresa Makabayan, Cory's Crusaders and other yellow brigades took to the streets and breakfast forums, sipping a heady brew of politics and barako. Cory, the widow, became Cory, the Candidate, and the women cheered, even if some of them had to abide by the Left's boycott position in the 1985 snap elections. Still, the women showed some spunk when early in the campaign, they protested the sexist political ads that had Marcos claiming that women were only good for the bedroom. For many, helping elect the country's first woman president was enough.

For the rest, however, the battle for change had just begun. And there have been many changes, among them the New Family Code that took effect in 1988 which increased the grounds for legal separation, recognized live-in relationships and upped the legal age for marriage. More women-friendly laws followed in quick order: the day care law in 1990, an increase in maternity benefits in 1991, the breastfeeding and rooming-in law in 1992, the anti-sexual harassment law in 1995, the paternity leave act in 1996, and the anti-rape law in 1997. In 1998, women elected Patricia Sarenas from Mindanao as their sectoral representative to Congress.

The '90s also saw the local women's movement expanding to embrace issues on the environment, human rights, reproductive health and rights, HIV-AIDS, sexual preferences, world trade and globalization, and foreign debt, as if to prove once and for all that every issue is a woman's issue.

When I joined the women's movement some 20 years back, I kept one thought going when the going got rough. When one works for change, we were told, the change will eventually come. But we were cautioned not to expect it to happen in our lifetime. That it has can only mean one thing: more work and more changes ahead.