

The National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women, the women's movement and gender mainstreaming in the Philippines¹

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Introduction

The Philippine experience shows that a vibrant women's movement plays a critical role *vis-à-vis* a national women's machinery — lobbying for its creation, providing leadership and direction, pioneering new initiatives such as gender training that are key components of gender mainstreaming, and serving as a gadfly when government fails to deliver.

The National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women (NCRFW) has had a long and chequered history, often interwoven with the twists and turns of Philippine feminism. Placed directly under the Office of the President, it was founded during the Marcos period of dictatorship (1975–86), strengthened during the Aquino era of restored but still limited democracy (1986–92) and further expanded during the Ramos regime which placed both globalization and gender mainstreaming onto the agenda (1992–98).

Twice has the women's movement played midwife to the NCRFW: at its creation in 1975 and at its rebirth in 1986. The NCRFW's deepest impulses reflect this fact: its leadership is largely drawn from academia and women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and its major themes resonate with issues raised by the women's

movement. The first decade of *Balikatan*⁴ organizing of local communities created a nationwide women's movement, albeit in the direction of income generation and micro-enterprise. The second decade's theme of gender mainstreaming was compelled by the small but steady gains of women's NGOs in gender awareness raising, advocacy and institution building.

Thus the functions of the Commission now include coordinating 'the preparation of Philippine development plans for women as well as their monitoring, assessment and updating'; serving as a 'clearinghouse and data base for information relating to women'; conducting reviews of existing legislation, policy studies and gender awareness-raising programmes; monitoring and assessing the implementation of laws and policies on women, including international commitments such as the Beijing Platform for Action; and implementing pilot projects 'for the delivery of services for women as a basis for policy formation and programme recommendation'. The NCRFW has a Board of Commissioners to set its policies, programmes and campaigns. It is led by an Executive Director assisted by a Deputy Executive Director and the Chiefs of five functional divisions: policy analysis; information resources; monitoring and evaluation; technical services; and administration and finance.

Two streams of feminism

The NCRFW's leadership has emanated from the Philippine women's movement, and from two streams in particular: liberal and left-of-centre feminism. Liberal feminism in the country emerged in the early 1900s, gaining force and visibility in the 1920s with the nationwide campaign for suffrage. Spearheaded by the National Federation of Women's Clubs, then the biggest coalition of women's organizations, the campaign mobilized all major women's groups to a resounding victory in the 1937 plebiscite that recognized, for the first time in Asia, women's right to vote. Through the next two decades this 'first wave'⁵ of feminism sought its goals in equal laws and equal opportunities. This wave was spearheaded by professional groups and a number of

welfare-oriented socio-civic women's organizations which later became the Civic Assembly of Women in the Philippines (CAWP), predecessor of the National Council of Women in the Philippines.

The CAWP's lobbying efforts for the creation of a national women's machinery date back to the late 1960s. But it would take the added leverage of 1975 as International Women's Year for President Ferdinand Marcos to redeem a half-forgotten pledge and decree the birth of the NCRFW. Unknowingly the NCRFW had two fairy godmothers: first-wave feminists and the international women's movement.

The 'second wave' of feminism in the country would gestate in the late 1960s and 1970s, aware of the emergence of the Western women's liberation movements while affirming its roots in the historic struggles for nationhood. Such emergence was palpable in a much-publicized protest against the 1969 Miss Philippines beauty contest by the then left-identified women's organization Makibaka, an acronym for Malayang Kilusan ng Bagong Kababaihan (Free Movement of New Filipino Women). But this nascent feminist group had to yield to the exigencies of underground resistance to a dictatorship in the early 1970s. In the 1980s second-wave feminists would largely come from mixed groups such as political formations, people's movements and women-only NGOs. All were critical of martial law and some of the more politically minded shared a socialist perspective. This created a tension with women's groups that had made peace with the establishment or kept their silence *vis-à-vis* martial law.

In the great divide between those for and against martial law, the NCRFW was perceived by second-wave feminists to be an ally of government. This was so for a number of reasons: Imelda Marcos chaired the NCRFW Board of Commissioners and local politicians' wives headed Balikatan councils; and as part of the government structure, it was assumed that the Commission would be pro-government. Yet a third reason stemmed from the fact that the CAWP, the NCRFW's major partner, was seen to have come to terms with martial law.

Many groups within the second wave of the women's movement which emerged at the height of the Marcos

dictatorship sought to balance class and gender issues, exemplified by two autonomous women's organizations, PILIPINA and KALAYAAN, founded in 1981 and 1982, respectively. PILIPINA affirmed that 'the struggle for social transformation would have to be waged along gender lines' and not just in terms of 'class and property relations'. KALAYAAN viewed itself as 'autonomous but not separate [from]' and 'distinct but not integrated [with]' the national democratic movement, refusing to sacrifice women's liberation for some 'higher goal' of national liberation, according to former NCRFW Commissioner Fe Mangahas.⁶

A third organization, GABRIELA, was founded in 1984 as a broad coalition to rally various women's groups against the Marcos dictatorship. Part of a larger political formation, GABRIELA has disavowed working directly with government, and that includes the NCRFW. Organized in 1975, the KaBaPa (Katipunan ng Bagong Pilipina or Association of the New Filipina) also belongs to a larger political group and has roots in the peasant movement. Infusion of gender concerns came in the 1980s.

Broad unities and deep fissures

For the Philippine women's movement (or movements, which some claim as being more accurate), the decade of the 1980s revealed broad unities as well as deep fissures. On 28 October 1983 various sections of the women's movement set their differences aside to march in full force against the dictatorship. This shining moment of feminist sisterhood would be repeated in the 1986 campaign for gender equality provisions in the new Constitution that was being drafted by a Constitutional Commission. The Commission was appointed by then President Aquino after she had been catapulted to power on the strength of the EDSA revolt against the Marcos dictatorship. Four organizations and coalitions initially met to consolidate their proposals: the Concerned Women of the Philippines, Women's Caucus, GABRIELA and Lakas ng Kababaihan spearheaded by PILIPINA, with Lakas serving as initial convenor and secretariat.

Five provisions were encompassing and prescient here: seeking women's fundamental equality with men in all spheres of life; affording protection to working women, including a concern for child care, and ensuring equal work and pay; recognizing the economic value of housework; safeguarding women's choice of career and property rights; and mandating women's equal representation in policy making at all levels.

The month-long process of consultations also prefigured the vibrant Governmental organization (GO)-NGO partnership that would be foundational for the NCRFW's rebirth and new growth in its second decade. Leticia Shahani, by then Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, formally convened the consultations with the NCRFW as host. Lakas ng Kababaihan Chair (and later NCRFW Board Commissioner) Teresita Quintos-Deles coordinated the NGO side. Shahani was concerned that the progressive women's groups enter the process, while Quintos-Deles sought the engagement of other streams of the women's movement. This effectively took care of the entire spectrum of women's organizations.

On a stirring Women's Day of Unity in July 1986, presided over by the outgoing Executive Director of the NCRFW, Leticia de Guzman, the final document was signed by 2,000 representatives of 200 women's organizations as well as school and government delegations. Crossing 'social and ideological boundaries', the gathering was also graced by suffragists of the 1920s and 1930s. Quintos-Deles observed that the entire process was 'imbued with intellectual alertness, emotional honesty, moral commitment, and a political maturity that all Filipino women can be proud of' (Honculada and Ofreneo, 1998:5). The document was formally presented to Constitutional Commission President and eminent jurist Cecilia Munoz-Palma by female members of the Constitutional Commission.

This test case of gender solidarity in the post-dictatorship period showed that a broad unity between 'first and second wave' feminism, within the more left-inclined women's groups and, finally, unity between women in the NGO community and those in the bureaucracy was essential for a high-stakes campaign to succeed. Yet it also became clear that sections of the women's movement continued to have different perspectives towards working with the government.

One perspective was that of critical opposition on the premise that the Aquino administration would not be fundamentally different from its predecessor. Another position was that of critical collaboration with progressive forces within government, to be able to espouse pioneering initiatives such as peace and an enlarged women's agenda.

With the NCRFW's doors open to the wide array of women's organizations, the new Board of Commissioners in 1986 included women's advocates, feminists and women professionals representing the private sector. The deepest hues of purple, the symbolic colour of feminism, now scintillated in the NCRFW.

The two global Women's Conferences in Mexico in 1975 and Nairobi in 1985 gave the then NCRFW Executive Director Remmy Rikken her first intimation of gender mainstreaming. But NCRFW staff and other women in government had to be converted to the vision. The presence and leadership of brash, young (and not-so-young) women activists at the 1987 consultations and other NCRFW meetings was edifying, if not electrifying. Women bureaucrats had a taste of what 'movement' meant, its dynamism and refreshing spontaneity. But the learning went both ways. Women activists realized that bureaucracy was not a faceless, genderless mass and that feminism could make inroads there. Indeed, feminism *had* to make inroads there.

Gender training was pioneered by the women's movement. Ging Deles says that the Harvard tools of gender analysis 'became exciting only because there were practitioners interacting with the technology. It was these practitioners sans technology who first realized the implications and possible impact of having technologies to measure or to communicate what you're trying to say.' It was also the women activists who first expressed the need to move from 'heart' to 'hard' data. Ging put it plainly: 'We [women NGOs] created the motivation, the environment to make it necessary to go technical.' And so the consultations provided the bare bones on which gender mainstreaming would grow. These gatherings would set into motion a process that would produce two historic volumes: the *Philippine Development Plan for Women (1989–1992)* (NCRFW, 1989) and the *Philippine Plan for Gender-Responsive Development 1995–2025* (NCRFW, 1995a).

The GO–NGO partnership

One high point of the GO–NGO partnership nurtured early on by the NCRFW was the annual GO–NGO congress starting in 1989. Drawing in participants from far and wide, the congress had both a serious and carnival side to it, with lectures, workshops, joint planning, poetry reading and singing, as well as movie screenings, folk art displays, and sales of posters, brochures and the like. Not a few top women bureaucrats point to the first congress as a turning point in their lives when they really got to ‘talk women’ with other women.

The GO–NGO collaboration is also credited with two executive proclamations issued in 1989: declaring the first week of March as Women’s Week, with 8 March as International Women’s Day and, later, March as Women’s Role in History Month. In 1990 8 March became a special holiday by legislative action. Only in the Philippines does the celebration of International Women’s Day fill an entire month: at least a hundred activities are held yearly in Metro Manila and the provinces, engaging both NGO women and their sisters in government. These activities include marches and rallies of left-wing-oriented women’s groups, founding anniversaries of other women’s organizations, film festivals, art exhibits, symposia and public forums, testimonies on violence against women, and the like. This prolonged observance has highlighted women’s culture and aided in the full flowering of women’s advocacy.

Cory Aquino’s term: the best and worst of times

Patricia ‘Tatti’ Licuanan, who served as NCRFW Board Chair for most of Cory Aquino’s presidency, describes this period as the ‘best of times [and] worst of times’. Why the ambivalence, if not seeming contradiction? The times were favourable, she says, because the national leadership was ‘deeply committed to reform’ and was ‘comfortable with NGOs and GOs eager to work with them’. Though Cory Aquino was not a feminist she was ‘instinctively supportive’ of women’s causes.

But it was also the worst of times for women's problems, which could easily be sidelined with an economy in near-shambles. Moreover, as Licuanan observed, GO and NGO 'working styles seemed incompatible' and NGO participation and partnership were difficult to concretize. A third reason was the NGOs' deep-seated suspicion and distrust of government. Licuanan wryly noted: 'Some of this destructive competition . . . characterized the women's movement as well.' She also observed that 'having a woman President did not always work to the benefit of women' because her situation, if not success, became generic for all women. A woman President also raised undue expectations about what could be done for women (Honculada and Ofreneo, 1998).

Nevertheless, gender mainstreaming and its evolving technology was part of Cory Aquino's legacy to the incoming administration of Fidel Ramos. Towards the end of her term, the initiative for gender mainstreaming lay with government structures. But the role of NGO women's groups remained critical, especially when gender mainstreaming started moving out to pilot regions and local government units.

Ugnayan ng Kababaihan sa Pulitika or UKP had drafted a ten-point women's agenda with demands related to peace, the environment, agriculture, work, business and industry, health, social services, education, culture and media, violence against women and political participation. Among the presidential candidates, only Fidel Ramos signed the agenda, an auspicious beginning. UKP included women NGOs and women from academe and government. Among its leaders was Imelda 'Mely' Nicolas, who would become NCRFW Board Chair in the Ramos administration (1992–98). A military man, who initially provoked women's fears with the scarce representation of women in his first Cabinet, Ramos proved a staunch ally of the NCRFW. Issuing a number of executive orders that sought to deepen the bases and broaden the scope of gender mainstreaming, Ramos increased the frequency of presidential meetings with the NCRFW from twice yearly to quarterly.

A notable accomplishment during Ramos' term was the allocation of a 5 per cent budget for gender and development. At last, the government seemed to be putting at least

some of its money 'where its mouth is', in the words of the then NCRFW Chairperson Imelda Nicolas. It was time to stop just talking about gender and start providing substance to the rhetoric by giving it a budget. After all, gender advocacy and commitment to women's empowerment would sound hollow if they were not accompanied by provision of resources for the implementation of programmes and projects on the ground. As succinctly put in *The Women's Budget* (NCRFW, 1995), 'the most reliable measure of government's political will to respond to women's concerns is . . . how much it spends on them.' The then Senator Leticia Ramos Shahani (sister of the President) also served as an important catalyst, insisting on a minimum allocation of 5 per cent for gender and development, despite arguments that such a small share would again reinforce women's marginalization in terms of access to, and control of, resources. On the other hand, beginning with a specific amount, no matter how minimal, would be better than vague rhetoric about an 'amorphous thing' called a Gender and Development (GAD) budget devoid of clear and attainable targets.

The NCRFW and global feminism

The GO-NGO partnership proved a winning combination in three major undertakings during Ramos' term: the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC) and the Social Reform Agenda.

The NCRFW was at the forefront of three years of preparations of Philippine GO and NGO women for the global women's conference and NGO forum in Beijing. As at Nairobi the NGO women's forum raised cutting-edge issues, with the crystallized debates finding their way into official conference sessions and the final document, the Beijing Platform for Action. Those preparations were both a labour of love and an exercise in discipline, engaging women NGOs in a three-tiered process: drawing the agenda from the regions via networks and major organizations; thence meeting at a national conference to come to a consensus; and,

later, sharing their agenda with counterpart organizations in the Asia-Pacific region. The NGO consensus document was further pared down to three major issues to be championed by the official Philippine delegation to Beijing: migrant women workers, rural women and violence against women, particularly trafficking in women.

It is a tribute to Filipino women that one of their own chaired the tumultuous United Nations Women's Conference in 1985, and again in 1995, to produce a consensus document that rang true for most, if not all, of the world's women. Leticia Shahani served as Secretary-General of the World Conference in Nairobi in 1985; Tatti Licuanan, as Chair of the main committee in Beijing in 1995, won the 'battle of the brackets'⁷ with grace and firmness, with one journalist describing her, as an 'iron bladder'. It is no surprise therefore that Tatti Licuanan succeeded Letty Shahani as NCRFW Chair when Shahani ran for the Senate in 1986. Another Filipina feminist, Irene Santiago, served as Executive Director to the NGO women's forum in Huairou outside Beijing which boasted 35,000 participants.

The total commitment of major sections of the Philippine women's movement to the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women and its preparatory process was bolstered by executive support. In the midst of the frenzy at Beijing, the Philippine delegation was cheered by news that President Ramos had issued an executive order approving the Philippine Plan for Gender-Responsive Development. The Plan would, in fact, be the 'main mechanism to implement the platform for action in the country' (NCRFW, 1998a:14).

The NCRFW's intense gender advocacy permeates its international engagements, an advocacy rooted in the women's movement. The APEC forum was founded in 1989 to promote open trade and economic cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region. The NCRFW has played a leading role in raising the issue of gender within APEC by commissioning policy research papers on APEC's priority areas of cooperation from a gender perspective.⁸ Most of these papers were forthright about the expected negative effects of globalization on the majority of women. These were presented at the Senior Women Leaders' Network, which the NCRFW is supporting. For their part, women's groups sponsored a series of forums to probe the perils and promises of increasing

globalization in the Asia-Pacific sphere. The NCRFW has likewise been charged with the task of monitoring government compliance with the Beijing commitments.

Gender advocacy and the social reform agenda

The Social Reform Agenda (SRA), espoused by the Ramos government to alleviate poverty and institute social reforms, has its origins in the peace and NGO movements in the country. As one of the basic sectors represented in the Social Reform Council, women have sought to raise the gender issue *vis-à-vis* the SRA framework and its sectoral programmes. Council meetings chaired by the President have been venues for gender advocacy in legislation and executive policy.

The issue of violence against women is instructive. The anti-sexual harassment Bill and expanded anti-rape Bill were produced through years of gender awareness raising, broad-based women's mobilization and coalition building on the issue of violence against women. Women workers consistently raised the issue of workplace-related harassment. Yet the Bills languished in the halls of a male-dominated Congress, saved from a natural death by a combination of factors, not least of which was the strategic support of women bureaucrats, the NCRFW and the President. For instance, last minute strategizing by women's NGOs led by Sentrong Alternatibong Lingap Panlegal (the Alternative Legal Assistance Centre) and PILIPINA rescued the anti-sexual harassment Bill from the freezer; and unrelenting advocacy by the women's coalition Sama-samang Inisyatiba ng Kababaihan sa Pagbabago ng Batas at Lipunan (the Joint Women's Initiative in Changing Law and Society) was key to the passage of the anti-rape Bill.

Gains

In spite of the current rough sailing (see below), two key gains have marked the decade 1989–98 and have refused to

sink in the murky waters of the present: deepening the discourse on gender and starting to redirect the mainstream in terms of logic and resources. The first meant learning to read and write anew. The women's movement may be credited with raising gender to the level of public discourse but sustaining the discourse apart from massive mobilizations and sharp confrontations with a macho Congress is beyond the capacity of even the most fervent gender advocates. Learning to read anew meant spotting the issues simmering beneath the surface of mundane reality: rank discrimination, a paralysing double burden, a punishing double standard, opportunities squandered, families in pain, communities in stagnation. This new literacy meant, for a growing number of bureaucrats (and non-bureaucrats), a new numeracy and learning to write afresh: counting women and making women count, in their labour in production and reproduction, and factoring the female population into projects, policies and activities. Not as mere recipients, clientele or passive objects but as active subjects, making the decisions that impinged daily on their lives.

In the concrete, the gains appear modest. However, agregately the infrastructure for gender mainstreaming is being built slowly, stone by stone. First comes the human resource base, the NCRFW staff and their counterparts in the agencies, that has become a 'community of people' with a passion for their work, trust and confidence in each other, and the dedication and commitment to see gender mainstreaming through. A second gain is the knowledge resource base, the tools and mechanisms, many of which have been crafted in good old trial-and-error fashion. Integral to this is the conceptual framework, the GAD framework, that was not ready to hand in 1989, but emerged from the hit and miss of GAD focal point building in many line agencies. Another gain is the expanded sisterhood, with women in government staking out their claims as much for themselves as for the whole bureaucracy, networking among each other and with women in the GO-NGO community for mutual growth and inspiration and a common agenda. These websites of sisterhood are crucial to both sides: for NGO women to comprehend and critique the gender mainstreaming process; and for women in the bureaucracy to locate their issues within the broader macro-realities

with which the majority of women grapple, such as globalization. There has also been an increase in male advocates and champions of gender issues in government. Gender mainstreaming would not have gone as far as it has in pilot agencies and regions without their staunch support.

The international women's movement and international development agencies have played crucial roles at each stage of the NCRFW's history. In processes that continue to affirm the NCRFW's autonomy, they have shared resources, helped to clarify directions and provided inspiration.

Finally, the 5 per cent GAD budget is an ingenious way of securing funds for GAD activities, projects and programmes in a situation of scarce resources. Regular compliance reports are the basis for the National Economic Development Authority's monitoring of agency performance. A similar call has been issued by the Department of Budget and Management to local government units.

Challenges

While the gains have been many, they are not irreversible. Bureaucracy has existed for decades without a gender perspective (or with a biased one) — why change? Thus many GAD reports are surreal, not real. Reporting for compliance means equating anything female with gender. One critic archly inquired whether enumerating male, then female, carabaos constituted sex-disaggregated data in agriculture. This is like the claim that a project is gender responsive on the strength of listing male and female beneficiaries. Bureaucratic culture could very well ignore the requirements for a GAD budget and GAD reports (see Staudt, chapter 2 of this volume). But in today's world, it is easier to keep the form without the substance. Thus the GAD budget has become an end in itself, rather than a means to an end — women's empowerment. Many dangers ensue from a bureaucracy with petrified ways of thinking and doing: outright opposition and hostility towards women's movements and groups, marginalization of GAD focal points, death by starvation (no funds), lip service and compliance simply on paper.

When coupled with macro-economic constraints that require severe fiscal cutbacks, the danger is potent, if not fatal (see Kwesiga and Sawyer, chapters 10 and 12 of this volume). Gains, painstakingly built since the 1980s, could be reversed. The economic crisis that hit Southeast Asian economies in late 1997 has adversely affected many sectors of the economy. The government has had to reduce budgets drastically. Viewed as a fad or 'flavour of the month', the GAD budget is deemed expendable and among the first to go (see also Jezerska and Kwesiga, chapters 8 and 10 of this volume). In fact, in 1998 69 agencies reported a 2.69 billion pesos allocation for GAD, a mere 0.49 per cent of the total appropriations worth 546.7 billion pesos.

If the NCRFW loses steam because of factors beyond its control, gender mainstreaming will all the more become rarefied rhetoric convenient to disarm women and humour the funding agencies. The GAD budget will either remain on display, funding all sorts of initiatives involving women but not empowering them, or be revoked as so much gender claptrap.

In the final analysis, the litmus test of gender mainstreaming in government does not lie within government itself, but in whether and how gender advocacy is able to transform relationships between women and men in the country's towns and villages, farms and workplaces, upland and coastal communities. Women's groups existing autonomously or within larger political and civil society formations need to conjoin with the NCRFW and women in the Philippine bureaucracy in this Herculean effort.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is based on *Transforming the Mainstream: Building a Gender-Responsive Bureaucracy in the Philippines*, written by the authors and published by the UNIFEM East and Southeast Asia Pacific Regional Office, which documents the gender mainstreaming experiences of the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women from 1975 to mid 1998.
- 2 Women's Secretary, National Federation of Labour; and Vice Chairperson of PILIPINA and the Women's Action Network for Development.
- 3 PhD and Professor, Department of Women and Development Studies, College of Social Work and Community Development, University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City.

- 4 Balikatan sa Kaunlaran or BSK, the nationwide organizing of rural women's councils for socio-economic uplift under the aegis of the NCRFW.
- 5 Some prefer the terms 'first wave' and 'second wave' feminists as more neutral, if not more inclusive, and less subject to polemics. While first-wave feminists were invariably liberal, second-wave feminists encompassed the liberal and left-of-centre. The terms 'nationalist feminism' or 'Third World feminism' have also been used for the latter substream.
- 6 From a 25 March 1998 interview with Mangahas, who was also a founder of *Kalayaan*.
- 7 Contentious points in official United Nations documents are bracketed and the effort to produce consensus in Beijing was Herculean, with the deletion of over 400 pairs of brackets.
- 8 Numbering seven, the policy papers are collectively entitled 'Gender Analysis of Selected Philippine Concerns under APEC'.