

The Philippine Experience

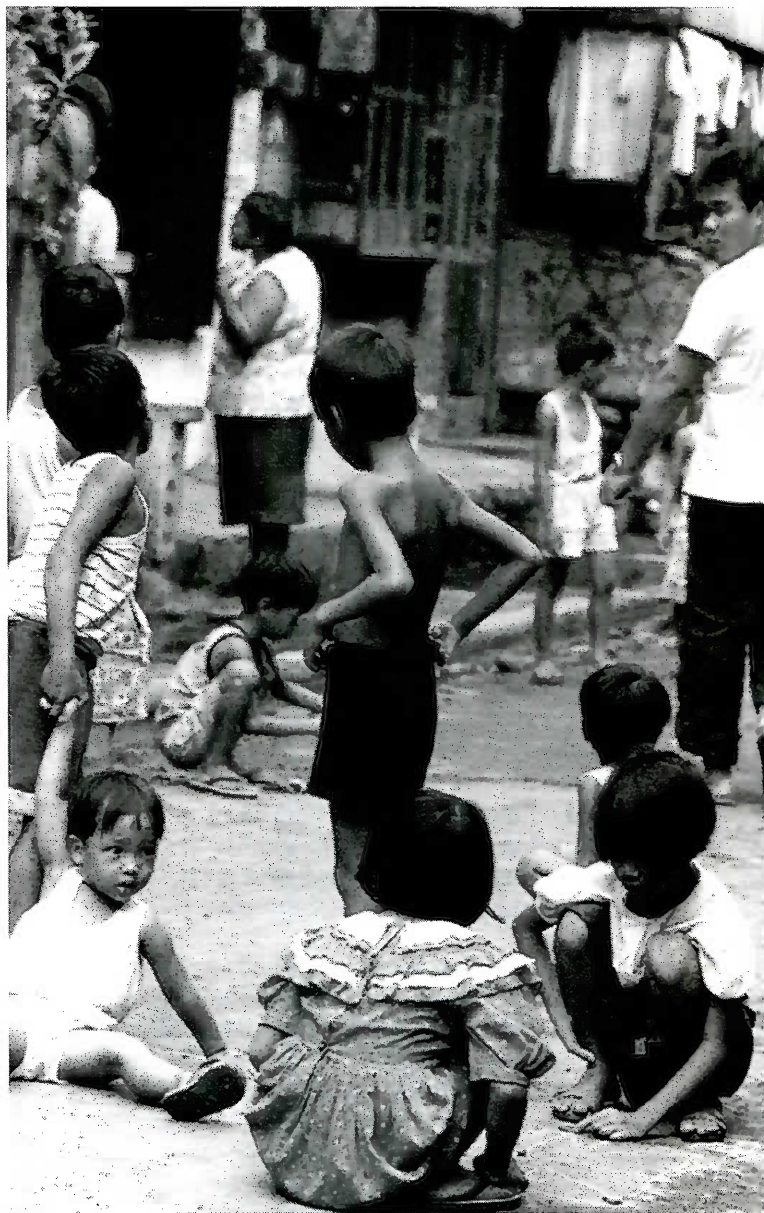
Reproductive Health Empowerment: A Struggle Against Conservatism

By Tess Raposas

The International Conference on Population and Development Tenth Year Review (ICPD+10) held in the Philippines on September 28 to October 3, 2004 showed some gains in women's empowerment in terms of laws and policy formulations. But the actual situation of women today is still really more of what it was 10 years ago.

A speaker at the ICPD+10 was Bellaflor Angara-Castillo, a member of the Philippine Congress immediately before being elected in May 2004 as governor of Aurora Province, in Luzon region, Philippines. In her speech, Castillo, who championed the Filipino women's reproductive health rights in Congress for nine years, identified some of the steps taken to respect, protect, and fulfill the health rights of every Filipino. However, she said that "we are yet to achieve the promise made 10 years ago (at the ICPD in Cairo), and this can only be fulfilled through a law providing for comprehensive sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR)."

The rights-based approach in reproductive health requires a comprehensive response but as Castillo cited in her speech "a vacuum in legislation obstructed the full protection SRHR." The UN Commission on Human Rights had provided a definition of "rights-based approach to development" as a conceptual framework for the process of human development that is normatively based on international human rights standards, and



Issi Photobank

operationally directed to promoting and protecting human rights.

Castillo furthermore enumerated three factors as main impediments to fully realising a favorable policy environment for SRHR in the Philippines. These factors are: 1. third-party intervention to a wobbly political institution; 2. under-investment by national and international duty-bearers for people's health; and 3. aggressive devolution of health services compounded by a privatised hospital system.

In the following pages, we take up on how the Church and the media are two of the most pervasive "third-party interventionists" and influence to the political structure in the Philippines on matters of SRHR.

The Third Parties

The Church

Foremost among the third-party interventionists, as one of the main impediments to a favorable policy environment for SRHR in the country is the Catholic Church, which defends its fundamentals whenever challenged. "The problem, however, is that our political institution, despite having settled the legal demarcations between Church and State, chose to yield to the church's political lobbying," Castillo continued in her speech. Clearly, this situation gives the Catholic Church a sharp edge in matters of national agenda that obscures the separation of the Church and State.

Surveys made by two survey institutions in the Philippines, Pulse Asia and Social Weather Stations, consistently showed that almost all Filipinos consider the ability to control one's fertility very important and that they would support candidates who promote family planning. Religion is hardly a factor in their family planning decisions, the surveys showed.

But Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and her health secretary Manuel Dayrit both made strong statements on institutionalising the violation of health rights by not respecting ICPD

principles and mandate. Provisions for information on family planning are believed to have been diverted to the Couples for Christ, an ultra conservative Catholic lay group. Arroyo and Dayrit also aggressively promote natural family planning methods that scientists have proved to be inconsistent and ineffective, but which are the only ones sanctioned by the Church.

Arroyo and Dayrit may be afraid of the Catholic backlash¹, thinking that their popularity might be attacked by the Church. In fact, Castillo—as a congresswoman then—and other proponents of the Reproductive Health Welfare Bill (or House Bill 4110) were indeed "demonised" by the conservative forces and were branded "anti-God." But the plight of the bill's proponents (and their eventual political victories despite the religious harassment) were not even publicised. In fact, Castillo's remarks in the ICPD+10 were not covered by the national dailies and what came out instead was the boeing of Dayrit in that conference.

The Church factor also comes into play in media coverage of SRHR issues. The mainstream media hardly covers the substantial aspects of reproductive health issues, more so their impact on women and children. If media does cover SRHR issues, it is always taking into account the views of the Church, despite survey results showing that religion hardly matters in SRHR. Economists, environmentalists, women's rights groups, and other stakeholders are hardly consulted in the media's stories. Even nuns who may have a more liberal stance on the issue are rarely consulted. Meanwhile, columnists invoking outdated theories against the effectiveness of modern methods of contraception are given prominent space in the opinion pages.

The Media

During the ICPD+10, Dayrit was booed for bringing up an article² in the September 27, 2004 issue of *Newsweek* magazine that said that economic prosperity is the best contraception. Dr. Junice Melgar of Likhaan, an SRHR non-government organisation (NGO) in the Philippines, later remarked that "this meant the poor women in need

of contraception would have to die because they cannot be economically prosperous.” Dayrit’s statement was however the only one highlighted in the October 7 issue of the broadsheet *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. The same *Newsweek* article was cited in a press release by Manila Mayor Lito Atienza, published by *Philippine Star*, another broadsheet. The article was made by Atienza as his vindication for not allowing modern contraceptives his city’s health service units. Atienza is also chair of the advocacy group Pro-Life Philippines.

Another issue in mainstream media reportage that affects advocacies like reproductive health is its taking things out of context and presuming them to be true. Such is what happened sometime in 2004 to the supposed two-child policy of the new reproductive health welfare bill filed by Philippine Congress Representative Edcel Lagman.

Where sensationalism and out-of-context reporting end, there begins the use of media as a venue for critical analysis to ventilate and advocate issues on gender equality. Through media, we can establish the extent of understanding issues that truly matter to women and not those defined for them by a patriarchal authority—religious or otherwise.

Lagman merely said in a news conference that his bill gives incentives to couples with only two children. However, mainstream media interpreted Lagman’s bill to mean controlling the number of children to only two. The bill never stipulated that and, yet, media’s notion about it had been repeated in various media references.

Lagman’s bill indeed got extensive mileage among the mainstream media—in multimedia, at that—and helped fuel the debate on contraceptives and other women’s issues. This was a fluke not only because these issues were grossly underreported before the uproar on the Lagman bill but also because if ever they were reported, it was because of novelty.

Stories are only picked up, for instance, when foreigners championing women’s issues come to the country to stir the hornet’s nest. In 1999, Gerri Halliwell, a member of the former British quartet Spice Girls and a spokesperson of the UN Population Fund, came to the Philippines upon the request of some non-government organisations (NGOs). She talked about family planning and women’s rights albeit on a rather superficial level. Halliwell’s controversial views were reported but when she left, there was no reverberation.

In September 2004, Thailand Sen. Mechai Viravaidya also came to the Philippines upon the invitation of reproductive health NGOs. The Senator is known in his country as “Condom King,” being responsible for institutionalising the hundred percent condom use policy in Thailand. Mechai also stirred controversy by castigating Dayrit’s policy on population control, and his views were likewise widely covered by the mainstream media. Some of the lesser popular newspapers like *Malaya* and *Manila Standard* even bannered Mechai’s harangue, while major newspapers *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (PDI) and the *Philippine Star* tried to “balance” their reportage by including not only Dayrit’s side but also that of the Catholic Bishops. In fact, the *Inquirer*’s editorial cartoonist Jess Abrera, who may be funny but very conservative in his population and health views, caricatured Mechai

and repeated the Church's word that condoms promote prostitution and promiscuity. Abrera, in his 12 July 2004 cartoon strip in his paper, also gave a retrogressive depiction of the "falling birth rate scenario," which at a 2.5 population growth rate is a contested case, and of the "two-child policy" and contraception in the August 2, 2004 issue.

A Globalised or Localised Agenda

Points cited so far on the impact of the mainstream media are particular to the Philippine scenario. But these do not preclude similarities or contrasts with other Asian context. Efforts to homogenise, however, are also met with articulation of localised experiences. There is a strong sentiment in the feminist movement to articulate the need to specify against universalising and simplification, which silence women and render mute their significant experiences.

While other parts of the world are way into their discussion of power feminism in contrast to victim feminism, the myth of female superiority, on the other hand, or the identification of a more successful place for female condom use, is the order of the day in other societies.

Gender issues in the Philippines have been largely the same through the years. Much as the women's movement is advancing its course as well as the form and fashion by which empowerment is taking place, there is a gigantic stumbling block to advancement somewhere amid the debate and the constrained actions. The culprit is the *status quo* of conservatism that is much preserved in in governance and the Church which is an influential institution in the Philippines.

Media as a Public Trust

We go once more in this discussion to media, a pervasive influence on everyday life, otherwise a critical tool and partner for development advocacy. Where sensationalism and out-of-context reporting end, there begins the use of media as a venue for critical analysis to ventilate and advocate issues on gender equality. Through media, we can establish the extent of understanding issues that truly matter

to women and not those defined for them by a patriarchal authority—religious or otherwise.

But media can only do so much. Tremendous as it is, the bulk of the task lies on the claimants. Convincing the Church is seemingly out of the question, but starters might begin to reassess their individual positions.

The marginalisation should take more space, the silenced to speak their minds, and the oppressed to emancipate themselves. Easier said than done, one may be prodded to say, but we are our own strength. It is a question of which side of us to nurture.

Raising issues is as important as crystallising these and calling for action. But, more importantly, we might be able to make that important connection between the day-to-day needs of women in their own context—housing, equal pay, comprehensive social services, empowering laws for women, freedom from violence and exploitation—and of far-reaching feminist principles. Certainly, this entails facing up to the stumbling blocks that are buried in religious dogma. The choice lies in each one of us.

Women empowerment in this sense, taken in manageable chunks, is lesser in big words and becomes more comprehensible. With a fuller understanding by, and conscientisation of media practitioners, media could be taken as an ally for effective information and education, dissemination and exchange.)

Tess Raposas is a freelance gender/media and development consultant for the past 15 years. She has done various writing, research, and training projects on women and children with a national and international scope for local and international non-government organisations as well as local government units and agencies.

[Footnotes]

- ¹ The Philippines is a predominantly Catholic country
- ² "Baby Bust—For More Countries, The Problem Isn't Having Too Many People But Having Too Few"

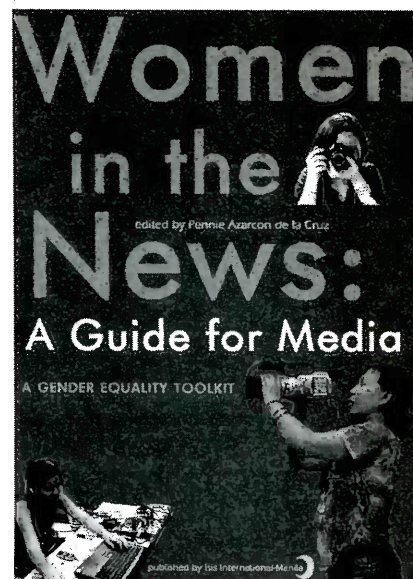
Women in the News: A Guide for Media A Gender Equality Toolkit

Edited by Pennie Azarcon de la Cruz

The silencing of women's voices is among the most insidious outcomes of "manstream" media (pun intended) evolution. Malecontrolled and dominated, the media in most Asian and Pacific societies has influenced the gathering and distribution of information from a perspective that is, naturally, predominantly male. Even the increasing number of women practitioners in journalism has not reversed the trend. Indeed, while the "all boys network" has grudgingly made space for them, women in the media are still subjected to second-class citizenry in the workplace—just as at home and in most spheres of public life. I believe a few (albeit too few to notice) improvements have been made in terms of content of media productions. The same thing with women's status in some spheres of public life. The use of less definitive terms is an acknowledgement of those improvements.

This tool kit developed by Isis International-Manila from a project initiated by the Asian Media Information and Communications Centre, tackles the issues straight from the shoulder in terminology that any media practitioner would recognise, focuses on issues of gender inequality in a variety of familiar situations, and examines the mindset from which the unfairness stems. It is important to note, however, that the occurrence of gender-insensitive incidents in newsrooms is but a reflection of that in the bigger society. Reforming the media, therefore, is the "fast track" way of re-educating the society that it serves.

Download the book at : <<http://www.isiswomen.org/pub/get/index.html>>. For more information, write to Isis International-Manila, PO Box 1837, Quezon City Main, Quezon City 1100, Philippines, Fax: (63-2) 924 1065, E-mail: <communications@isiswomen.org>.



Isis Clip Art Images Now Available Online and in CDs

Isis-International Manila would like to announce the online availability of the images from the Isis Clip Art collection.

Isis is hoping to share these positive images of women as rendered by chosen Filipino artists free for anyone to use in publications and productions, as long as it is for non-commercial purposes. Please give credit to Isis International-Manila and the artist if you choose to use these images. Feedback about our Clip Art is most welcome.

The electronic version of the Clip Art book can be accessed at the Isis website at <<http://www.isiswomen.org/clipart/index.html>>. Around 275 line art, non-coloured images are now available for downloading. Half of the images came from the Clip Art book published by Isis in 1995 and half came from other publications produced by Isis. The artists whose works are included in this volume are Sandra Torrijos, Grace de Jesus-Sievert, Irene R. Chia, Joanne de Leon, Melvi S. Gelacio, Jean Faye Rodriguez, Chit Balmaceda, Cristina Quisumbing Ramilo, Marianita Villariba, Lilette de Lara, Mara Carmela Villariba, Marilyn Barcelona, Denise Besinga, Maica Delfino, Mary Elizabeth Alejo-Aytin, Ferdinand Kintana, Alex Umali and Khalid Hussein.



To request for a copy of the CD, please write to the Media, Information and Communications Programme, Isis International-Manila, 3 Marunong Street, Bgy. Central, Quezon City 1100, Philippines; Fax: (63-2) 924 1065; E-mail: <communications@isiswomen.org>



Isis International-Manila
PO Box 1837, Quezon City Main, Quezon City 1100, Philippines
Tel (632) 928 1956
Fax (632) 924 1065
E-mail: isis@isiswomen.org
Website: www.isiswomen.org, www.isismanila.org, www.isisinternational.org

ISSN 101-5048

PRINTED MATTER