

# BREAKTHROUGHS AND CHALLENGES OF MAKING THE PHILIPPINE GOVERNMENT WORK FOR GENDER EQUALITY

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The Philippine government has been pursuing a strategy to advance women's status, promote their effective participation in all aspects of national life and ensure their equal enjoyment of the fruits of development. In consultation with women NGOs, it adopted the Philippine Development Plan for Women (PDPW) in 1989, a companion to the Medium-term Philippine Development Plan (MT-PDP) 1987-92. Institutional mechanisms have been initiated to incorporate the PDPW agenda into the government's planning, programming, budgeting, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation systems. The PDPW technically expired in 1993, so the government and leaders of the women's movement are preparing a 30-year Philippine Plan for Gender Responsive Development (PPGD), a sequel to the PDPW. Women's NGOs (WNGOs) have played a key role in improving the national response to women's concerns. This article reviews the collaborative and independent efforts of the government and WNGOs, and presents the strategies, breakthroughs and challenges in responding to gender issues in the Philippines. It assesses the impact of the women's movement on national development planning, and traces the strategies adopted to mainstream gender concerns in government.

## 2 CREATION OF A NATIONAL FOCAL POINT FOR WOMEN

### 2.1 'First-wave' activism

The establishment of an organized mechanism for representing women's needs and interests in planning processes had antecedents in the Philippine's long history of women's activism. This history cannot be reviewed here, but the immediate antecedents of the national 'machinery' for women were women's organizations who, from the immediate post-war period to 1976, were federated under the

National Council of Women of the Philippines (NCWP), and worked to mobilize women and lobby with the government for responses to their needs.

Recognizing the need for a more formal and systematic approach to women's concerns, the early feminists of the NCWP started to lobby for the creation of a government machinery in 1968. However, it was only after seven years that the government responded through Presidential Decree 633 issued on January 7, 1975 by the late President Ferdinand Marcos. The decree created the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women (NCRFW), an advisory body to the President.

With the creation of the NCRFW and the declaration of the UN Decade for Women in the same year, the government began to pay (some) attention to women. The policy making body of NCRFW (Board of Commissioners) was composed of cabinet secretaries (who were mostly male) and of women who belonged to the early feminists' group. The NCRFW was created with only two divisions and around 15 staff. This number grew to 54 after nearly two decades. Among them, only 12 occupy technical positions. The NCRFW does not have any operational branch and until 1993, received an annual budget of only P7 million (approximately US\$300,000). Assistance from foreign donors greatly helped sustain NCRFW's programmes and projects.

Today's Board is composed of 17 women, all from the non-government sector. The NCRFW advises the President and assists the Cabinet on policies, programmes and projects for women's advancement. It is now recognized as a national authority on women whose views and technical advice are sought by decision makers and law makers in government.

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## **2.2 The *Balikatan Sa Kaunlaran* (BSK) strategy**

From 1975 to 1985, the NCRFW's mission was to 'integrate women in the development efforts of the country', a mission that was executed through the *Balikatan Sa Kaunlaran* (shoulder-to-shoulder for progress). The BSK was a nationwide movement that sought to mobilize women and galvanize government and non-government efforts to promote women's participation in development. The strategy involved using influential women to mobilize the so-called 'grassroots women' toward productive endeavours. Programmes aligned to the decade's sub-themes of health, education and employment were mainly welfare-oriented. NCRFW served as a catalyst, brokering funds and creating mechanisms for inter-organizational planning and coordination. NCRFW also monitored the country's compliance to the UN Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and generated research to build the national database on women.

## **2.3 Emergence of second wave feminists**

The assassination of ex-Senator Benigno Aquino in 1983 sparked political upheavals in the country. New women's organizations joined the fight against the Marcos regime. These WNGOs espoused more progressive views about gender relations and were more militant, politicized, and cause oriented. They also had varying positions on how the national strategy for women's advancement should be approached.

The women's movement was polarized: some factions supported the regime, others sought to overthrow the Marcoses. The former continued to work with NCRFW. However, rifts were beginning to permeate the circle of the first wave feminists. Leaders of BSK decided to institutionalize the movement by incorporating it as a non-profit organization. The NCRFW, which supported the BSK, was accused of bias, of competing with WNGOs in mobilizing resources, and of usurping the programmes of the early women's NGOs. Meanwhile, the new women's NGOs openly criticized the NCRFW for supporting an illegitimate regime and of being elitist. This situation persisted until the end of the decade. It was not surprising, therefore, that despite having a Filipina as Secretary-General of the Nairobi World Conference on Women, the Philippine delegation came up with two opposing country reports – the official government report and an alternative report prepared by the new generation of women's NGOs.

## **3 THE MAINSTREAMING STRATEGY: PROCESS AND LESSONS**

### **3.1 Rationale**

Under the term of the first woman President, women moved to break into the formal structures of the bureaucracy. Women began to recognize the pivotal role of the government to change the policies and structures that work against women's advancement. Although the government was generally perceived to be weak in responding to the needs of the people, mainstreaming was seen as a way to examine the work of the government and improve its people-responsiveness.

In simple terms, mainstreaming was defined as the processes and strategies of making women's needs and perspectives an integral part of the overall development work of the government, as opposed to a separate concern. Mainstreaming involves questioning the present order of things in government – how are resources allocated and utilized? Where are the women in this order of things? What impact will the work of agencies have on women?

### **3.2 Maximizing a favourable political climate**

National developments in the post-UN Decade for Women era provided a favourable climate for the government's mainstreaming strategy. First, with the exit of the Marcoses, the 'people power' revolution catapulted a woman, Mrs. Corazon Aquino, to presidency. Having a woman President raised the expectation that something significant would happen to the government's women constituents. This expectation was repeatedly played up – for instance, the following was deliberately included for the President to read in one of her speeches: 'I don't want it said with any degree of credibility that the condition of Filipino women did not improve considerably during the term of your first woman President.' The women's movement capitalized on the President's pronouncements to exact cooperation from government officials and agencies.

Second, the euphoria of liberation from two decades of dictatorship provided a fertile ground for building alliances in the women's movement. With the drafting of the new Constitution, women held a national unification congress that put the factionalized women's movement to the task of drafting a set of policy resolutions for inclusion in the new Constitution. This defused tension in the women's movement, and despite obvious differences in

perspectives, dialogue and unity on certain issues became possible.

Last, with faith in the government restored, the non-government sector agreed to cooperate with the government. The public sector was infused with perspectives from non-government organizations/ individuals, many of whom had progressive and innovative ideas on running state affairs. NCRFW was restructured, putting first and second-wave feminist leaders in key positions. This narrowed the gap between women NGOs and between NCRFW and second wave feminists. NCRFW began to get more support from the national leadership, foreign donors, government officials, and the women's movement.

### **3.3 Setting the legal and policy framework for mainstreaming**

In this favourable political environment, women pushed for policies to serve as the legal and policy foundation of mainstreaming. Thus, the new Constitution provides that 'the state recognizes the role of women in nation building and shall promote the fundamental equality before the law of women and men' (Art. II, Sec. 14). This was later used as a backup mandate for: i) the explicit inclusion of a macro policy on women in the Medium Term Philippine Development Plan; ii) formulation of the Philippine Development Plan for Women; and iii) passage of the Women in Development and Nation Building Act (RA 7192).

In addition, international treaties on women ratified by the Philippine government supported women's concerns. Among such treaties were the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for Women's Advancement.

### **3.4 Early attempts**

Beginning in 1975, all Philippine Development Plans (PDP) explicitly stated a concern for women. For instance, the 1984-87 PDP promotes the 'training and active participation of women in the economic, social and political affairs of the country'. However, up to 1987, the primary focus of these plans was mass poverty, addressed in a gender-blind fashion. Relatively disadvantaged groups were singled out, such as youth, the disabled, cultural communities, the elderly, etc. and it was under this rubric that women's concerns fell. Generally,

the recognition of women's importance in development hinged on their roles as mothers and wives. Women were mentioned only in sections on health, nutrition, family planning, education, community development and social welfare. The first crucial challenge was to get into the agendas of 'non-social' sectors.

At this point, it was realized that fundamental to mainstreaming is the clarification of what women want. What is the change being sought? How do they want these changes to take place? Another problem was the closed nature of the formal planning system to women's concerns. For instance, planning standards dictate that issues should be empirically substantiated. As it was, women's issues were never adequately captured by national data systems. 'Anecdotal information' was not acceptable. Objectively verifiable indicators were required for targeting and monitoring purposes. An additional problem was how to reflect these issues in the plan without too much mention of the word 'women' so that other sectors could not accuse the government of favouring a specific marginalized group.

### **3.5 Mainstreaming in planning: two complementary strategies**

Two complementary strategies were initially adopted. One was the gradual mainstreaming of women/gender concerns in national development planning, through advocacy and representation of women in the planning committees. The second was the formulation of a separate but companion plan for women, the PDPW, as an interim measure until such time that mainstreaming in the national plan was attained. As a companion plan, the PDPW is intended to analyse impacts on women of policies and strategies outlined in the national Plan, and to propose complementary strategies for minimizing negative impacts.

#### **3.5.1 Gradual Mainstreaming in National Development Planning**

To implement the first strategy, seats for women representatives were institutionalized in the technical committee (the approving body) and in the different technical sub-committees (the drafting bodies) of the national planning process. The women's representatives ensured that priority policy measures emanating from women were articulated during the deliberations and were subsequently reflected in the national plan.

A focal point for women was established in the national planning body, composed of staff who supported the work of the committees. This instrument was meant to ensure that the policies that women seek are incorporated in the national plan. Further, agency representatives to the various planning committees were given gender sensitivity training, a strategy to minimize opposition to women's policy agendas and possibly, establish a corps of allies in the national planning process.

### **3.5.2 The PDPW: Women's Agenda and Companion Plan**

For the second strategy, consultations with women on 11 priority issues were conducted: agriculture, trade unions, education, health, law, family, policy and action, research, sexual exploitation, arts and culture, community organizing, and media. A range of problems and potential responses expected from both the government and non-government sectors were identified. They served as basis for the formulation of the women's sectoral agenda which subsequently became the PDPW.

Hundreds of women leaders, planners, decision makers and interest groups took part. The process was designed to be as 'innocuous' as possible to avoid serious opposition from largely gender blind critics. The participatory process was part of the strategy to generate a sense of ownership of the PDPW, an essential factor in its implementation. Moreover, the process itself served as a levelling and sensitizing vehicle for the key actors in the promotion of women's advancement.

### **3.6 Making the government adopt the women's agenda**

After the PDPW was completed, the crucial issue was to have it approved by the President as a part of her administration's agenda. This was problematic because unlike other development concerns such as population and ecology, women's issues do not pose an impending threat that would warrant priority action. While there is a global recognition that women's concerns are central to development, there were no local cases to what gains would accrue to the government if it addressed these concerns. Gender sensitivity was generally low, and the technology for sensitizing top decision makers was minimal.

The adoption of the PDPW required prior approval of the male-dominated Cabinet. However, since the consultative process involved individuals who

were normally consulted by Cabinet members, obtaining their approval was facilitated. Women members of the Cabinet also helped to neutralize opposition. The difficulty of defending the PDPW before a body of male and gender blind legislators was minimized by stressing that the PDPW merely fleshes out the policy and programme measures of the national Plan.

The PDPW passed the Cabinet's scrutiny in one sitting. It was approved by the President for implementation by all agencies of government through Executive Order 348. This order was extremely important. First, it provided an *imprimatur* for the plan's operationalization. Second, it prescribed the basic courses of action to undertake in order to operationalize the PDPW (such as setting up of WID Focal Points in all government agencies, utilizing regular appropriations for its implementation, etc.). Finally, it empowered NCRFW to monitor the Plan's implementation, issue circulars, and call upon other agencies for support. The PDPW launching was also carefully engineered as a highly visible ceremony, attended by representatives of entities that are perceived to have a stake in its implementation such as donors, implementors, women from various sectors, and legislators.

### **3.7 Mainstreaming of PDPW implementation**

Mainstreaming the implementation of PDPW has been more problematic than mainstreaming in the planning level: firstly, because no funds were actually allotted for its implementation, and secondly, because implementors in government were not gender sensitive. Implementing the PDPW called for: i) a committed and capable bureaucracy; ii) transformative institutional mechanisms; and iii) a supportive environment.

#### **3.7.1 Building a Committed and Capable Bureaucracy**

Four of the most important concerns in building a committed and capable bureaucracy are: (a) a good understanding of the nature and culture of the bureaucratic institution; (b) a need to 'awaken' key decision makers and technical staff to the gender issue; (c) top-level sponsors; and (d) clarity of means, trade-offs and rewards.

#### **a Good understanding of the nature and culture of the bureaucracy**

The mainstreaming effort came up against rigid bureaucratic standards, rules, procedures and

routines. For instance, government staff performing advocacy work were bound by other performance commitments and key result areas, and were constrained from initiating mainstreaming activities without prior approval from authorities. Therefore, gender mainstreaming was incorporated in the agency head's performance contract and in the agency's key result areas, and agencies were mandated under Republic Act 7192 to review and revise all government circulars, policies, rules and procedures to eliminate gender biases.

Disruptions brought about by the mainstreaming effort were viewed as cumbersome, unnecessary and costly. Mainstreaming activities that entailed expenditures were evaluated from the point of view of material returns. Playing up the efficiency and social justice concerns of mainstreaming in gender sensitivity training sessions proved inadequate as a compelling justification for the effort.

The bureaucracy is largely male-dominated, but it employs a number of women who are potential allies in the process of mainstreaming. The government adopted measures to address these women's concerns. A flexi-time policy was introduced, male officials are undergoing gender sensitization, and legislation making sexual harassment a punishable offence has been passed. Policies that discriminate against women in hiring, training, and promotion are gradually being changed.

The Philippine bureaucracy is a complex web of structures and mechanisms each of which is designed to execute a specific function. To determine the locus of transformative interventions for mainstreaming, it was important to understand critical processes – how and where are decisions made? By whom? Who determines what? To analyse these factors, NCRFW and UNIFEM commissioned a team of organizational development and gender experts to study the systems, processes, structures and programmes in government for the purpose of identifying potential problem areas, the possible solutions, and to come up with a sourcebook for GAD Mainstreaming and Institutionalization in government.

#### **b 'Awakening' to women's issues and skilling of technical staff**

Gender sensitization of top government officials has been problematic as they must abandon old

beliefs, ideas and practices. They have to be convinced that the inconvenience of this process is worth the outcome, and that this will redound to a greater good from which they themselves can benefit. Since men are threatened by the possible loss of privilege, and since they are the ones in power, it is more effective to persuade than intimidate them. Thus, initial gender sensitivity sessions emphasized programme efficiency, improved relations and stronger families as a consequence of addressing women's concerns, or the 'no-additional-fund' approach. The distinction of being an 'honorary woman' was bestowed to carefully-selected men who did much to advance the women's agenda. For elected officials, giving the impression that a 'women's vote' exists was helpful, and here a politicized and dynamic women's movement created this impression.

Beyond sensitization, government technical staff need specific skills for internal sensitization, gender planning, gender sensitive data management, etc. The challenge of pioneering courses exacted a lot of time and energy from NCRFW. As a strategy, NCRFW focused on trainers' training and tapped the support of feminists in academia and NGOs. Right now, efforts are directed at empowering key training institutions to respond to the need for gender sensitization.

#### **c Top level sponsors**

The President is the most effective for the role of providing top-level sponsorship – consciously and consistently stressing the political will of his/her administration to advance the women's agenda and exacting compliance and cooperation from subordinates. S/he is also in a position to issue policies that could facilitate response to women's concerns. Such sponsors, however, often do not know what specific measures to adopt to support GAD initiatives, and require clear direction.

#### **d Clarity of means, trade-offs, and rewards**

This entails clarification of who will do what, how, when, and why. It involves careful planning and the adoption of yardsticks to measure the extent and pace of progress. NCRFW is developing a course on Strategic Planning for GAD Mainstreaming and Institutionalization which will be useful in the process of implementing the PPGD. The course addresses the mechanics of: (a) reviewing the existing mandate of agencies and expressing

human-centred intents in the agency's vision, mission and goals; (b) obtaining active and high level sponsorship; and (c) development of internal policies and procedures to address gender needs of agency clients and employees.

### 3.7.2 Transformative Institutional Mechanisms

The process of institutionalization will be accelerated when it is done in a climate of least resistance. But since it challenges the *status quo*, and because it exacts time, energy and resources, it is often perceived as disruptive, and competing with other priorities. Mechanisms were adopted to quietly promote the eventual absorption of women's agenda into the mainstream. While bureaucratic systems were still unprepared to accommodate this agenda, these mechanisms served to clarify that gender is a complementary and supportive aspect of the mainstream concerns. These are micro-mechanisms which appear innocuous yet proved capable of producing quicker results than more confrontational strategies. Among the mainstreaming mechanisms instituted in various government agencies were:

- a Focal Point for Women's Concerns – a mechanism composed of highly motivated individuals within government agencies, tasked to catalyse, coordinate, facilitate, monitor, and provide technical assistance to the various units of the agency. NCRFW carries out a capability building programme for focal points, consisting mainly of mentoring, seminars, inter-focal point dialogue, planning assistance, etc. The main problem articulated by Focal Point members is the 'add-on' nature of their work. NCRFW tries to address this by working for the inclusion of Focal Point efforts in their key result areas and in the performance evaluation system.
- b GAD Database System – NCRFW works with the National Statistical Coordination Board and the National Statistics Office to mainstream the data needs of women into the national data collection and management systems.
- c Advocacy and Trainers Pool – The process of institutionalization creates a strong demand for gender training and sensitization. NCRFW 'plants' seed trainers in various government agencies to respond to internal training needs. Technical assistance is provided to review mainstream training programmes and incorporate gender awareness sessions.

- d Planning for Mainstreaming – This intervention involves the development of tools and guidelines for planners and implementors. Presently, GAD Guidelines are being tested at the subnational level. Customized guidelines are also being developed by sector, particularly in the Department of Agriculture. Here, there is a continuing demand to provide technical assistance, monitor, and oversee the mainstreaming attempts. To meet the demand, NCRFW is training teams of sectoral gender specialists who will provide hands-on technical assistance to various agencies.

### 3.7.3 Favourable Climate or Supportive Environment?

WNGOs play a unique role in support of mainstreaming. There are between three to five thousand women's clubs and organizations in the country, pursuing programmes and projects that cater to women's practical and strategic gender needs. WNGOs also set up the National GO And NGO Network, an alliance of some 300 national WNGOs and umbrella organizations, including gender workers in government.

The WNGOs and their coalitions, networks, alliances, together with feminist men and women in the government and private sectors, loosely comprise the women's movement in the Philippines. WNGOs in the movement are effective in doing what those in the government cannot do (like questioning top level policies that are disadvantageous to women). They are at the forefront of lobbying for legal and administrative reforms, they advise and consult agencies on mainstreaming, and monitor the government's perspectives on major social and policy concerns.

Within government, informal alliances have been forged with women across all levels, from rank and file to secretaries. Within the political circle, NCRFW allied with women politicians regardless of party affiliation. Inside the bureaucracy, NCRFW rallied women employees around gender issues affecting them, from hiring to retirement. The Civil Service instituted the EQUADS programme to handle complaints against sexual harassment and discriminatory practices in government. Women decision makers in government were also enjoined to participate in informal discussions on the situation of women in government.

### 3.8 Mainstream budgeting for women's concerns

One of the major stumbling blocks to implementation was the lack of funds. To minimize adverse reactions to the PDPW, NCRFW deliberately refrained from seeking new appropriations to fund implementation. Instead, NCRFW directed agencies to tap their regular appropriations, including savings and official development assistance for this purpose. The President has also issued two memorandums to ensure that budgets for women's concerns are earmarked by government agencies.

However, there is still a wide gap between policy and implementation. Agencies found it difficult to tap their regular appropriations for the following reasons:

- a Annual increases in budgetary allocation of agencies are already minimal due to fiscal deficits; moreover, the government continues to impose mandatory reserves out of approved agency appropriations;
- b Officials who decide on agency spending priorities have other priorities; they are not gender sensitive; and
- c Agencies do not have the necessary technical skills to creatively incorporate women's concerns in the agency's line up of expenditure items.

The Department of Budget and Management, the national planning body, and NCRFW issued a joint memorandum providing guidelines on how budgeting for women could be managed. A policy statement on the allocation of budgets for women was also incorporated in the 1995 General Appropriations Act. At the moment, however, many of the activities on women are funded through foreign assistance and *ad hoc* financing mechanisms.

### 3.9 Monitoring the mainstreaming efforts

NCRFW has been mandated to monitor the progress of government initiatives on women. Section 10 of the Women in Development and Nation Building Act directs all government agencies to submit semestral reports on their compliance to the provisions of the Act. Reporting guidelines are provided to agencies to help them undertake a situation analysis of women's status/situations within their sectoral area and within the agency itself. The

reports are submitted to Congress, the Office of the President, and copies are furnished the NCRFW and the national planning body. NCRFW also adopted a system of assessing agency performance.

A feedback mechanism provides assessments of government agencies' performance to the President and, subsequently, to the Cabinet and Congress. However, focal points, particularly those whose agencies rated poorly on these assessments, felt that they were not consulted sufficiently prior to assessment or before performance ratings were submitted to the President. A new assessment framework is being refined in consultation with the Focal Points to clarify and routinize assessment variables.

## 4 CONCLUSION

The Philippine experience in mainstreaming women/gender concerns in government work has attained modest gains since its inception eight years ago. Among the important breakthroughs are:

- a Institutionalization of a system for an organized response to women's concerns. Women's issues are now an integral aspect of the government's agenda. This means that efforts to promote women's well-being will be more sustained than before.
- b Broadening of women's participation in policy and decision making. With the creation of participatory mechanisms for planning, implementation and monitoring of policies and programmes for women, there is a better chance that women's perspectives are expressed in decision making enhancing the quality and focus of public service.
- c Developing concepts and methods to help the government rethink and redesign its systems, norms and paradigms and reorient its culture to enhance its responsiveness to the needs of its constituents.
- d Creative harnessing and utilization of the public and non-government initiatives. In the past, sporadic and uncoordinated initiatives in both sectors resulted in duplication of services, wastage of resources, and diffusion of impact. The Plan for women has improved coordination towards attaining a shared vision.

I have sketched out how the concern for women evolved in my country and the various strategies we adopted to address women's concerns. We seem to have stumbled upon the right track. However, I could not confidently say that our breakthroughs can serve as a model to other countries. At best, our experience offers options whose applicability will depend on socio-cultural, economic and political realities in other countries. Moreover, our work has just started. As the past eight years have taught

us, many of the problems we faced in pursuing our strategy could not have been anticipated. If there is one insight that I wish to share, it is that in the work of pioneering, the best way to create a path is by walking on it. This has given us courage to go against conventions, to be prepared for failures and learn from them, to be realistic about our dreams, and to see the significance of each minute gain to the realization of our vision.

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