

# THE PHILIPPINES: WOMEN'S REPRESENTATIVE, PEOPLE'S PARLIAMENTARIAN

By Bernadette P. Libres

Liza Largoza-Maza

Elections are so frequent in the Philippines that Filipinos would jokingly announce there are three seasons in the Philippines: dry, wet and election seasons. Elections for various elective positions both at national and local levels are held every three years. In between, *the barangay*, or village-level election is conducted.

Filipinos welcome elections because it provides them a sense of participation in charting the country's future. For centuries, the people have been marginalised in the everyday politics of the nation that they regard election as an important political activity. Voter turnout in the national elections ranges from 70-80%, this, despite the fact that election results do not reflect the people's real choices because of widespread fraud. But Filipinos also view elections with both humour and cynicism. They regard elections as a break, a breather from the routine of daily survival. Election campaigns draw in movie stars, both as entertainers and as endorsers during the campaign or as political candidates themselves. Having lived through years of frustration with the government and its leaders, election gives the ordinary Filipino an opportunity to laugh at the politicians who vainly try to crack jokes, to sing and dance during campaign sorties or appear in popular comedy shows on television. Election campaign period, because of rampant vote buying, is also a time to make money.

In all this, the more important issues of the people - unemployment and starvation wages, negative impact of globalisation, the lack of basic services and issues concerning human rights, justice and peace - are expectedly relegated to the sidelines, if at all tackled during campaigns. Content analyses done by the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism on the news coverage during the 1998 and 2004 elections "confirm the media's obsession with personality, 'winnability', and opinion polls. In both elections, there was scant coverage of issues and platforms".



## Philippine politics and the electoral process

### Economic Context

After the politicians' worn out trumpeting of "we-are-your-servants", the grim reality of the Philippine economy resurfaces — an economy that is "pre-industrial, agrarian and semi-feudal, afflicted by chronic budgetary and trade deficits and therefore ever vulnerable to foreign indebtedness and financial manipulation". (Sison. 2004. p. 7)

A majority of the people, especially the workers and peasants, face a day-to-day struggle to survive. Natural resources that could otherwise serve as a base for the country's own industrialisation are extracted by foreign corporations and exported raw or semi-processed and low-valued. What seem like highly urbanised cents are largely trading cents where imported goods and products are dumped for market consumption. Manufactures and industries are largely owned by transnational corporations or by local big business that make use of the country's cheap and suppressed labor. Transnational corporations, aided by local landlords and big business, dominate not just the rural landscape but the whole economy.

The disastrous impact of imperialist globalisation can no longer be covered up by the propaganda machinery of the government and the advocates of globalisation, who "never cease to sing the virtues of staying within the bounds of the economic, financial and trade policies dictated by the United States and such US-controlled multilateral agencies as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation (WTO)" (Sison. 2004. p. 8). The consequences of liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation are felt daily by the people - the rising cost of basic commodities, the lack of basic services, massive unemployment, slave wages, destruction of agriculture and local manufactures. The current administration of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo is confronted by a fiscal crisis that reflects the financial and economic crisis the Philippines is reeling from. Burdened by debt (PhP 4.08 trillion or US\$ 75.41 million as of end-February 2005) from both domestic and foreign creditors, the government allots the bulk of its fiscal budget to debt servicing. Likewise, the Arroyo administration proposes new tax measures purportedly to bail out the country from its present crisis. A new E-VAT Law took effect in July 2005. These new taxes will definitely add an additional burden to the already impoverished majority.



## Political set-up

### Form of Government

The Philippines has a presidential form of government. The President, elected at-large every six years for one term, heads the Executive branch. The President appropriates the tasks and functions of the Executive branch through various departments, headed by Cabinet members and through the elected local government officials. The President is also Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). The Legislative Body is divided into the House of Representatives, (covering congressional districts and Party-list representation) and the Senate. Party-list representation, members of the Senate and the President are elected at-large through nationwide elections. The Judiciary is composed of the Supreme Court and the lower courts. Members of the Judiciary are appointed by the President.

### Elections

The Philippine Constitution states that “sovereignty resides in the people and all government authority emanates from them”. Sovereignty, according to the Constitution, is expressed through elections. But in reality, elections are characterised by intense battle between those who have more (more gold, guns, goons and girls) and those who have less (less gold, guns, goons and girls). It is a battle among the ruling elite - the big landowners, big business and/or traditional politicians. The contest is best captured by the adage: “economic power begets political power; and political power begets more economic power”.

Seven major political parties vied for power in the 2004 elections. The leadership of these parties is monopolised by political clans made up of landowners, big business and bureaucrat capitalists. Those who have more would, in all probability, be the faction of the ruling elite who is in power; and those who have less would be the faction of the ruling elite which is temporarily dislodged and is attempting to take over the rein of power. To have more, one should also get the support of US imperialism. The Philippines is of such strategic importance to US imperialism’s economic and military interests in Asia that it puts premium on whom, among the local elites, holds the key to economic and political power. Any faction of the elite, to get or hold on to power, must have the blessing of the US. (Remollino, 2004)

### Term Limit

The 1987 Philippine Constitution, which was formulated and ratified after the ouster of the Marcos dictatorship, sets a term limit for all elective positions -



from President to local government executives. The term limit is supposed to prevent the formation of political dynasties.

Both the President and the Senate have a six-year term. Members of Congress and local government executives have a term of three years up to a maximum of three terms. The term limit prohibits public officials from seeking elective position for the same public office after their term has expired. However, the term limit does not prevent the politicians from seeking another position in public office. When a senator for example reaches the term limit, he/she could easily run for provincial governor, congressional representative, or mayor of a major city. Thus, despite the term limit, regions, provinces, towns and cities are still most often identified through the traditionally dominant and/or warring political families in the locality. (Balana, 2004)

The composition for example of the 13<sup>th</sup> Congress proves that despite the term limit set by the Constitution, the great majority of members of Congress are from well known political clans who have been in politics through generations. Two out of three members of the 13<sup>th</sup> Congress are from such families. Most of the lawmakers are second and third generation politicians whose parents and grandparents once held public office. It is likely that they have other relatives who are currently holding elective posts. These political clans always have the edge over any ordinary Filipino interested in seeking an elective position. They have well-oiled political machines and a lot of wealth to win elections and maintain political power. (Balana, 2004)

**Table 1: Congressmen and their kin**

Representatives with Relatives in Elective Office*						
REPRESENTATIVES' RELATIVES WHO WERE OR ARE IN OFFICE...	9 <sup>TH</sup> HOUSE		10 <sup>TH</sup> HOUSE		11 <sup>TH</sup> HOUSE	
	No.	% of all Reps	No.	% of all Reps	No.	% of all Reps
Parents	60	30	66	30	71	31
Children	18	9	17	8	25	11
Spouses	16	8	25	11	22	10
Siblings	43	22	38	17	47	21
Other close relatives (uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews, cousins)	56	28	64	29	60	26
In laws	30	15	32	15	31	14
Grandparents	35	18	40	18	41	18

Source: Coronel. 2004. p.49.

Such bid of political clans and politicians for perpetuity in power is also characterised by fraud and violence. Elections are never without accusations of fraud from the contending parties. Schemes like “*dagdag-bawas*” (*dagdag* is to



add votes or vote padding; *bawas* is to subtract votes or vote shaving) and disenfranchisement of voters through harassment, intimidation and fraud are common occurrences that have not been prevented nor curtailed.

## The Party-List System

The Party List System is mandated in the 1987 Philippine Constitution. In 1995, eight years after the ratification of the Constitution, Congress passed the Party-List System Act or Republic Act No 7941. It is designed “to promote proportional representation in the election of representatives to the House of Representatives” and “to enable Filipino citizens belonging to the marginalised and underrepresented sectors, organisations and parties who lack well-defined constituencies but who could contribute to the formulation and enactment of appropriate legislations that will benefit the nation as a whole, to become members of the House of Representatives.” The other pertinent provisions of the Party-List System Act are:

- The party-list representatives shall constitute 20 per cent of the total number of the members of the House of Representatives.
- Parties, organisations and coalitions participating in the system shall obtain at least two percent of the total votes cast for the party-list system to be entitled to a party-list seat.
- Those who garner more than two percent of the votes shall have additional seats corresponding to a maximum of three seats.

Unlike the majority of the members of the House of Representatives who are elected individually by the constituencies in a particular congressional district, party-list organisations can gain a seat in the legislature by garnering at least 2% of total votes cast nationwide. Political parties and sectoral organisations from the marginalised sectors can run in the party-list system. The party-list organisation is voted upon. Seats won are occupied by the list of nominees pre-submitted to the Commission on Elections.

The party-list system offers an opening for the progressive movement and other marginalised sectors to have representatives in Congress. Without the party-list system it is quite impossible for the marginalised sectors and cause-oriented organisations to join in the electoral system where millions of pesos are needed to win. The organised strength, mass base and credibility of cause-oriented organisations offset the amount of money required to enter mainstream politics. However, traditional politicians find ways to dominate even the party-list system. They try to register their parties as marginalised ones or put their spouses, other family members or protégés as nominees of party-list groups. They join campaigns to discredit party-list groups that are



threats to their political power because of the formers' history of struggle against injustice, human rights violations, graft and corruption.

**Table 2: Profile of representatives of the 13<sup>th</sup> Congress**

House of Representatives		
Total members		236
<i>Representation</i>		
District	90%	212
Sectoral or Part- List	10%	24
<i>Term</i>		
1 <sup>st</sup>	35%	82
2 <sup>nd</sup>	36%	85
3 <sup>rd</sup>	29%	69

Source: [www.congress.gov.ph](http://www.congress.gov.ph)

A closer look at the 13<sup>th</sup> Congress shows that traditional political parties still dominate the Congress. Those from the marginalised sectors that made it to the party-list system is a mere 10% of the total number of representatives compared to the 20% provided by law. In addition, more than half of the representatives (65%) are incumbents, either in their second or third term compared to the representatives elected for the first time (35%).

## Women and Elections

Filipino women's right to vote was recognised in 1937. The 1935 Philippine Constitution stated that the right of suffrage would be extended to women if they were able to gather 300,000 women to vote in its favor in a national plebiscite. In the 1937 plebiscite 447,725 women voted yes.

Overall, women's participation in the electoral process as voters is very high. Over a period of 26 years (1978-2004), the numerical difference between male and female registered voters is insignificant. Likewise, the difference between the actual number of women and men who actually vote is small.

Nonetheless, women's participation in the elections does not necessarily mean a solid vote for those who are carrying the women's agenda. Most often voter preference is still on the side of the traditional politicians, mainly influenced by the candidates' high media visibility and name recall. (Hofilena, 2004) On the other hand, while there is no women's vote to speak of in the Philippines, the victory in the polls of the Gabriela Women's Party shows that there are women who vote for a women's political party. However, according to Cristina Palabay, Secretary General of the Gabriela Women's Party, "this vote should translate to a more vibrant and marked women's vote to change the general political landscape".



Despite two women presidents, politics in the Philippines is still male dominated. Historically, as shown in Table 3, the Philippine Congress is an exclusive men’s club. The 12<sup>th</sup> Congress (2001-04) has, so far, the highest number of women representatives since 1946. Of the 227 representatives in the 12<sup>th</sup> Congress, 40 were women legislators (18%). Five of the women representatives were from the 19 party-list organisations. In the current 13<sup>th</sup> Congress, however, the number of women representatives decreased to 37 or 15%. Four of the women representatives are among the 24 party-list representatives.

**Table 3: A Male Bastion**

Composition of the House of Representatives By Gender				
YEAR	Male		Female	
	No	%	No	%
1946	96	99	1	1
1957	101	99	1	1
1965	98	94	6	6
1992	178	89	21	11
1998	193	88	27	12
2001	187	82	40	18
2004*	199	84	37	16

Source: Coronel. 2004. p.8

\*www.congress.gov.ph

As earlier stated, positions in public office revolve among members of political clans. However, when male members of a family are no longer qualified to run for public office, the female members — the wife, mother, daughter, sister, mistress — come in handy as replacements. Female members of a political family or clan, however, are most often perceived as “dummies” of the older and male members of the family. In the 12<sup>th</sup> Congress (see Table 4) almost half of the 40 members of the women representatives or 45% were replacements of relatives previously in Congress.

**Table 4: The Glass Ceiling**

Women in the 12 <sup>th</sup> House of Representatives (HOR)		
Women Representatives Who are...	No	%
Replacement of relatives previously in HOR	18	45
Members of political families not previously in HOR	8	20
TOTAL MEMBERS OF POLITICAL CLANS	26	65
Party-List members	5	13
Others (non-family, non-party list)	9	22
TOTAL	40	100

Source: Coronel. 2004. p.9



## **GABRIELA Women’s Party Representative to the House of Representatives: Liza Largoza- Maza**

Liza Largoza-Maza is 47 years old. She was born on September 8, 1957 in San Pablo City, Laguna, a province in the Southern Luzon region. Her family is Roman Catholic. A consistent honor student, Liza spent her elementary and high school years in an exclusive Catholic girls’ school.

Liza is generally described as “hardworking, persistent, creative and principled.” As a child her world revolved around the books she read, which were beyond the required school textbooks. She was, and still is, fascinated with books on history, philosophy and religion. Reading books helps her make sense of what is going on around her. Hooked on reading, Liza recalls that she didn’t speak until she was a few years old. But when she started talking, she found delight in debating.

Liza finished Business Economics at the University of the Philippines (UP), the state university. It was during this period that she became an activist. After college she worked as a researcher and teacher. It was during her stint as a researcher that Liza got involved in the women’s movement.

In 1983 Liza married Jaime Maza with whom she has two sons. Liza describes her sons Nico and AG, ages 20 and 14 respectively, as “independent” and who don’t mind cooking their own food. Liza also made sure that both sons grow to be respectful and aware of “every woman’s worth”.

### **History of Involvement in Politics**

Liza’s interest in politics started when she was in high school. She intently followed current events. What caught her interest was the series of rallies held during the early 1970’s in what is now known in Philippine history as the “First Quarter Storm” or FQS.<sup>1</sup> Liza linked the events with what she learned from her readings. Also, the political climate at the time brought forth earlier questions she has been asking herself: “the meaning of life” she says. “I was also influenced by the prevailing free spirit attitude and anti-establishment atmosphere of the 60’s and 70’s”, Liza added. She foresaw herself as an activist. She wanted to enroll in UP, which was known to be a hotbed of activism.

In 1975, Liza enrolled in Business Economics to prepare for law school. But she abandoned the idea of being a lawyer when martial law was declared in

---

<sup>1</sup> FQS is a series of anti-Marcos demonstrations held from January-March 1970. This was led by the students and workers who stormed the Malacanang Palace where the deposed Pres. Marcos held office. Violent dispersals by military and police were a common occurrence during these rallies.



1972. She was convinced that it was useless to study law because, according to her, “No law was followed then except Marcos’s own laws”. She remained in UP for several years, unattached to any particular campus organisation. However, she caught the attention of campus activists when, as a resident in one of the women’s dormitories on campus, she stirred the other women residents to complain against their dormitory matron. This started her involvement in campus politics, although prior to this and even during her first year on campus, Liza joined rallies. She was in rallies which demanded the right of students to campus press freedom and to organise their councils. Liza recalls that when she made her vow to become an activist, she also promised she would ensure that rallies would not be “unruly”. Her attitude changed, however, when she joined a rally demanding the release of detained campus journalists. Liza, as she puts it, “had my first taste of fascism.” The rally was violently dispersed. It was then that she realised that “the violence does not come from the students.”

Until she joined the dormitory council, Liza describes her involvement in campus activism as “unsustained and mostly theoretical because I did not belong to any organisation.” Looking back, she describes the case against the dormitory matron as “more of a personal expression stuff which is part of my concept of free spirit”. And it has been a long way since. In her last years in college, Liza spent her weekends in urban poor communities, with people whom she met in rallies outside the campus. Her exposure to the lives of the urban poor deepened her understanding of Philippine realities and concretised what could have remained as socio-political theories she learned from books and in school.

## **Development of Feminist Ideas, Advancing Women’s Cause**

Liza became involved in the women’s movement rather reluctantly. She grew up in a household of strong women. Her mother, as Liza describes, is a “hardworking woman, a survivor”. Liza sees her as intelligent and street-smart. While her mother plays the traditional role of a woman in the house who cooks and takes care of the children, she was not the type who depended too much on her husband. “She can do everything,” Liza says of her mother. Her sisters, eight among ten siblings, are all independent-minded, strong-willed women like their mother. Her early schooling was also in an exclusive women’s school from grade school to high school which was attended mostly by children from middle class families. Thus, Liza says, “you don’t really feel powerless in this kind of an environment”. She says she had “no concept of women’s oppression” and considered women’s issues as “soft” compared to the passion she feels for economics and politics.



Things changed however when in 1982 she conducted research among Filipino women who were working as domestic helpers in Hong Kong. There Liza heard all sorts of stories about violence against women. Liza could not forget the story of one woman who allowed her boss to have his way with her sexually for a fee. This was one way some of the women could earn additional income to send their families back home. Liza realised that the low economic status of women was a major factor in incidences of violence against women.

After college, Liza worked as a researcher in the Philippine Center for Asian Studies (PCAS) and in the Strategic Studies under the Office of the President of the UP System.

She also served as Executive Director of NEPA (National Economic Protection Association), an organisation of economists and local manufacturers. She taught economics at St. Scholastica's College, an exclusive women's school. In 1986, Liza became Executive Director of the Women's Center for Development and International Study (WCDIS), which joined GABRIELA. Also, Liza was one of the initiators of the first Women's International Solidarity Affair in the Philippines (WISAP). In 1987, she became the International Relations Officer of GABRIELA while still serving as the Executive Director of WCDIS. From this point on she never left GABRIELA. She eventually became GABRIELA's Deputy Secretary-General, then Secretary-General for several years. In the last GABRIELA Congress, Liza was elected its Vice-Chairperson.

During Liza's term as Secretary General, GABRIELA launched several successful campaigns to raise public awareness on women's issues. Among them were: the Purple Rose Campaign in support of the global campaign to expose and fight sex trafficking of Filipino women and children; and the campaign against the exploitation of women workers particularly those hired in department stores through contractualisation. There was also the campaign for justice for rape victims by powerful government officials such as former Congressman Romeo Jalosjos and former Calauag Mayor Antonio Sanchez, who, if not for GABRIELA's campaign, would have escaped conviction and imprisonment. GABRIELA at that time also ran a strong campaign against the U.S. military bases, anti-terrorism bill, national ID system, charter change and imperialist globalisation. To Liza, these activities "are not just campaigns but real life struggles from which you draw lessons and perspectives that would help develop the women's movement in the Philippines".

When Liza joined GABRIELA in 1987, her understanding of women's issues and concerns deepened especially when she got involved with issues of peasant women and women workers. And she has not stopped advocating and fighting for women's rights and interests since then. Aside from women's



issues, Liza Maza remains active in political and economic issues at national and international levels.

To Liza, the women's movement is a force for social change. First she says, "women should recognise their importance and their major role in social change". Liza believes women should realise their stakes in changing society's economic, political and socio-cultural situation. "Why are we fighting for land reform? For the right to own land, to work the land, to benefit from the fruits of land reform. Because we want to increase the economic capacity of women, thus empowering us economically." Liza stresses that "it is important for us women to understand the active role we have to play in changing society and changing our own lives. There can be no fundamental and long-lasting change without women taking an active role."

## **The Women's Movement and the Parliament**

Liza never imagined that she would be in Congress. Since high school she had wanted to be an activist. She went through a process of concretising her "ideals" by immersing herself in the concrete conditions of the people. She was active in the social movement and in particular, the women's movement. Activism for Liza is a way to concretise her vision of changing society. This did not include being in Congress though. Going into parliamentary work entailed a lot of adjustment for her. "I needed to psych myself up." She did this by deepening her understanding of why GABRIELA should participate in the electoral process, an arena commonly perceived as that of the rich and powerful.

But the present strength and breadth reached by people's organisations like GABRIELA combined with the opportunity offered by the party-list system opens another avenue to pursue the advocacy for social change and women's emancipation. "The laws in the country are still very much influenced by the feudal-patriarchal nature of the society. These laws restrict the full participation of women," stressed Liza. It is in this arena that Liza hopes to make a dent as far as advancing the interest of women is concerned. "Working in Congress may also provide women the experience in governance and also a deeper understanding of how traditional politics works. We can use whatever insights and lessons we gain to pursue women's advocacy within Congress," adds Liza. But more than this, Liza emphasises that "As a progressive parliamentarian, my role is not only to make laws but to challenge the very foundation of traditional elitist politics".

## **Campaigning to Win Seats in Congress**

When the women of GABRIELA decided to set up a party-list organisation, Gabriela Women's Party (GWP), Liza was the natural choice for its president



and number one nominee. As one of the most prominent women leaders in the country, Liza embodies the organisation's principles and advocacies. This, together with GABRIELA's track record and mass base, would ensure that GWP could make it to Congress.

The electoral campaign was difficult for Liza. As an activist, she is used to "integration" in communities i.e., staying for hours or days in one place to learn about the lives of women and men in the community. But, during the election campaign, she had to hop from one place to another, meeting hundreds of people, "all in an hour". She particularly was not comfortable with all the "forced smiles, handshakes" most voters expected from traditional politicians. But she could not do otherwise. The electoral campaign, which essentially covered the entire country, was only for a period of three months. "Eventually you understand its logic, and you just have to genuinely use the opportunity to touch base with as many groups, communities and organisations as you can and reach the broadest number of women and men alike," Liza explains.

But she stressed that this has to be done "not just to win votes but to make use of the campaign to inform the public of GWP's platform. We used the opportunity to learn about the people's situation and how our Party's programme and legislative agenda could respond to these needs." From the campaign, Liza learned new ideas, new perspectives on issues. "Later it became enjoyable, too," she smiled.

## **Personal Adjustments**

"On the surface it didn't seem hard for me to adjust. I could deal with them (the traditional politicians) on a day-to-day basis," Liza describes her first few months in Congress. Her most "traumatic" experience so far is sitting for hours during committee meetings and plenary sessions, listening most often to the rhetoric of traditional politicians. "It's more of a psychological thing," describes Liza of her "session claustrophobia".

Nowadays, Liza has to get used also to her limited mobility. In her early days as congresswoman, she could still go by herself to public markets and bargain shops on weekends. But since leaders, members and supporters of progressive party-list organisations have become targets of killings and harassment, Liza is forced to travel with a security escort. On the other hand, her media appearances have doubled as she takes such opportunities to discuss women-specific and national issues and explain GWP's platform of action to a broader audience.



## Advancing the Women's Agenda in Congress

Women's participation in traditional politics is limited. This is because traditional politics is "where reactionary forces are concentrated. Here, one experiences class-based discrimination as well as machismo. The influence of a feudal-patriarchal society is well ingrained." Liza describes the participation of women in mainstream politics as "way below" women's role in the social movement. As a rule, women in the people's movement are given equal opportunities and responsibilities. Recognition of women's rights is not merely being given lip service but is manifested in practice.

Philippine politics remains a man's game—a run-away use of cash and naked show of power. It sets almost insurmountable odds for women. Running for an elective position is an expensive endeavor. "Only women who come from rich and influential families can play the game", says Liza.

In traditional politics, even the basic right of women to be represented has to be fought for. "There is a need to increase the number of women in mainstream politics", Liza stressed. "But it should not be merely a number's game. The women in parliament should assert the women's agenda and fight for women's rights. While there should be more women, they should be genuine women's representatives and not clones of macho men." Liza underscored that "the feminist agenda to put more women in positions of governance should not end in having more women engaged in politics nor in putting more women in all levels of governance". The other important question Liza adds "is whether these women truly carry the interests of women and the interests of Philippine society; whether these women are truly representatives of the majority of the poor Filipino women and men".

The limitations posed on women in electoral politics was offset, in the case of Liza, by GABRIELA's track record. Liza is also armed with lessons from her three-year stint in Congress as a representative of the Bayan Muna Party-List. In the 13<sup>th</sup> Congress, GWP and the women are represented through Liza. She is vice-chairperson of two congressional committees: Women, and Higher & Technical Education. She is a member of seven other committees (Globalisation and WTO, Human Rights, Justice, Health, Foreign Affairs, Suffrage & Electoral Reforms, Southern Tagalog Development).

And while she debates and pushes her arguments in Congress, Liza tries to cultivate and maintain personal relations with her colleagues. "Politics in the Philippines is personalistic, even patronage. One has to be aware of this and turn it to one's advantage. Of course, not to the point of compromising principles." To avoid making unprincipled compromises, Liza keeps in mind that her stint in Congress is not a personal agenda. "I carry with me the agenda of GWP and it has the support of GWP's constituency".



Within Congress, Liza believes she has to maintain a strong and tenacious link with the women's movement. Otherwise her stint in the legislature is useless. "I represent GWP. I am not just an individual here. I represent a Party with a definite programme and platform for women and that's the only reason why I am here." Liza also believes in maintaining personal discipline. "There is a lot of corruption in government. And they will try to corrupt you because you are from the progressive movement. And there are various ways of corrupting a person, even very subtle ones. Discipline is a must to keep one's commitment to the organisation or Party. The Party principles should be one's guiding principles. Once you succumb to the bribes and other forms of corruption no matter how petty, you no longer have a reason for being. You have betrayed the trust put upon you by the women, the people and the movement. I did not spend more than twenty years of my life in the progressive movement only to be corrupted," she stressed. Liza added that she always tells herself that "this is my last term", to avoid the "trap" of perpetuating oneself in power. Unlike traditional politicians, the parliament is just one arena for Liza and GWP where women's advocacy can be advanced. It is not an end in itself.

## **GABRIELA Women's Party and its Strategies**

The Gabriela Women's Party<sup>2</sup>, along with other progressive party-list organisations, reflects the present strength of the people's movement for change. It is a product of long years of painstaking education work, organising and mobilisation of the underprivileged majority.

### **People's Movement for Change**

The Filipino people's struggle for independence and democracy is a long historical process dating back to colonial times - from the Spanish era to the American period of colonisation and Japanese occupation. The struggle continues until today even with the so-called Philippine independence. The people's movement for change aims for genuine independence, both economically and politically, from the domination of the United States government. The people's movement works for a genuine agrarian reform programme and for a government that protects the interest of the majority of the Filipinos and not that of foreign monopoly capitalists and the few local elites. There is an underground movement led by the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP) which is waging a protracted people's war

---

<sup>2</sup> The first women's political party, KAIBA (Kababaihan para sa Inang Bayan or Women for the Motherland), was set up 1987, along with the formation of a multi-sectoral political party, Partido ng Bayan (People's Party - PNB). KAIBA won one seat in Congress. All of PNB's senatorial candidates lost.



against US imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat capitalism which it considers as the basic problems of Philippine society. One of the founding members of the NDFP is Makibaka (Patriotic Movement of New Women), a revolutionary organisation of women espousing armed struggle.

Aboveground, there is a strong democratic movement which tackles people's issues and concerns, asserts people's economic and political rights and campaigns against anti-people policies and the rampant graft and corruption in government. They hold rallies, marches and other mass actions, a movement that is popularly referred to as the *parliament of the streets*.

## **Women's Movement: The GABRIELA Experience**

In 1984, GABRIELA<sup>3</sup> (General Assembly Binding Women for Reform, Integrity, Equality, Leadership and Action), a national alliance of women's organisations, was born amidst the people's unrest during the final years of the Marcos dictatorship. GABRIELA led thousands of women against the Marcos dictatorship. It led women in asserting *women's rights as human rights* and in the fight against prostitution, mail-order brides, sex trafficking/sex tourism and violence against women. GABRIELA actively campaigned against the presence of US military bases in the country and in the ouster of former Presidents Ferdinand Marcos and Joseph Estrada.

Currently, GABRIELA is visible in the people's campaign against imperialist globalisation (policies of liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation) and against global US military aggression. It monitors and protests against the presence of US military troops in different parts of the country under the guise of military exercises. It campaigns for increases in workers' wages and salaries of government employees. It is also part of the broad alliance against political repression sparked by the recent spate of killings of political activists and human rights defenders like lawyers, media people and priests. It is one of the leading organisations within the Gloria Step-Down Movement (GSM) pressuring President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo to resign, after evidences of graft and corruption through a numbers game by her husband, son and brother in law were exposed; and worse, a taped conversation of her was unearthed showing that she had cheated her way to the presidency in the last presidential election.

All these years, GABRIELA has been actively addressing the issues of grassroots women - women workers and peasant, indigenous and urban poor

---

<sup>3</sup>GABRIELA is named after the heroine Gabriela Silang from Ilocos Sur, Northern Philippines. After her husband Diego, the leader of an uprising against the Spanish colonisers was killed, she took over and led the band of revolutionaries. She was captured and subsequently executed by the Spanish government.



women - who comprise the majority of its membership. It has very close ties with the other sectors in the Philippine people's movement.

## **Party-List Elections and GABRIELA**

In 2000, along with other militant people's organisations, GABRIELA co-founded *Bayan Muna* (The People First) party-list. *Bayan Muna* (BM) is an alternative political party which sought representation in the House of Representatives under the party-list system in the 2001 elections. BM carries a comprehensive platform for social transformation and trumpets the call "politics for change" as opposed to traditional elite politics. It aims "to articulate in Congress the voice of the marginalised and the underrepresented majority of the population; to defend and assert the people's interests in a highly elite-dominated Congress" and also "to support and advance the broader people's struggle for freedom, democracy and justice".

A few months after BM was organised, the Gabriela Women's Party was established as an organised venue for women's participation in electoral politics. GWP however decided to postpone running in the party-list elections in 2001 to give full support to BM. The third seat among BM's nominees to Congress was given to Gabriela. BM won. It had the highest number of votes in the 2001 elections and was way ahead of the 2<sup>nd</sup> party-list winner. It got the most number of votes garnered by any party-list organisation since the law was enacted and implemented in 1998. The votes reflected the breadth of the organised forces and mass base of the people's movement, including that of GABRIELA's, from the countryside to the urban centers. BM got three seats in the House of Representatives. GABRIELA's then Secretary General, Liza Maza, was among BM's three representatives.

During the 12<sup>th</sup> Congress, Bayan Muna, through its three representatives, brought into the halls of Congress the same people's issues and concerns they have been advocating in the parliament of the streets. Many proposed bills and resolutions submitted by BM were on specific women's issues and concerns primarily authored by Rep. Liza Maza. She was one of the principal sponsors of the bill on Anti-Trafficking in Persons and actively pushed for its passage until it was eventually passed into law in 2003 after years of getting stuck in Congress. She also co-authored the Anti-Violence Against Women and Children Act.

In 2003, the Gabriela Women's Party (GWP) formally announced that it was contesting the 2004 party-list elections. There were two women's parties among the 66 party-list groups accredited in the 2004 elections: GWP and Abanse Pinay. A third women's party, Women Power, was not accredited because it failed twice (1998 and 2001 elections) in getting the 2% minimum vote requirement and was disqualified from running a 3<sup>rd</sup> time. Abanse Pinay



won a seat in the 1998 elections but was short of the 2% minimum in 2001. When BM protested and successfully got non-marginalised party-list groups from being accredited, the base figure was reduced which enabled Abanse Pinay to get the 2% needed for one seat. However, it failed to get a seat in the 2004 elections.

Other organisations from the people's movement formed their respective sectoral parties for the 2004 elections, namely: Anakpawis (Toiling Masses), Anak ng Bayan (Youth Party), Migrante Sectoral Party (for Migrants) and Suara Bangsa Moro (Moro People). BM maintained its number one position in the 2004 elections and got three seats in Congress. Anakpawis got two seats and GWP got one seat, missing a second seat by only 0.35%.

## **Setting up GWP**

GWP's strength comes from GABRIELA's 20 years of service to Filipino women and its involvement in the people's movement for change. In the past two decades, GABRIELA broadened its mass base and influence by consistently advancing the rights and interests of Filipino women. It has more than 200 member organisations and more than 40,000 individual members nationwide. The majority of its members are from basic sectors: women workers, peasants, indigenous and urban poor women. It has a youth arm, GABRIELA Youth, and an association of women professionals, GABRIELA Network or GABNet. They all serve as the backbone of GWP's electoral campaign machinery.

Forming a women's political party is by no means an easy task. Women activists from GABRIELA, its member organisations and other women's associations got together to be GWP's initiators. As an initial step, these women pioneers drafted the GWP constitution and by-laws, declaration of principles and general plan of action. They began to recruit more members. On October 28, 2000 GWP was formally established through a general assembly held in an all-women's college. The general assembly ratified GWP's basic documents and elected its first board of directors and officers. With the decision not to contest the 2001 elections, GWP soft pedaled as an electoral party until the start of 2003, the year before the next party-list election. GWP then proceeded to get accreditation from the Commission on Elections (COMELEC). The process proved difficult as COMELEC suspiciously delayed accreditation of progressive party-list groups.

Meanwhile, GWP proceeded to recruit more members and set up local chapters and organising committees in different parts of the country, expectedly starting in areas where GABRIELA and its member organisations were strong. GWP had 7,480 members and 24 chapters by the time the official campaign period started on February 10, 2004. Membership had



grown to 23,065 individual members, 38 chapters and 4 adhoc formations by election day. Now, GWP has more than 90,000 members and almost 1,100 village-level chapters nationwide. Recruitment of volunteers to help in the National Party Headquarter operations was also done. To recruit men and gay men, GWP formed the Men in Purple and the Friends of GWP.

Preparation for GWP's second General Assembly, annual National Women's Council meeting and Convention was done simultaneously. GWP's Declaration of Principles and Platform of Action were drafted for ratification in the 2<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly. Formal announcement regarding GWP's participation in the 2004 elections was done at the national convention.

Election promotional materials were designed for use before and during the Convention. Examples are GWP's logo, letterhead, membership forms, brochure, different types of leaflets (introducing GWP, invitation for membership, popular version of the declaration of principles and platform of action, call to vote for GWP), brochures, posters, streamers, banners, stickers, umbrellas. Materials were both in English and Filipino. The GWP members in the regions translated these materials into the local dialects. The GWP theme song and a jingle were produced for the Convention and the delegates sang and danced with the GWP cultural group performing onstage. A few more jingles were made for the actual campaign period. Also well applauded in the convention was a video presentation showing well-known women personalities from grassroots leaders to women professionals, artists and government officials endorsing GWP. Among the video's highlights were statements of young girls who were named after Gabriela.

The GWP national convention was attended by more than 800 women and about 200 children. It was colourful, a big show of womenpower and great fun. The delegates listened to speeches, sang, danced, chanted slogans, cheered and applauded the elected GWP leaders and initial party-list nominees. Regional, provincial and city conventions were held based on the capability of the local chapters. The proclamation rally held months later was attended by more than 2000 women. The children were there again to celebrate with their mothers, grandmothers and sisters. It already felt like a victory party in the jampacked venue.

## **The Electorate**

The electorate in the Philippines can be classified into what is called the "organised", the "alliance" and "market" voters. The organised voters for GWP were members and sympathisers of GWP, GABRIELA and other organisations in the national democratic movement. Alliance votes come from other candidates and traditional organisations which have committed



support to GWP. Market votes come from non-aligned voters and are those that a candidate or a party can garner through campaigning.

The organised votes are the base of GWP's electoral strength. These votes can be almost accurately estimated. Alliance votes, on the other hand, while they can also be estimated, are not completely reliable. Market votes are the target of name recall tactics and sweeping campaigns. The previously unaligned voter can decide later on to support a party-list group based on the latter's public projection and direct campaign reach. GWP had a strong base of organised voters and this ensured that it would get at least one seat.

That GWP got a big number of market votes only shows that GABRIELA's track record in fighting for women's rights and welfare has caught public attention especially of the women voters. While there is still no women's vote to speak of, the number of votes garnered showed that there are women who prefer a party they perceive as their own. Without the Arroyo administration's and the military's vicious campaign against GWP it could have easily won two seats in Congress.

## **The Election Campaign**

Before the COMELEC-specified campaign period, GWP organisers and volunteers held education sessions and women's meetings to discuss the women's situation, highlights of the national situation and GWP's orientation and platform of action. In these venues, they invited women to be members of GWP. Those who were not ready yet to apply for membership were requested to support GWP in the coming elections. These education sessions continued all throughout the campaign but gave way to brisk campaigning for votes as the election date neared.

GWP members and volunteers conducted direct campaigns to voters by distributing campaign leaflets and sample ballots in public places like markets, church plazas, busy intersections and wherever people, especially women, congregate. Members were encouraged to hold street by street and house to house campaign visits in the neighbourhood where they live. They campaigned among their families, relatives, friends, neighbours, co-workers or officemates, current or former classmates, acquaintances and even strangers they happen to meet in public places. Mobile Propaganda Teams (MPTs) of at least three women were formed. They went around riding in borrowed or hired vehicles talking to the public through a public address system, playing the GWP jingles and stopping at places to hand out election campaign materials like leaflets, stickers and sample ballots. In some communities, GWP held medical missions to help alleviate the poor health condition of the residents. Campaigning through text messaging and e-mails were also resorted to, especially among the youth & students, workers and professionals. The



GWP nominees go on sorties by themselves and at times with other candidates with whom they have established tactical alliances based on common issue/s. In the campaign sorties, they deliver speeches on women's issues, listen to women's complaints or demands, absorb what they could of the situation in the community, shake hands and ask people to vote for GWP.

## **Campaign on Women's Issues**

While GWP's electoral campaign was aimed at winning, it did not focus only on getting votes. The party continued its advocacy and education work among women, as well as men.

GWP together with GABRIELA and other allied organisations continued to tackle women's burning issues. A good example is GABRIELA's "Blow a Whistle", a campaign to fight violence against women. Its main feature is a metal whistle which women can blow to call attention and get help when they are being harassed or in danger of being attacked or subjected to any type of violence. The whistles are being sold at a discount or given free to women who cannot afford it. The campaign has an education component so the people can learn more about the root causes of violence against women and how they can be addressed.

Another campaign that caught the public's attention was against the "Kinse Anos" (literally 15 year-old) advertising billboards of a brandy. The advertisement had a copy that says, "Nakatikim ka na ba ng kinse anyos?" (literally, "have you tasted a 15-year old?"). The advertisement played on sexual innuendos offending women and men alike. This highlighted the age-old problem of commodification of women. GWP and GABRIELA launched a signature campaign, along with a media and information drive that demanded the pull out of the advertisement from tri-media and the removal of its billboards. The campaign gathered the support of various sectors including those in the advertising industry. GWP considers the campaign successful. The advertisement was pulled out. But more than this, the success of the campaign is also measured in terms of the support it generated for non-sexist advertisements.

## **Media Campaign**

That winning in Philippine elections depends more on name recall and fraud is a reflection of the state of democracy in the Philippines. There cannot be honest elections in a country that is dominated by US imperialism and its lackeys, the local ruling elite. In such a situation a media campaign, no matter how expensive, has to be part of the whole electoral campaign. The mass media play a vital role in reaching out to a wider section of the voting population. This complements the process of education and organising being



done at the grassroots level. The print media was the most widely used followed by radio and TV.

GWP, for its part, placed paid advertisements in two of the tabloid newspapers with the highest circulation. The entertainment page was selected since it was the most read section of the tabloid. The paid advertisement appeared three times a week, every two weeks prior to election day. Paid ads were also placed twice each in two major broadsheets the week before elections. An advertising agency of a GWP friend helped in choosing the page where the advertisement appeared. A 30-second radio plug was produced and aired daily for two weeks before elections. The radio plugs were not aired frequently enough because of the expensive radio time despite discounts given to GWP. GWP though got some media placements for free through alliance work. An all-women's advertising agency which helps GABRIELA in its campaign against violence on women came out with a paid ad in a broadsheet at its own expense. The GWP banner and poster were included in a television advertisement of a woman senatorial candidate whom GWP endorsed. Also, GWP and GABRIELA ensured multimedia coverage of their campaigns, women's mobilisations and propaganda actions. The GWP party-list nominees, especially Liza, and the GABRIELA leaders, who regularly guested on radio and TV talkshows even prior to the election period, also took the opportunity to talk about GWP and its platform.

Both organisations engaged in a tit-for-tat information campaign to counter the Arroyo-backed military's vilification campaign against GWP, BM and the four other progressive party-list organisations.

## **Finance and Logistics**

The problem of finance and logistics was lessened through contributions and free service from members and supporters. There were also cash and material solicitations from family, relatives, friends, acquaintances and business enterprises especially those dealing with products used by women. GWP held fund-raising activities like benefit dinner where tickets cost P1,000 per plate. GWP also sold t-shirts, umbrellas, stickers and other souvenir items.

While very large amounts could not be raised, the financial constraint was overcome by the spirit of volunteerism and commitment of GWP's members and supporters. Various materials, supplies and other campaign needs did not have to be bought because people just brought things from their pantries and *bodegas* (junk rooms).



## **Against Election Fraud**

GWP joined various alliances in their information and education campaign to prevent massive cheating and disenfranchisement of voters. Led by the church, the progressive movement invited international observers to come to the Philippines as part of the anti-fraud campaign.

GWP joined a composite poll-watch machinery composed of members of the six progressive party-list organisations. The poll-watch teams monitored the official counting and canvassing of votes. They documented and reported cases of fraud especially against the six party-list organisations. They also canvassed their own votes through their established network, chapters and members nationwide. There was a post-election anti-fraud campaign to ensure that votes were accurately counted and canvassed at all levels of the COMELEC.

## **Harassment and Vilification Campaign against GWP**

There were several attempts by the government and the military, particularly through the office of the National Security Adviser, to rob GWP and the five other progressive party-list organisations (PPLOs) of their votes.

A motion was filed in the COMELEC to disqualify the six PPLOs. When it was denied, a government task force was created to keep an eye on the six party-list organisations and to gather evidence to support the disqualification case against them. The task force was composed of representatives of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, Philippine National Police and the Department of Justice. When it also failed, a disinformation campaign was launched a few days before election day announcing that the six PPLOs were disqualified; therefore, there was no need to vote for them.

The government, through the military and police, conducted a vicious propaganda campaign against the progressive parties in the mass media and through community meetings. They came out with a paid advertisement in at least two local papers referring to the six PPLOs as communist fronts. They used the radio to vilify them. Posters, streamers and slogans painted on walls accused the six party-list organisations of being terrorist organisations. Billboards and posters were set up in rural communities telling people not to vote for the six PPLOs. Mass meetings were held in rural villages telling the women not to vote for GWP. The military and police also threatened those who would vote for any of the other five PPLOs. They were ordered to tear down and/or confiscate posters, streamers and other campaign materials and paraphernalia of the six's party-lists. A caravan of supporters were blocked and prevented from campaigning. There had also been cases of raids or burning of party-list headquarters. During elections itself, there were military



operations or massive military deployment in known bailiwicks of the six PPLOs, especially those of BM. There were also cases of “hamletting” or containment of residents in certain areas. Voters were disenfranchised through the setting up of numerous military checkpoints. There were many reported cases of soldiers preventing the supporters of the six PPLOs from going to the precincts to vote. In the Moro areas, the polling centers were moved from the designated schools to military camps. There were ballot boxes burned. Worse, there were cases of arrests, assassination and assassination attempts on local coordinators and leading members of the progressive party-list groups. In fact, 50 BM and 2 GWP members were killed between the 2001 elections and March 2005.

## **What worked for GWP**

Despite the difficulties, the GWP ended a winner with a total vote of 464,586 or 3.65% of the total votes cast in the party-list system. This is, so far, the biggest number of votes garnered by a women’s party-list organisation. It was among the 15 party-list organisations which won seats in Congress out of the 66 accredited. GWP could have easily won at least an additional seat if not for the government and the military’s vicious campaign against it and the other PPLOs.

GWP Secretary General Cristina Palabay points to the following factors which worked for GWP:

- GABRIELA’s track record of fighting for women’s and people’s causes for 20 years earned the public’s support, especially the women and, including media. Media regularly sought GWP and GABRIELA’s opinion on important issues, whether national or women-specific. This resulted to GWP’s high media visibility before and during the election campaign.
- Highly related to GWP/GABRIELA’s track record is its consistent pro-women and pro-people position on different issues which proved to be correct in almost all instances.
- The breadth and depth of GWP’s multi-sectoral and multi-class organisation nationwide was established and strengthened not only for and during the electoral campaign but was a product of the long process of educating, organising and mobilising women.
- GWP has close and strong links with the women’s movement for emancipation and the people’s movement for national freedom and democracy.



## Post-Election Strategies to Advance Women's Agenda

GWP is currently represented by Liza Largoza-Maza in Congress. GWP's legislative agenda for the 13<sup>th</sup> Congress serves as a guide post for Liza. This was laid down right after elections and even before the start of the 13<sup>th</sup> Congress. The legislative agenda was a product of a series of consultations with women's organisations and institutions.

Now that Congress is in session, each part of the legislative agenda is still subject to verification through consultations, including with women legislators in local government units.

Much of the work though lies in following up Liza's proposed bills from the 12<sup>th</sup> Congress, when she was with Bayan Muna. Among the bills she either sponsored, authored or co-authored and awaiting legislative approval are those on reproductive rights of women, infidelity bill, bills against contractualisation of women workers and on granting maternity leave to unwed government employees. There is also a bill on raising workers' wages by PhP125 and on declaring November 25 as a National Consciousness Day on Violence Against Women (VAW). For the 13<sup>th</sup> Congress, aside from countering the government's new tax measures and pushing for the passage of a law that would legislate the much needed wage hike, GWP expects an uphill battle with regard to the Divorce Bill<sup>4</sup> authored by Liza. Liza's Divorce Bill is different from the versions earlier passed which excluded legal separation and annulment. Alternately dubbed as "divorce Pinoy style"<sup>5</sup> or Maza Bill, GWP expects controversy to surround the bill because of the Catholic Church's position against it, the Church's influence on many of the legislators and the macho attitude of the congressmen. She has also filed resolutions including the maximization of the use of the Gender & Development (GAD) budget of the local government units, and a resolution calling for the investigation of so-called escort services which are used as fronts for prostitution.

Aside from filing bills and resolutions, Liza's advocacy extends within the parliament through the Association of Lady Legislators in the House of Representatives. Liza co-chairs its Committee on Advocacy. The association is another venue where women legislators could achieve a certain level of unity on what pro-women bills to pass. This is where Liza got most of the support during the 12<sup>th</sup> Congress for her proposed bill which is now called

---

<sup>4</sup> The Philippines is one of the two remaining countries (the other one is Malta) without a divorce law.

<sup>5</sup> This bill presents divorce as one of the options, and not the only option, that a woman could take according to her religious belief and cultural identity.



the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2003. However, not all pro-women legislations sponsored or co-authored by Liza get support from women legislators, most especially those bills perceived as “not along the lines of the Catholic Church.” GWP is now also reaching out to women legislators in the local government units as part of broadening the network of women legislators advocating the issues of women.

Beyond the work in Congress, Liza and those from other progressive partylist organisations have never ceased to be members of the parliament of the streets. They are still present during rallies, giving speeches.

## INSIGHTS

Liza Maza is conscious that she represents GWP and the women’s movement inside the halls of Congress. As such, she is focused on the party’s platform, programme of action and legislative agenda for women.

It is worth repeating Liza’s earlier statement, I represent GWP. I am not just an individual here. I represent a Party with a definite programme and platform for women, and that’s the only reason why I am here.

Liza Maza’s statement provides the context of GWP’s current work in the House of Representatives. It is GWP that is in Congress. It is GWP’s programme and platform for the advance of women’s rights that is bannered in the halls of Congress through its representative Liza Maza. GWP’s programme and platform articulate the aspirations of GWP’s members and constituents who are part of the people’s movement for change. The GWP programme and platform stand and only its constituents may say otherwise. It is therefore Liza Maza’s role to follow through that these same aspirations are echoed in the halls of Congress.

*The party-list system offers the possibility to progressives and marginalised sectors for representation in Congress. They are practically ‘banned’ from running for a seat in Congress through congressional district elections because of the millions of pesos needed for an election campaign. A district seat in the Philippine Congress costs some 20M–30M pesos up to 40M-50M pesos in highly contested districts. People’s movements in other countries should first work for the passage of a similar law if they intend to win seats in their parliaments. The party-list system is akin to the people’s movement. It is not personality-centered and gives more emphasis on the party’s performance and platform. Individual nominees can be replaced if they go astray of the people’s mandate expressed through the Party.*

The people’s and women’s movements can form political parties to win seats in parliament only after they have reached a certain level of strength and influence. This organised strength ensures that the people’s perspective is



carried on through work in Congress as an additional venue of the people's struggle. In the case of GWP, the organised and influenced base of the women's movement led by GABRIELA provided the Gabriela Women's Party the machinery to recruit members and volunteers for the campaign during elections. It also provided the sure votes which, when multiplied by at least three (3) additional votes that each can bring, gave GWP its base of organised votes.

GWP benefited from GABRIELA's 20-year record of fighting for women's and people's causes and its consistent pro-women, pro-people and patriotic stand on issues. GABRIELA as a women's organisation is known by many. It is respected and trusted by people who know or have heard of it. It was a wise move to name the women's political party, Gabriela.

*GWP maintains close links with grassroots women.* It's platform, programme of action and legislative agenda reflect the situation and aspirations of women, specially the women workers and the peasant, indigenous and urban poor women. They are a product of consultations with the different sectors and classes, urban and rural communities nationwide. They are also the result of a long process of integration with these communities, sectors and classes.

*GWP has gained experience from the 2001 elections and Liza's stint in the 12<sup>th</sup> Congress.* The experience undergone and lessons learned in founding and campaigning for the Bayan Muna Party-List in the 2001 elections and in having Liza as one of the BM representatives in the 12<sup>th</sup> Congress prepared GWP for the 2004 elections and the 13<sup>th</sup> Congress. It was through this that Liza, in particular, had a first taste of how it was to be a people's parliamentarian.

*Tactical alliances with other political parties and candidates are necessary.* Such alliances are based on issues both parties agree to carry out during and after the campaign period. Through these tactical alliances GWP is endorsed to the constituencies of other political parties and candidates and therefore translated into additional votes. After the elections, such tactical alliances facilitate co-sponsorship of and support for bills and resolutions filed by Liza and the five other representatives of the PPOs.

*GWP won because while it "played the game" it introduced what the PPOs called "politics for change".* GWP's campaign tactics included "name recall", mass media projection, handshaking, and other methods traditionally used by candidates. At the same time, GWP exposed election fraud and the reactionary character of the Philippine elections and turned campaign sorties into a discussion of women's and people's issues.

One cannot underestimate the extent the state and its military will sink to prevent the progressives from entering parliament. GWP could have comfortably gained two seats in Congress and could even have a third seat if



not for the vicious campaign the military conducted against it and the other PPLOs. It included killing of local coordinators, harassment and intimidation of members, attempts at disqualification, vilification through mass media, mass meetings and postering.

*GWP has a built-in mechanism to prevent being coopted by a corrupt government.* In general, the women's and people's movements exercise guidance and supervision over their representatives in Congress. Liza's office in Congress is being run more like a women's collective than a government office. There is also close coordination among the representatives of the PPLOs. Policies and code of conduct defined by the Party are in place. A PPLO representative can be replaced for cause by the party anytime.

Electoral struggle and parliamentary work are new arenas of struggle that complement the mass movement. The mass movement takes priority over them. Parliament is an additional venue to discuss and popularise the movement's platform for change. But they are secondary in relation to the work that is being done all these years - awareness-raising, organising and mobilisation of the different sectors and classes in Philippine society. The effectiveness of GWP's work in Congress depends on the strength of the women's and people's movements in general, and the specific issue campaigns and mobilisations, in particular.

## References

- Sison, J.M. (2004) Chronic Financial Crisis and the Way Out. *Liberation*. Vol.XXXI, No.3.
- Remollino, A.M. (2004) *Philippine Elections: Under the Watch of Uncle Sam*. May 2-8, Vol.IV. No.13, <http://www.bulatlat.com>
- Coronel, S. (2004) Born to Rule. *The Rulemakers: How the Wealthy and Well-Born Dominate Congress*. Quezon City. Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism.
- Balana, C.D. (2004) Old wine in new Bottle. *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. July 26.
- House of Representatives. Profile of the Members of the 13<sup>th</sup> Congress. <http://www.congress.gov.ph>
- Commission on Elections (COMELEC)
- Hofilena, C.F. (2004) The Showbiz Gets into Politics. May 3-4. PCIJ. <http://www.pcij.org>



## CONCLUSION:

### **See Things to Seatings: Reflection and Call to Action**

Women, especially in Asia Pacific, are still a long way off from winning half the seats in Parliament and creating a critical mass of women politicians at the highest decision-making level of their national governments and parliaments. Feminists all over the world have been, and are still, struggling for equal rights and opportunities along with the other marginalised sectors of society like the workers, peasants, fisher folk, indigenous peoples and the urban poor. Although the struggle for voting rights, including the right to become representatives in Parliament, has seen tremendous results during the 20th century, there are still many substantial constraints for full and effective women's participation in electoral and parliamentary politics. In the 21st century some barriers are becoming stronger due to further erosion of democracy in many countries, superpower hegemony, religious extremism, racism, militarism and neo-liberal globalisation. Women still continue to suffer from all forms of discrimination due to patriarchy. The concept of equal political right and opportunities has not become a practiced principle in many countries.

How long will it take women, especially those living in Asia-Pacific, to widen real possibilities for women's leadership in society, whether it be the home, workplace, community or at regional and national levels? Although for many decades, women have held high government positions such as those in national parliaments, ministries and government agencies, they were few and often isolated from women's needs. Their participation in politics was more an exception rather than a political norm. For example, in 19th century there was a queen, named Kurmandjan Datkha who was the queen of Alaay, a famous valley in Kyrgyzstan. India's Queen of Jhansi was a leader in the 1857 Indian Mutiny who fought against the British colonisers. In the 20th century, the world became acquainted with Indira Gandhi, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Golda Meir, Corazon Aquino and Benazir Bhutto. Despite having such women leaders, these countries can hardly be commended for achievements in advancing women's rights and welfare or women's participation in political processes.



There are cases where the number of women in parliament has actually decreased. Also, male politicians have subverted the quota systems and other affirmative actions provided to women by getting their wives, daughters or sisters elected. There are extremely rare cases of women in the highest levels of state bodies coming from a women's movement platform. In this book, the women political leaders are not pioneer women politicians, but they are, by and large, the first women candidates running on a woman's platform. It is encouraging and inspiring to read that "Liza Maza is conscious that she represents the Gabriela Women's Party (GAP) and the women's movement inside the halls of Congress. In this capacity she is focused on the Party's Platform, programme of action and legislative agenda for women."

Countries covered by the research differ in political, economic, social and cultural contexts. Despite the diversities, women in Asia-Pacific have many common challenges to face in order to enjoy equal rights and opportunities for political careers. Though Fiji, India, Korea, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia and the Philippines may be very different from one another, they have a lot in common in terms of women's participation in electoral and parliamentary politics, as can be seen in the case studies. Women in these countries face strong constraints, among which are patriarchal stereotypes about women's role in society, negative impact of religious norms, disadvantageous legislation and monopolisation of political leadership and power by political clans of landowners, big business and bureaucrat capitalists. Furthermore, women have to overcome the lack of resources, lack of political will of states and political parties to address women's issues and, in extreme instances, political repression by their government and its military and police forces. The state and the traditional political parties keep limiting opportunities for women's full and effective participation in political processes. The Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) is not fully implemented in most countries. Elections costs are so prohibitive that the higher the cost, the lower is women's representation. There are varying levels of women's political leadership skills development. Lack of training discourages women to run in elections. For example, in Kyrgyzstan and Malaysia, there are no specialised training opportunities for women who would like to be political leaders.

The individual stories of the women entering politics, raising women's issues, aligning with women's organisations also show the personal aspects of the six women leaders in our region. It is a good demonstration of how the personal becomes political. The other important side of this project is that the researchers come from the women's and/or the people's movements. This made the research rather focused on the cooperative potential of women leaders instead of a detached analysis of their political career development. The research is not a comparative one, but because of its multicultural nature, it shows very well the similarities of challenges and recommended strategies



for women. This research is a step in identifying best strategies for optimising women’s participation in the political process. It is valuable from several perspectives. It shows what women can do to win elections, and subsequently takes up women issues and the agenda of women and other marginalised sectors in the highest national decision-making bodies of their countries.

From our perspective, it is not enough to have women in national decision-making bodies. It is imperative to have women activists there: those who will not be co-opted by elitist and corrupt systems -- those who will continue to fight for the under-privileged, disadvantaged, vulnerable women, especially the women workers and the peasant, dalit, fisher folk, indigenous, migrant, elderly and differently-abled women.

## Similar and Yet Different!

In the cases drawn from the six countries, there are diversities especially in terms of electoral systems. Table 1 depicts several characteristics associated with a candidate and the country she represents.

**Table 1**

Parliaments	Researched election year(s)	Involvement in political work	Election result	Electoral system	Personal previous work on women’s issues	Quota system
Fiji	2004	Since 1998	Elected	Parliamentary	Yes	Yes
India	2004	Since 1984	Elected	Parliamentary	Yes	Yes
Korea	2004	Since 1980	Elected	Presidential	Yes	Yes
Kyrgyzstan	2000	Since 1980	Not elected, but got in through part list	Presidential	Yes	No
Malaysia	1999, 2004	Since 1999	Not elected	Parliamentary	Yes	No
Philippines	2004	Since 1987	Elected through party list system	Presidential	Yes	No

There are substantial challenges in front of women requiring common strategies to address them. These are electoral attitude, electoral system and its constraints, as well as personal and organisational capacity of candidates.

Electorate attitude under the impact of traditional stereotypes with preference to male candidates was addressed in the case studies. The classification of electorates used by GAP is valuable for future use. Differentiate the voters, identify the “organised”, “alliance”, and “market” voters and create separate strategies for each - this is one of the positive lessons from the Philippines.



Bernadette Libres notes that “the organised votes are the base of GWP’s electoral strength”, and that these votes can be almost accurately estimated.

Voters do not vote automatically for women, even if a woman candidate is clearly much better than the man from all perspectives: intellectual, organisational, educational, professional, administrative, personal, etc. People are used to voting for a man as they were indoctrinated early in life that it is the place of men to lead, not the women. Efforts to change people’s “electoral mindset” have brought results. GWP organisers and volunteers hold education sessions and women’s meetings to discuss the women’s situation, to highlight the national situation and introduce GWP’s orientation and plan of action. It will be best to encourage wide application of this strategy in other countries than is currently being done. For example, in Kyrgyzstan lack of such a targeted educational and mobilisation campaign contributed to the loss of women’s seats in the national decision-making bodies, including the Parliament. Create special campaign components aimed at women-voters - this is a lesson that all cases lead us to. Certainly this component is part of the direct campaign to all voters. We need, of course, to convince the male community. But they are not yet our “organised” voters. GWP used mobile propaganda teams, going around communities calling for support for women’s issues and GWP. The GWP experience also shows that consistent advocacy for women’s issues create a long-term image of women caring about women that helped GWP to win.

The election campaign is a venue for women to show the public that the women’s agenda is their agenda, too. Sharing with women and men during the campaign sorties, enable them to see women’s issues from a different perspective, convincing them that problems can be solved. Teamwork helps to convince the electorate that voting for women candidates means voting not just for the individual but for the women’s joint program and platform, and in general for gender equality, justice, development and peace. History shows that it requires a lot of energy, commitment and time.

As in the case of Zaitun Kasim of Malaysia, her journey from social activism to political involvement was described as “reluctant but inevitable”. Her reluctance seemed to be due to a mixture of personal doubts of her own efficacy as a politician, the daunting challenge of money, machinery and manpower to launch and sustain an election campaign without a party organisation, and the acute debate on the perceived boundaries between political activism and partisan politics. However, it seemed to Zaitun that it was inevitable that she takes up the challenge as a woman candidate, given the marginalisation of social movements in general and women’s voice in particular in the policy-making process of the country. Such growing consolidation of women in the joint political platform as in Philippines is a



success strategy which is worth practicing in other countries. For example, Bermet Stakeeva shares that during elections in Kyrgyzstan, NGOs mobilised their human resources and partners, but most NGOs in 2000 had minimal experience in political campaigning, and particularly in providing support to women candidates. Unquestionably, it takes time and effort to acquire such knowledge and skills. During the 2000 elections, women's organisations in Kyrgyzstan did not play any significant role, and they were not allowed by the Election Code to participate in 2005 campaigns. Assistance from women's organisations certainly helped Toktokan Borombaeva, but this assistance was minimal, due to its limited capacity. Ema Tagicakibau, the former Fijian Member of Parliament, appreciates and tells what exactly helped in her electoral campaign.

In Korea, Fiji and the Philippines, women's organisations helped women in various forms and scale. Collective activities of women's organisations brought positive results. Except for a negligible few, no woman ran in elections as an independent candidate. In India, one exception was Maneka Gandhi, who was the daughter-in-law of Indira Gandhi. Hong Chun Hee from Korea classified assistance into three categories (lobbying, networking and training, and post-election support) that may be used by women's organisations in supporting women candidates. Korean women's organisations successfully lobbied for a clause that allotted 30% for female candidates in 2000. In 2002 the convention rule assigned 50% of metropolitan proportional representative candidacy for women. Korean women's organisations also set up education and training attended by 101 women candidates. Out of 39 women who won in the 2004 general elections in Korea, 18 were recommended by Women Power 2004. On the other hand, Zaitun and Toktokan both lost in elections. However, their running in elections is seen as "the first step towards women participating in the electoral process not under the patronage of male dominant political party and breaking ethnic politics paradigm by centering on non-partisan public interest issues".

Political parties can play a significant role in promoting women's participation in electoral and parliamentary politics. They have their leadership polygon, lobbying body and public relations machinery. All this can be used to the advantage of women. They provide effective venues for leadership development. The participation of women in the electoral process in India has largely been dependent on the attitude of political parties. Although many candidates contested the elections as independent candidates, the winning candidates for Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament) and the State Legislatures usually are members of political parties. Opinion polls in India suggest that people tend to vote for a party rather than a particular candidate. Similar voting behaviour tends to be exhibited in Malaysia. Kim Hyen Mi



gained her experience in a political party, National Congress for New Politics. Such a party which is an alternative for the traditional one, as also Bayan Muna party-list in the Philippines where Liza started her stint as a legislator, can break stereotypes and attract new types of leaders.

On a larger scale, the *type of the electoral system* has its advantages and disadvantages for woman candidates. Electoral systems differ but they are all biased towards the powerful, the wealthy and the men. It is an observation of all researchers that the party-list system offers more opportunities and possibilities for women and other marginalised sectors in the electoral struggle. Proportional representation is preferable. Hong notes that even if the proportional representation was followed only in the party, it was very meaningful since it gave a chance to evaluate Kim Hyen Mi's 18 years of political involvement. Women in Kyrgyzstan lost in parliamentary elections and finally got zero seats in Parliament after a shift to pure majority electoral system in 2005. Women still need to push states to implement their commitments and obligations formulated in the BPFA, Beijing Plus Five Outcomes Document, CEDAW and to take measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making. Women have to put pressure on states to take positive actions like introduction of quotas and affirmative action. In Korea the quotas for women in the proportional representation increased women's seats up to 50%, doubling the number of women in Parliament in comparison with 2000 elections. In Kyrgyzstan liquidation of quotas led to a decrease of six times in the number of women in the Parliament of 2005 in comparison with 2000 elections.

The state of an electoral system is linked to the state of democracy in a country. This is clearly shown in Fiji and the Philippines. While Ema won a seat in the national Parliament, her incumbency was cut short by a coup d'état. With the present set-up she does not see any future in running in another election as democracy has been curtailed in Fiji. Elections in the Philippines, where "elite democracy" and US domination prevail, have always been characterised by bribery, cheating, warlordism and even state terrorism. The ruling elite uses all the powers at its disposal against those who criticise and oppose its anti-people policies and programmes. Disinformation is used to malign women candidates.

**Personal and organisational capacities** are equally important for overcoming barriers and winning elections. Histories of our heroines attract attention to the high level of importance of close links of candidates to their constituency's needs and concerns. Knowledge of women voters' problems in her district assisted Toktokan and her team to address their needs directly, and to build her programme accordingly. Toktokan had lived in the province



where she ran for elections. Ema and Toktokan attribute their success to many factors including their personal knowledge and experience, strong sense of identity, belief in equality of women and men, political will, education, abilities and capacity to realise commitments. In the case of Balabarathy, her teacher introduced her to certain political books which were then banned in India. Early entrance into political work is an advantage. Practically all the women leaders who participated in this research actively took part in political activities from their youth. Early involvement in women's organisations, NGOs and the movement enabled them to build personal political vision and commitment. This gave the women greater strength to fight male chauvinism and overcome prejudices, discrimination and various constraints that limit her. Significant experiences of working in various leadership and power positions built strong personal political confidence among them. Personal strategies and those of the women's group, movement and political parties complemented one another. Zaitun and a few other like-minded friends actually moved among voters in especially identified parliamentary constituencies in the Selangor state, Malaysia. The case studies show the complexity and interrelationship of the various factors that can mean success or failure of women in electoral politics. In all the cases studied, women had access to education and the public sphere. Not all women though were ready and eager to participate in elections. Development of a personal vision and commitment to advance women's concerns through participation in the mainstream political processes is a long-term process and requires the involvement of young women. Ensuring women's participation in the political processes is the responsibility of the state, political parties and women's organisations. Thus, how much of a role does personal vision play in electoral victory? All the case studies show that the women had strong personal vision and desire to succeed in their chosen field.

## **Seethings to Seatings: The Need for Action**

Long-term strategy to open space for women in the political sphere goes beyond education and mobilisation campaign strategies. It has several goals. Quality education for girls and young women is one of them. The other is women's access to public life and wide opportunities to work outside the domestic realm. Practically all the case studies show that good education and opportunities for work lay the grounds for the development of personal abilities and the "courage to fight absurdity and discrimination in the world".

Women's struggle to increase women's representation in state power structures and decision-making and integrate women's agenda into political programmes is growing all over the region. Women as individuals and their organisations are taking on more roles in the political scene. Since political players will not address women's concerns without women's pressure, only



proactive approaches by women will enable them to make gains in the political arena. The research shows that women themselves *have to struggle* to realise women's rights: study, think, plan, share, develop skills, join women's organisations, enter political parties, set up their women's political parties, lobby. Equality of opportunity if guaranteed under Constitutions, such as that of India and discrimination on grounds of sex, language, religion, class or creed is prohibited, however, women's participation is still restrained due to attitudinal, institutional, cultural and social restrictions. The research shows that in the Philippines and Kyrgyzstan there are women "who prefer a party they perceive as their own". In both countries and additionally in Korea women's political parties won seats in the national elections. Organised and consolidated efforts of women like in the Philippines, Korea and Fiji can break millennium-old male political domination. One such example is that during her election campaign, Balabarathy was supported not only by her party but also by the party's allies. Another example was when after tough negotiations with the opposition Democratic Action Party, Zaitun was offered Selayang, the ethnically-mixed parliamentary constituency in the economically developed Malaysian state of Selangor, that had been traditionally contested by the Democratic Action Party. In the Philippines, the women have to link up with the struggles of the other marginalised classes and sectors in society because equality among women and men, and among classes and races can be achieved only if a country's sovereignty is respected and there is justice, real democracy and respect for people's rights, especially those of the women.

Without seeing things from a broad perspective and without proactive approach from women's groups, it is hardly possible to reach in the near future the modest goal of 30% representation for women by women who advance women's interest and carry on women's agenda. One step is to make the matter both a political and a personal issue. In the situation of violence against women, private concern historically transforms into public concern; in the case of women's participation in political processes, public concern becomes personal. The women's movement should lend some of its women leaders to electoral and parliamentary politics to complement women's organising, education and mobilisation. To embark successfully on this journey, individual women need to have sustainable support from women's groups and the women's movement. The future success of women's participation in mainstream politics depends on a wide and long-term involvement of women's organisations in the national political struggle. They are the force that can break stereotypes about women's role in politics.

