

## Feminism in Philippine Activist Politics: The Case of Mindanao<sup>1</sup>

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Public arguments in behalf of feminism are impoverished in Mindanao, and I must say, in other parts of the country as well. There are several explanations for this, the most obvious being the weakening of the women's movement itself. Feminist politics in Mindanao came strongest in the mid-1980s, right after the ouster of the fascist government of Marcos. But there is little left of this now. Where there are struggles that enlist the mass participation of women, as in the Islamist movement in the Moro provinces or the self-determination struggle of the indigenous peoples in mainland Mindanao, these are ostensibly indifferent to feminism, to say the least. The political climate in the Philippines has grown conservative and the feminist movement is inevitably one casualty of this new conservatism. This is a point some activists in the non-government organizations (NGOs) find arguable, as there is a widely held perception that women's issues have never been more acceptable than now, as evidenced by the proliferation of gender programs in the country. My argument is, this acceptance has been at a great cost to feminism. Feminism has been thrown over the edge, thanks to a gender mainstreaming project that is hostile to feminist politics.

Mindanao is located south of the Philippines, comprising thirty-four percent of the country's total land area. A major contributor to the national economy, it has always been a laggard in terms of industrial development. Its economy remains dependent on agriculture, particularly in the production of cash crops for export. One factor being blamed for its slow economic growth is the unquelled rebellion, which channels large amounts of money into military spending and disrupts delivery of basic services into its poorest segments, particularly the Lumad and Moro communities in the remote uplands and island provinces. Mass poverty is more pronounced among these two minority groups as opportunity structures in Christian-dominated institutions and business establishments

are tighter on them. This poverty is also often cited as the reason why ethnic and class politics continues to draw adherents among the Lumad people and the poor settler groups.

Present activist politics in Mindanao basically consists of addressing this ethnic and class conflict through rural development projects and peace programs. This project is however a little splintered, a wide segment of it not linked to the social transformation project that once gave birth to it. Spinning off from the reform project following the opening of the democratic space that came with Corazon Aquino's ascendancy to power, many NGOs have continued to collaborate with government, the private sector, and powerful development agencies and engage in activities they used to critique as welfarism. The belief is, we are patching holes left by government neglect and corporate greed or complementing services rendered by these sectors ([www.etext.org/Politics/MIM/fil/ngo.html](http://www.etext.org/Politics/MIM/fil/ngo.html)).

I have two main propositions with regard to the place of feminism in Mindanao's activist formations: 1) that these male-led formations are basically hostile to feminist politics; and 2) that women activists within the structures of these organizations are ideologically aligned with these ethnic and nationalist struggles. There is a third proposition, which is corollary to both propositions: 3) that female conscripts who find feminism valuable to their political practice engage in feminist politics upon exit or on the peripheries of these organizations. In the case of the national democrats, they express themselves in the above-ground women organizations that found relative autonomy in the 1980s.<sup>2</sup>

### The Gender Construct and Feminist Politics

Gender became an important criterion in Mindanao development work beginning in the early 1990s, facilitated in part by the intervention of international donor agencies who demand of their Third World partners a new set of requirements in development programs, one of which is gender. In development jargon, this has become interchangeable with the Gender and Development (GAD) framework, an improvement on the Women in Development (WID) approach, which makes of women mere recipients of palliative and short-lived development interventions and has the potential of "marginalizing women as a species with inherited handicaps" (Ostergaard 1992, 7). As a development tool, GAD considers the different roles men and women play in the family and society and acknowledges that these men-women relations may be characterized by

conflict. More than that, it seeks to improve women's position through the realization of women's productive potentials in development (Ostergaard 1992, 7).

Feminists in Mindanao are not quite of one mind as to the uses of GAD in their women emancipation project. Many like to point out the gains made from this institutionalized support for women. For instance, among other benefits, GAD has made reproductive health a commonplace demand, and the change in language must surely say something about a growing consciousness of and responsiveness to women's claims. Others however are more cautious (Aguilar 1993, 92, 94; St. Hilaire 1992) and deplore the redeployment of feminist energies into programs located within aid agency structures (Alojamiento 2002, 60).

For this paper, my emphasis is on feminism as a disestablishment discourse. I argue against the GAD mainstreaming project being pursued by government in cooperation with international aid agencies, which I hold responsible for the hijacking of gender as a feminist construct. Nowadays, de-emphasis on adversarial politics around class, sex, and other divides in favor of a supposed all-inclusive pluralist paradigm<sup>3</sup> has confused discourse. Words are de-politicized and robbed of their meanings. Feminism, therefore, has been replaced by a now neutralized gender discourse.

### Feminist Politics and the National Democratic Movement

The women's movement in the Philippines attained the height of its influence in the later part of the 1980s, right after the EDSA Revolution<sup>4</sup> which made Corazon Aquino President. For the women activists, the democratic space that was opened with the rise to power of the first woman president was an important occasion to make themselves felt in the national body politic. The national liberation discourse deployed by the national democrats in the previous decade was too malestream to be serious about developing a feminist agenda.

At the forefront of this feminist politics was GABRIELA,<sup>5</sup> the largest women's federation in the country. It led thousands in mass mobilizations, addressing women's issues and connecting these to national interest issues. This activist wave included Moro and Lumad women who were also then engaged in the self-determination and social transformation project. Their participation in the mass politics of the 1980s was however mainly as the Moro women contingent of the national democratic formation. The

Lumad women, on the other hand, were mostly found in the peasant organizations, engaging in land occupations and direct action politics, alongside their men, in the struggle for the return of their lands or for the implementation of a revolutionary agrarian reform program.

Alongside GABRIELA, there rose autonomous feminist organizations bannered gender-based issues occasionally dismissed by the hegemonic Left as bourgeois and Western-oriented. GABRIELA's women did well in claiming national-interest issues as their own, though not as well in demanding that women's issues be owned by the broad national democratic organizations of which it was an affiliate. Even MAKIBAKA, (Makabayang Kilusan ng Bagong Kababaihan or Patriotic Movement of New Women), the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP)-guided clandestine women's organization, was too preoccupied with the task of pushing forward the revolutionary struggle to spend itself on feminist politics. But more than the male attitude in the activist organizations which did so much to control and repress the development of a feminist agenda, the day-to-day struggle against fascism siphoned off women's energies. There was the belief among women that to be part of a movement was all they could do as women. Leftist literature during this period moreover valorized women as bearers of sons and daughters who would carry on the struggle for national liberation. For many women in the national liberation movement, this was how they understood their role and defined themselves.

But the culture of radicalism fomented by the national democratic revolution brought on tremendous changes in the lives of people who were involved in the struggle. Relationships restructured as the needs of the revolution came first and in many places, comradeship was replacing other bonds based on bourgeois institutions. The nuclear-patriarchal family, although still regarded by revolutionists as the only legitimate site for reproduction, was being complemented by the bigger family - the collective (Alojamiento 2002, 59).

This did not last long, however. The triumph of elite democracy and the onslaught of neo-liberalism, marked by the collapse of socialist institutions abroad, combined to push to the bottom all these social and political gains. When Fidel Ramos later became President, consolidating the liberal policies begun under the Aquino regime, the retreat of radical politics was made final, with many activists adopting an accommodationist and cooptative attitude.

### Fragmentation and Depoliticization

For all the celebration over the world's opening-up to democracy, the 1990s was not just all about the vigorous search for alternatives to past paradigms. In the Philippines, the glasnost-propelled democratization produced a new breed of activists that looked for "interstices and spaces within the political system" (FOPA 1993). But even as these idealists struggled to advance their agenda - just as the feminists sought to find their own ground within the changes taking place - there was great confusion as well. The demise of the liberation project and the scandals that surfaced in its wake cast a pall on the environment, demoralizing its mass supporters and dislocating its hundreds of cadres who could not find an anchor, not even a means to life, under the new climate.

For those in the feminist movement who were closely identified with the political struggle of the 1980s, and who got their education in liberation politics in the discussion groups of the national democrats, vengeance on the macho government of the Marcos was not the same as triumph over the macho revolutionary organization. The advance of male-dominated radical politics found in the women loyal comrades in the struggle who served as support base of the revolution, and who shared the revolutionary movement's successes and failures. After the woman power magic lighted by the 1986 revolution tapered off, defeat was felt everywhere, and the women contingent dispersed.

By the mid-1990s independent formations rose, mostly from the ranks of the erstwhile national democratic organizations. Aided by generous funding from financial institutions and development agencies abroad, these groups set up programs and activities that promoted people's capacities and encouraged self-help. This alternative formation would later be in the forefront of the civil society movement that works within the democratic reform project being instituted in the country.

On the losing side of this new configuration was the national democratic politics of the Old Left. The spilling of dirty secrets attending the split in the early 1990s also had its repercussions in international solidarity work. There was strong pressure among partners abroad not to engage in partisan politics. The national liberation bloc - or what survived of it - thus lost a big chunk of funding while those in the independent groups (abiding by aid agency policies) got new money to do development work. This signaled the enlistment of activist politics in the uprising neo-liberal regime. In the proliferation of gender projects that followed,

feminist energies were retrenched as well, redeployed into programs that had little to do with emancipatory politics.<sup>6</sup>

The withdrawal of feminist politics came at the tail of the national democratic formation's collapse. The fallout following the split did not seep down to the women's ranks until much later. In the mid-1990s, almost every other national-democratic political project either folded or transmuted into one that fitted within the post-conflict and developmentalist regime.

In the women formation, this transmutation was marked by the ascendancy of the gender discourse and social programs. This was aided by the windfall of support that came with the heralding of new democracies that now made other axes of oppression central issues. Women desks and resource centers were set up, and gender-sensitivity trainings upscaled. So did welfare services, health centers, credit facilities, children's care and like humanitarian projects.

### The Hijacking of Gender

Gender as a feminist construct underwent first revision upon mainstreaming, when government took upon itself the task of accelerating GAD, and when the NGOs themselves opted to work with government.<sup>7</sup> There was adequate support being pummeled into this government and non-government sector cooperation and for those who would otherwise think feminist had to make do with what was already there in their hands. With no more women's movement to latch their hopes on, feminists have had no choice but to scatter into little programs, many of which do not directly serve women.<sup>8</sup> This dispersal of women-managed projects has had one net effect: it further obscured and diffused, if not finished off the unconsolidated feminist agenda (Alojamiento 2002).

Critique of the mainstreaming project in the Philippines has however been nil and has been little reflected in the volume of literature on gender that are produced annually. While many individual women activists might be actually doubting their specific activities' strategic ends, more often they are so immersed in their everyday workload (documentation, module-making and training-giving, etc.) to have time to think these out, a form of empiricism. The diversity and segmentedness of what now constitutes women's concerns have prevented them from engaging in a coherent and focused collective debate. This has contributed heavily to the dilution of a feminist debate that could have challenged "mainstream" gender agenda.

Structurally, it translates into a horizontal division of women groups and programs, each after its own interests, what may be termed as turfing.

In the Philippine NGO community, groups who insist on an autonomous women emancipation project, i.e., one that may or may not take men along, are a minority, and often associated or stigmatized as belonging to the lesbian camp. In Mindanao there is almost consensus among women NGOs about the importance of male participation in gender advocacy work. GABRIELA-Mindanao, for itself, has gone back to cementing its ties with the now marginalized national democratic organizations, which have continued to prevent it from pursuing an autonomous women's agenda.

For a feminist organization, GABRIELA is in an ironic situation. Its emphasis on national liberation as a prerequisite for the elimination of "national oppression" (blamed on the triple problems of feudalism, capitalism, and US imperialism), including gender oppression, makes it an ally of the national democratic revolution which has a history of hostility towards feminist politics. Critics posit that if a feminist consciousness did not fully develop in the women's movement a good part of the blame can probably be laid on its continuing alliance with the male-dominated leadership of the national democratic movement (Angeles 1989, cited in Poethig 1993, 133).

### Ethnic Politics and Women's Consciousness

Attending the fall of socialism in the 1990s and the defeat of Left politics in the Philippines was the rise of ethnic politics the world over. In Mindanao, the unquelled Moro rebellion got new attention as the Ramos government sought a comprehensive peace settlement that would integrate the Moro populace in mainstream development processes. Multi-lateral aid was mobilized as the region was prepared for a transition to a post-conflict scenario. As the top ranks of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) moved to government offices, a large number of combatants were left in the cold, unable to avail of the promised jobs and benefits. Some of these would later regroup as Abu Sayaf fighters.<sup>9</sup>

The signing of the 1996 Peace Accords between the MNLF and the Ramos government however signaled the Moro populace introduction into civil society politics.<sup>10</sup> For the Moro women, this opened for them an opportunity to be trained away from the war culture and participate in the peace and development activities being pursued. The Bangsa Moro

Women for Peace and Development Foundation (BMWPDF), the MNLF's women's arm, took charge of building cooperatives and women's organizations that would help the Moro communities engage in sustainable economic activities. Under this federation, women organizing took the shape of setting up community-based self-help projects that fell under the gender, peace, and development agenda, with a strong component on family welfare through the delivery of basic social services.

The 1990s was not only the time when ethnic politics was on the rise in the Philippines and in other parts of the world. It was also the era of "democratization," when previously denigrated voices were being brought into the center. For those engaged in development work, visibilization of minority women thus became a very important area of interest. Among the Moro and Lumad communities, the gender perspective (motivated in part by funding agency policy) was introduced. On ground, however, minority women's formations (and the organizing and articulation that went with these) came at the rear of the upsurging ethnic politics. Gender did not figure prominently as one of the most important issues in these ethnic and supra-nationalist movements. Emergent groups were too preoccupied with regathering their forces to pursue collective goals to be deterred by "gender issues."

The imperviousness to feminist ideas of Moro and Lumad organizations are often explained by local leaders and NGO practitioners as a fault that is found in feminism, not in the local culture of these organizations. The claim is that the reality of war and poverty are of more pressing concerns; gender is not an issue. Often, Moro women activists themselves are the strongest articulators of this view. In their agenda, what may be construed as feminist concerns for the Moro and Lumad women – polygamy, arranged marriage, bride price – are always at the bottom of the list of "women's most pressing problems," far behind the more important ones: war, poverty, and the exploitation of their land resources (Siapno 1993, 112).

### Moro Mass Politics and the Feminist Agenda

Moro mass politics is not any better than the national-democratic formation in pursuing a feminist agenda. Both the Moro rebel formations and the national-democratic forces nurture certain hostility to feminist politics, portraying women in their texts as happy adjuncts of the revolutions. This holds some truth: women activists within the structures

of these organizations are ideologically aligned with these ethnic and nationalist struggles. In the case of the secessionist and nationalist struggles of the Moro people which are ostensibly even more male-dominated, hierarchical, and recently religious-clerical, there is even less discussion on what constitutes women's emancipation. Discourse in these organizations has not gone far beyond women's role in the *jihad* and articulation on this mainly comes from the male leadership (internally recognized political and religious authorities), seldom from women. Even women outside these formations have difficulty constructing their own feminist agenda as they have to go back to Islam as reference point. For those who espouse a women's liberation politics that does not anchor on Islam, venue for political articulation is very narrow, if at all available.

This strengthening of an Islamist agenda has been greatly aided by the strong current of an anti-West nationalist discourse which in turn has been further fueled by current anti-Muslim campaigns emanating from Western governments. Recently, feminist critique about Islamic states' constructing of women as repository of national-traditional values is becoming moot as the heightened campaigns against Islamic symbols had backfired. In Mindanao, it made many Moro women turn to the veil as an ultimate expression of solidarity with the assaulted Muslim world.

Mindanao's Islamic rebel politics has a strong strand of separatism – a reaction to the rule of an oppressive majority (represented by the Christian Filipino settlers) that had taken political power and economic rights from the indigenous Moro Muslims. This separatism is conveyed in the desire to establish an Islamic state, which is envisioned as an alternative to Western institutions. Part of a worldwide resistance to Western hegemony, and particularly, to US imperialism, this movement finds a strong support base among the Moro women. This anti-West stance is a source of tension between Mindanao feminists and Moro women activists who equate feminism with Western values.

While there are a handful of Moro women activists who do not find the Islamic agenda – or separatism, for that matter – worth supporting, there are no alternative movements to mobilize and organize the women. The Islamic movement, as conveyed by the MNLF and MILF, still has every reason to flourish for as long the conflict in Mindanao continues to target the Muslim populace as war subjects and poverty alienates them from mainstream economic development.

## Indigenous Women and Feminist Politics

Like the Moro organizations, the Lumad formations are likewise not clear in articulating what constitutes their identity politics besides the current ancestral domain project. But unlike the Moro population which has Islam to gather around, the Lumads do not have as much strength or political cohesion. The current struggle via Indigenous People's Rights Act (IPRA)<sup>11</sup> implementation to regain control and management of ancestral lands are more a product of government and civil society organizations' belated affirmative action to address errors committed in the past than the Lumad people's own self-determination praxis. In the past (1970s-1980s), the Lumad people's self-determination agenda had been subsumed under the national democratic revolution project. It is only after the loss of hegemony of the national democratic movement that autonomous Lumad formations rose. But since the Lumad's geographical location also approximates the insurgents' refuge, they remain susceptible to being recruited anew into the New People's Army's class struggle.

The resurgence of ethnic politics occurred after the loss of hegemony of the Left. In the "post-revolution" period of the 1990s, loss of leadership sowed confusion among the mass organizations that once stood behind the national liberation agenda. There was demoralization as a result of the excesses in the purges in the revolutionary movement. With the new importance accorded indigenous peoples' struggles, the initial response among Lumad leaders was valorization of this recovered identity. This found many expressions, ranging from revivalist movements demanding a return to a past supposedly self-sustaining and ecologically sound, to the recovery of indigenous knowledge and technology, to the demand for a territory where land development and indigenous ways of resource management may be pursued. Gender does not conspicuously figure in this all-important self-determination and cultural regeneration project, despite pressures from funding agencies.

This attitude is however not endemic to ethnic movements; and neither is it recent. The Lumad people mainly got their training in social transformation work (now called "development work") from the male-led national democratic organizations, which had a basically class-oriented tradition. With the temporary exit of the national democrats and the transference of Lumad development management into the hands of NGOs and government institutions, this bias against feminist politics

has been further reinforced, especially so as current projects do not so much engage in debate and theory building as accelerate testing of gender tools developed in Western agencies and perceived to be inappropriate to local culture and context. With the national democratic organizations recovering lost influence, this could only mean strengthening and reconsolidation of class politics. Under this condition, feminism has an ever harder time to be appreciated.

## Summary and Conclusions

I have argued in this paper that the feminist project in the Philippines, and in Mindanao in particular, has had little space in the broad activist formation carrying nationalist, supra-nationalist and ethnic issues. In the case of the Moro and Lumad organizations, feminism has been met with indifference, if not hostility, thus resulting in a misconstruction and misappreciation of its possible uses to these movements. In the Moro revolutionary organizations and mass politics, feminism's unviability has been decreed mainly because discourse within these formations has been ostensibly the privileged domain of its acknowledged leaders, particularly the religious authorities inside and outside the organizations. There is therefore a need for the Moro women to take back, wrest the authority to speak in behalf of themselves for them to be able to truly own, define, and manage their own feminist project. In the meantime, feminist theorizing and practice have to be anchored on the dominant Islamist discourse. For those who insist on a secular feminist agenda, they have to do it in the fringes or outside of these political-religious organizations.

The newly independent self-determination project of the Lumad populace, on the other hand, still has to begin real discussion on gender politics. Their training in class struggle with the national democratic revolution and their continuing links with the mountain-based insurgency will continue to influence their political agenda. It is likely that the organized sectors of the Lumad people will always find it easier to rally behind "rural development issues" (land, mining, agricultural corporations, etc.) than lend themselves to feminist politics. The knowledge system and organizing work being done among them have always been biased towards these agenda; ergo, the culture and social infrastructure that are being created can but produce this kind of politics. The notion that gender is a "non-issue" among the indigenous peoples of Mindanao is more symptomatic of who brings in and manages these projects, than of the

“deficiencies of feminism” which project agents may never find out about because they don’t bother to look it up, much more try in their political work.

In the national democratic formation that enjoyed political supremacy in the 1980s, the feminist agenda rose to prominence, largely, through the efforts of women activists allied with the national liberation project who won relative autonomy in the 1980s. This was however stunted, especially after the political reversals of the early 1990s. This abortive project has been particularly blamed on GABRIELA’s dependence on male leadership, which has heretofore defined women’s agenda. Ironically, the gender and development framework, purported to be a feminist project, enjoyed acceptability, especially after international funding gave it ample attention. But this has been at the expense of feminism. The language, mechanisms and structures that came with the more popular gender framework has subtly transformed the once disestablishment politics of the women’s movement into one that upholds the status quo, i.e., instead of changing the system, feminist activism and the broad movements allied with it have been changed by the now dominant neo-liberal paradigm. This has made of feminists and radicals activists managers and partners of GAD mainstreaming. The net result has been the depoliticization of gender and the expulsion of feminist politics from the everyday language of these program managers. Because discourse and literature serve the ascendancy of this status quo, creation and consolidation of feminist thought and political agenda are likewise aborted. An analysis that “name[s] the enemy” is therefore cancelled out as NGOs now buy into and dominate this new gender project and willingly participate in the reproduction of a culture and language that neutralizes and stabilizes, rather than makes change. As gender projects proliferate, a tractable and coherent feminist construct and political practice are consequently sabotaged.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at the international feminist conference on Gender and Activism held at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland on 26-27 October 2004 organized by the Laboratoire Interuniversitaire en Etudes Genre (LIEGE) of the Université de Lausanne and the Centre de Recherches sur l’action Politique de l’Université de Lausanne (CRAPUL).

<sup>2</sup> It is hard to say the same of the Moro organizations. Save for the brief involvement with GABRIELA’s mass politics in the 1980s, feminist politics is yet a largely unexplored political terrain among Moro women activists of Mindanao.

<sup>3</sup> In Mindanao, current activist politics now debunks statism and class struggle and has dropped “national liberation” from its agenda, settling for more amorphous terms like peace, multiculturalism, and the like.

<sup>4</sup> The massing of millions of people at the Epifanio delos Santos Avenue (EDSA) in 1986 demanding the ouster of Marcos.

<sup>5</sup> GABRIELA (General Assembly Binding Women for Reforms, Integrity, Equality, Leadership, and Action), named after Gabriela Silang, a historical figure who led troops into battles during the war against Spanish colonization.

<sup>6</sup> International funding agencies’ disastrous influence on activist politics has been best described by Bayan International: “Using their clout as conduit of resources, they began to discourage NGO involvement in political activities and pushed for socio-economic and environmental projects that followed a dictum of self-help and sustainability for local communities. NGO projects and programs had to assume a pluralist or non-political character to win the nod of funding agency (FA) approval. It became such that some NGOs had to reorient their mission and vision to conform to FA demands or else face the consequence of folding up as an institution.” (<http://www.etext.org/Politics/MIM/fil/ngo.html>)

<sup>7</sup> I am indebted to Luz Sevidal-Castro for clarifying further my arguments on government’s inadequacy as a gender agency. Sevidal-Castro avers that government is the culprit in the hijacking of gender as a feminist construct, since government’s main function is order and stability, while feminism is disestablishment, conflict, power contestation. (Interview with the author, 15 September 2004, at Iligan City.)

<sup>8</sup> Programs like children’s rights, environmental protection work, literacy, peace advocacy, etc. which in practice were more successful in mobilizing female labor than improving their gender status and entitlements.

<sup>9</sup> The original members of Abu Sayaf were idealistic youth disillusioned with Nur Misuari’s surrender to the government. This group was, however, later on infiltrated by the military and deteriorated into a terrorist group as its core members were killed in battle or assassinated.

<sup>10</sup> A key player in Mindanao’s civil society movement is the Catholic Church which organized the Bishops-Ulama Forum (BUF). An important aspect of BUF’s activities is the dialogue for peace at the parish and community level. Later, the Lumads were included in the forum to reflect the tri-people (Moro, Christian settler, and Lumad) character of Mindanao population.

" Law enacted in 1977 recognizing indigenous people's cultural integrity and right to self-governance and the management of their ancestral lands. IPRA is perceived by critical sectors in Mindanao NGOs as an erroneous response to an otherwise contemporary land problem.

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