

THE FIGHT AGAINST VIOLENCE ON WOMEN IN THE PHILIPPINES: THE GABRIELA EXPERIENCE

Violence is a stark reality that women have to struggle with everyday. For Filipino women who grapple with poverty in a feudal patriarchal context, the challenge is greater.

Indeed, the intensifying economic and political crisis in the country is increasing vulnerability of women to gender-based violence. Gruesome stories of violence committed on women and children have become common fare in TV, radio and print media. These are not only individual cases of violence; many involve groups of women such as the cases of sex trafficking, cybersex, pornography, and prostitution.

For this reason, GABRIELA, a national alliance of women's organization in the Philippines, has considered the issue of VAW as one of its core gender-based campaign for 21 years. In the last five years alone, we launched two campaigns on VAW-- the VOW vs. VAW (Voices of Women vs. Violence Against Women) in 2002 and the Blow-a-Whistle Campaign in 2003. VOW vs. VAW brought the issue of VAW to schools and communities while the he Blow-a-Whistle aims not only to educate women but also to "arm" them with a whistle which they can use when in danger to attract the attention of other people. This is also an encouragement for women victims to break the "culture of silence". This campaign is effective in urban poor communities where domestic violence is most prevalent.

THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS AGAINST WOMEN

GABRIELA has pinpointed Seven Deadly Sins committed against women as the focus of its campaigns. These are:

1. SEX TRAFFICKING AND PROSTITUTION

Twenty-one years of helping victims of sex trafficking has given us a better understanding of how this happens. One way is through the mail-order-bride system which despite the enactment of an Anti-Mail-Order Bride (MOB) Law in 1990, continues to thrive basically as poverty in the country worsens. The advent of the Internet has led to unrestricted advertising for the MOBs under the guise of "Dating Service". According to estimates, there are from 50,000 to 100,000 Filipinas listed in such Internet sites. In fact 70% of South East Asian women listed are Filipinas thus making the Philippines one of the world's hotspots for MOBs. A report of the US Immigration says that in the last decade, marriages between Filipinas and American men have doubled to 6,000 annually.

This industry had branched out to the operation of cybersex sites where most of the victims are minors. A popular website even claims that the Philippines has a listing of 212,257 potential sex partners, the second largest in the 35 countries in Asia. India has the largest listing.

To fight sex trafficking, GABRIELA launched the Purple Rose Campaign Against Sex Trafficking of Filipino Women and Children in 1999. Through the Purple Rose, we have created venues to raise awareness and galvanize opposition against the use of sex trade and forced labor as a means of propping up the collapsing economy. This campaign also served as a channel by which our chapters abroad and our international women networks provides support to trafficked Filipino women. One of our campaign's victories is the passage of the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2003 with Liza Maza, GABRIELA Women's Partylist representative in the Philippine Congress, as a co-sponsor.

At present, GABRIELA, through its party list Gabriela Women's Party, is at the forefront of proposing a special law on prostitution in Congress.

2. DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence or abuse of women in intimate relationships remains as a major concern. From January 2002 to August 2005, 61% (532) of the 872 VAW cases handled by GABRIELA were on domestic violence. This trend is supported by statistics from the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and the Philippine National Police (PNP) wherein 47% of VAW cases received from year 2001 to 2004 were on domestic violence.

GABRIELA has played a decisive role in bringing light to the issue of domestic violence and shifting it from private to public realm.

The recent passage of the Anti-violence against Women and Children Act of 2004 last March 8, 2004 is a concrete gain won through persistent mass campaigns. GABRIELA has found this law useful in giving protection to women victims though there is still a difficulty in its implementation due to gender sensitivity of law enforcers from the village to the police level. This is why GABRIELA community organizers are now reaching out to local executives for dialogues and joint activities to popularize this law.

Another bill filed through our women partylist in Congress is that on Divorce which was crafted to give Filipino women a legal option to get out of abusive marriages that is less expensive than an annulment of marriage.

3. RAPE, INCEST AND SEXUAL ABUSE

In 1994, there was one woman raped every six hours; in 2004, the figure is already one incident of rape every 2 hours, a tripling of reported cases in a decade. Rape or sexual abuse was 14% (125 cases) of the total number of VAW cases handled by GABRIELA.

GABRIELA is also in strong support of the campaign for justice of Lila-Pilipina, an organization of survivors of sexual slavery during the World War II. These women are the living testimonies of how rape of women and minors is used as a tool of war of aggression.

4. SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Sexual Harassment highlights the unequal relationship of men and women. It can happen inside the classroom, in the office, factory or community. Our present Anti-Sexual Harassment Law recognizes only cases perpetrated by men who use power over women to incur sexual favors in return for something. This was the case of an advertising executive in a big telecommunications firm who was sexually harassed by one of the company's executive-owners. GABRIELA helped her file a case against her harasser who died before the case was heard.

But GABRIELA has also handled cases where the perpetrator is not necessarily the in a higher position of authority such as the case of a singer-actress elected governor, who was sexually harassed by a member of her Provincial Board. She had no recourse in the law since the perpetrator was of a lower position than her.

Thus our ongoing campaign for the amendment of the Anti-Sexual Harassment Law. Also, two of our member organizations, the GABRIELA Network of Professionals and GABRIELA-Youth have a continuing campaign against sexual harassment in workplaces and schools.

5. VIOLENCE AS A RESULT OF POLITICAL REPRESSION

Violence against women is still used today to torture women-political prisoners. Military men used this during Martial Law and though the number of women victims has diminished, they still use this form of torture today.

We are presently campaigning for the release of a 60-year old woman peace advocate from Mindanao who was abducted and sexually molested by her military captors. We have already filed a complaint against her military perpetrators with the Commission on Human Rights. Three years ago, our chapter in the Cordillera region also launched a campaign against military rape after documenting several women abused by military men and police.

Women now also become direct targets of political violence through summary execution. Since the regime of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, 16 women have become victims of summary executions by suspected military men or their assets.

GABRIELA continues its struggle against the intensified fascism and militarist tendencies of the Armed Forces of the Philippines that lead to violence, especially against women. The group has formed an alliance VOW for Civil Liberties (Voices of Women for Civil Liberties), which is campaigning against the intensifying political repression in the country.

6. *SEXUAL DISCRIMINATION AND EXPLOITATION*

Even as more women are becoming members of the labor force in the rural and urban areas, sexual discrimination and exploitation remain rampant. Wages of women in agriculture remain 14% below that of their male counterpart. In instances where family labor is employed, women and children labor remain uncompensated. Some factories require even single female job applicants to take pregnancy test. Single women are also preferred over married ones.

The most recent campaign of GABRIELA against sexual discrimination and exploitation was against a liquor company which used the tag line: *Nakatikim ka na ba ng Quince Anos?*(translation: *Have you tasted a 15 year-old?*) in advertising their 15-year old brandy. The campaign gained widespread public support, the liquor company and its advertising agency were forced to dismantle their huge billboards and pull-out its radio commercial.

7. *LIMITED ACCESS TO REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH CARE*

GABRIELA considers women's limited access to reproductive health care as a form of violence. The increasing number of maternal death (maternal mortality: 10 women everyday) resulting from childbirth unattended by medical personnel is a very big concern. This can be attributed to the low health budget allocation, which is the reason why many government hospitals (mostly district and community hospitals) are forced to close down and the continuing exodus of health workers (especially doctors and nurses) abroad because they continue to receive low compensation.

Reproductive health care in the country is in a very sorry state. In 2003, only 60% of pregnant Filipino women received professional health care and only 38% of them delivered in clinics or hospitals, according to National Demographic and Health Survey. There is indeed a lack of maternal care services in the country that is why our party list in Congress, together with other legislators are pushing for a Comprehensive National Policy on Reproductive Health which include services for population management.

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

GABRIELA continues to wage anti-VAW campaigns while servicing victims of VAW.

In the past five years alone, we have launched the VOW vs. VAW (Voices of Women vs. Violence Against Women) in 2002 and the Blow-a-Whistle Campaign in 2003. Through the VOW vs. VAW GABRIELA brought the issue of VAW to different schools and communities where women were taught about asserting their rights.

The Blow-a-Whistle Campaign aims not only to educate women but also to "arm" them against violence through a whistle that they could use in times of danger to draw attention and help from others. This campaign is also meant to teach women how break the "culture of silence" surrounding cases of VAW.

Service to VAW victims and survivor is also ongoing. Aside from individual psychosocial counseling, home visits, providing shelter and legal assistance to the victims, GABRIELA also helped women survivors of violence organize into the GABRIELA Circle of Friends (GCF). With more than 50 active member/survivors, GCF is now providing support to each other and to other VAW victims and survivors in the form of therapy sessions and moral support during court hearings.

This combination of campaigns and services has led to the increase in the number of women seeking our help in the past four years.

But primary barrier in the advancement towards women's rights and gender equality is still the feudal-patriarchal system that permeates Philippine society. Unless changes occur in the economic and political system in the country these 7 deadly sins would not end. Thus, we also campaign against economic violence by joining the struggle for jobs, higher wages and increased government budget for social services, against increasing prices of basic commodities including oil and other economic issues exacerbating the poverty. We have likewise made a firm stand against political repression and corruption in law enforcement and judicial agencies that often make life for VAW victims more difficult.

Indeed, in our fight against different forms of violence against women, we also fight for the change of the feudal patriarchal system that pervades in the Philippines today. And as long as the semi-feudal economy keep most of our people in bondage and poverty, many more women and children will suffer. ###