

## **PHILIPPINE COUNTRY REPORT - WORLD WOMEN'S CONFERENCE 2**

### **RAGING AGAINST NEOLIBERAL POLICIES: The Situation of Filipino Women**

From Luzon to Mindanao, women's demands for jobs, higher wages, land, social services and lower prices reverberate.

Filipino women have shown anger, contempt at the US-Aquino regime's "tuwid na daan" (righteous/straight path) which for the last six year has further mired them in poverty, abuse, and want. Year round, they have raged against the regime's anti-people, anti-women policies and inutility in the face of disasters and emergencies, holding community meetings, pickets and marches, even facing-off the police and military in the exercise of their right to freedom of expression and assembly.

Indeed, Filipino women have much to gripe about and confront their present government with. Aquino, in his utter puppetry to U.S. Imperialism, is further institutionalizing neoliberal policies by pushing for the passage of laws that "conform to WTO rulings and dictates". The latest of such is the Cabotage Law of 2015 which allows the free entry and movement of foreign cargo vessels between ports within the Philippine archipelago thus removing the advantage of local cargo ships which were often used by foreign exporters to bring their goods to the various inland ports. Under President Aquino, neoliberalism has gone at a faster rate. And so the women rage and rage against:

#### ***Chronic Job Insecurity***

The aim of neoliberal policy is to depress wages, remove workers' rights, destroy unions, "curb the power of labor" in order to bring in more profits to capitalists thus negating the rights which workers, including women, have won and fought for with their very lives.

Unemployment in the Philippines is at a record high of 7.4%, the worst in Asia. This can even go more than 20% if discouraged and underemployed workers are taken into account. Neoliberalism has made sure of the rarity of jobs to pave the way for passive acceptance by job seekers of highly exploitative labor arrangements. Most affected by job insecurity are women who are found in the most precarious jobs. Forty-three percent of the estimated 15.3million women workers are either own account workers (27%) or unpaid family labor (16%) where work is irregular and income is not assured.

Added to this number are the 51% of the Filipino women who are excluded from the labor force count because they said that they were housewives though they have created their own jobs selling cooked food in front of their homes or in offices, doing other people's nails in homes and along street corners, being on call for home massages, acting as barkers to jeepney drivers, vending whatever they could afford to buy and sell. Half of the wage and salary workers who compose 55% of women workers are laborers and unskilled workers or service workers, the most lowly paid insecure jobs. Their daily pay is three to four and a half Euros per day. Ten percent of wage and salary workers are employed in private households as domestic workers, care givers, child minders, laundresses, etc., work that make them more vulnerable to violence and exploitation.

Women workers are likewise found in “industries” like wholesale and retail trade, manufacturing , and services where contractual work in the form of seasonal or temporary jobs, piecework and flexible work arrangements are rampant.

More than half of establishments in the country particularly those found in export processing zones do not follow labor standards including payment of minimum wage. Seventy percent of workers in special zones are women. Under Aquino, many accidents and fires in workplaces have been recorded. This includes the fires in Novo Jeans, Asia Micro Tech at Kentex factories where most workers and casualties were women. And government has done nothing give justice to families of those who have died.

The highest minimum wage of 9 euros in Metro-Manila (MW in the country has been regionalized and thus differ from place to place) is less than half of the country’s living wage of 20.5 euros. Wages are still being depressed by the introduction of the two-tiered wage system where floor wages are set below the minimum and any increase is based on productivity which the capitalist determines. Flexible and contractual labor arrangements coupled with the continuous union busting and harassment of unionists make organizing work among workers difficult. Thus membership in workers in unions is a low 10%. Among women workers it is even lower at 7%.

Lack of work opportunities in the country have driven many Filipinos to work abroad. About 60% of the almost 6,000 Filipinos who daily leave the country for overseas employment are women. And even outside the country, they work as domestic helpers or entertainers, jobs that expose them to violence and abuse. Sexual and/or physical abuse has become the lot of many overseas Filipino women workers.

The Women Committee of KMU – May First Movement- the biggest labor center in the country are thus calling for an end to contractual labor, for higher minimum wage, for national industrialization.

### ***Persistent Landlessness, Hunger in Rural Areas***

Under neoliberalism, more farmers have become landless. From 70%, landlessness has now grown to 90% of the farming population. This despite the 26 years of the government’s Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) and CARPER, its extension.

For neoliberalism is stoking the capitalist elite’s hunger for land and resources and the bogus land reform program of the government is sating this hunger by legalizing massive landgrabbing through land use conversion. Thus, tens of thousands of peasants are being evicted from the land that their ancestors have tilled for centuries as their Certificate of Landownership Awards (CLOAs), Emancipation Patents (EPs) and Certificates of Land Transfer (CLTs) are cancelled en masse to give way to Public and Private Partnership (PPP) projects such as the Clark Green City project that covers 36,000 hectares of productive and abundant agricultural lands that will displace some 20,000 indigeneous people and farmer families in five towns of Pampanga, Central Luzon.

Liberalization in agriculture has led to massive food importation which has brought bankruptcy to many peasants and eventually higher food prices. Liberalization has turned the Philippines, a rice producing country, into one of the top four biggest rice importers in the world and pushed the price of rice to more than 100% of its original price in 2010.

It is the peasant women who bear the brunt of hunger and poverty brought about by neoliberal policies among the country’s food producers. They bear the double burden of housework while working in the field as unpaid family labor. But when the harvest is not enough, it is the women in peasant families who seek

employment to augment the family's income and/or to pay for the children's health services and education. They either end among those employed in private households as domestic helpers or as agricultural workers. Women are the majority of workers in fruit plantations and packaging plants where they are forced to work long hours to meet quotas during harvest season and are often subjected to sexual harassment because of their from early morning till dawn working hours. They likewise suffer from gender discrimination, such as getting lower wages than the men in an industry where wages are already very low. For example in Bukidnon, a province in Mindanao, male workers get 2 euros per day while female workers only receive 1,7 euros.

Thus the call of AMIHAN, the peasant women federation of the Philippines, for Genuine Land Reform, food security, and the junking of neoliberal policies in agriculture.

### ***Government Abandonment of Social Services***

As women and children's health deteriorates, the government response is to further abandon its responsibility for people's health.

Maternal mortality rate remains a high at 221 deaths per 100,000 livebirths. Four out of every 10 pregnant women suffer from anemia. For every maternal death, there are 20 neonatal, infant and child death. Twenty percent of children under 5 years of age are underweight while 32% are stunted. The Aquino government's response is to put public hospitals under public-private partnership (PPP), a clear adherence to neoliberal prescription. This will put the health and wellbeing of millions of Filipino women and children who are poor in the hands of private corporations who care only for profits.

Women were among those who actively opposed the privatization of more than 20 national government hospitals of which only four have been bidded out. Public pressure had forced the Dept of Health to make the assurance that these hospitals will retain its present personnel and continue its free services to the poor.

Half of the expenses for health care in this country is from out-pocket. Social insurance, e.g., Philhealth, pays only the 11%. The national government pays only 16%.

Women were also at forefront of the mass actions to stop the implementation of the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 or the K-12 program which will add two years to the current 10 years primary and secondary schooling of Filipino children. Among their objections are the increased expenses which they could ill afford, the absence of any clear curriculum, and that this is a neoliberal ploy. This program will gear the country's educational system to respond to the labor needs of labor importing countries and is in line with ASEAN integration which is also part of neoliberalism.

The other object of K-12 is the privatization and therefore the further commercialization of education. More than half of those entering senior high school, the additional two years, have to enroll in private schools since the DepEd is ill-prepared for the full implementation of the K-12 curriculum. The K-12 program is a bane to mothers but a boon to investors in private schools.

The Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT), Aquino's flagship program for poverty alleviation, is a dole out program that is endorsed by the IMF-WB (International Monetary Fund – World Bank) and patterned after programs already carried out in Latin American countries such as Mexico and Brazil. It does not provide any long term solution and is a mere palliative. It is not an alternative to providing jobs so people they can stand on their own two feet. And it is a burden to women who are charged with fulfilling certain conditions, ensuring their children's daily school attendance and bringing them to the public clinic for vaccinations and check-ups, in order to get the P1,400 monthly payments.

To gain from the CCT are the World Bank (WB) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) who loaned Euro 240 million for its implementation, the banks involved in its financial literacy program through mobile banking, and the various companies including multinational corporations involved in its micro-loan program.

The CCT not only encourages patronage politics and mendicancy, it is likewise open to corruption. More alarming is the use of the CCT in some areas to prevent women from joining militant organizations and/or participating in organized actions.

### ***Increasing Incidences of Violence Against Women and Children***

Reported incidences of violence against women and children (VAW/C) have gone up and will keep on increasing as long as there is poverty. Poor women and children are more vulnerable to abuse according to the National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS).

During the four year period of 2010-14, one woman or child was raped every 53 minutes and one woman or child was battered every 16 minutes. Seven out of 10 rape victims were children. And these are only those reported; many more VAW/C cases remain unreported.

Impunity still surrounds cases of VAW/C. Justice in the Philippines is slow and expensive and cases of VAW/C including rape seldom win because even in the judiciary, certain myths about VAW/C, e.g., that a woman's clothing or manner can provoke a man to sexual abuse, still lingers. And there is still a lot of victim-blaming. And of course, there is the fear and the guilt.

A number of law enforcers, whether the police or military, are guilty of committing VAW/C. Of the 58 rape cases brought to the services committee of GABRIELA since 2012, eight were perpetrated by men in uniform and half were gang rapes. Karapatan, the human rights group in the country, reported 10 cases of rape by soldiers from June 2010 to Nov. 2015. Most of the victims were minors and indigenous women. And none of the perpetrators have been punished. Thus, the shroud of silence envelops most VAW/C victims. The NDHS revealed that only 30% of VAW/C victims tell and ask that the abuse be stopped, 27% merely reveal their experience but do not ask help, and 38% remain mum.

### ***Repression as Answer to People's Protests***

People's protests are met with repressive measures by the US-Aquino regime. People's rallies and marches and workers's strikes and resistance from residents of areas up for demolition are brutally dispersed; leaders of mass organizations are put under surveillance, harassed and threatened via phone messages and even house "visits". Break-ins in offices of mass organizations, including that of Gabriela Women's Party, have been reported. Trumped-up charges are also filed against leaders of these organizations. Of the 555 political prisoners, 51 are women (as of Sept. 2015). Of the 238 extrajudicially killed under the US-Aquino regime, 23 are women. (from July 2012 to March 2015) There have also been enforced disappearances during the same period but none of them are women.

Now, OPLAN Bayanihan, the US-Aquino regime's anti-insurgency program, focus are the lumads (indigenous people of Mindanao) who have been actively opposing the entry of big, foreign mining firms and "development projects" into their ancestral lands. The schools which their tribes have set-up and managed for years without any government assistance are being closed, the teaching staff branded as members of the NPA, the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines. Their leaders have been killed. Traumatized by the killings and other military atrocities, many have fled their homes. And many of these evacuees are women and children.

### ***US Military Pivot to Asia – the other side of Neoliberalism***

The recent Supreme Court decision declaring as constitutional Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) between the US and the Philippine governments has strengthened the basis of the US military's stay in the Philippines. Though both governments are constantly denying it, the EDCA together with the VFA, which grants extra-territorial and extra-judicial rights to US servicemen visiting the Philippines for "military exercises" also known as *Balikatan*, means that now the US can now openly set-up its own bases anywhere in the country. Because despite denials from the US and Philippine government, the US military bases have stayed on usually hidden behind Philippine military bases. The EDCA just like the VFA makes a mockery of the anti-foreign bases provision in the Philippine constitution; it also direct attack on Philippine sovereignty. It is another open indicator of the puppetry of the Pres. Aquino to US imperialism.

The Philippines remain as an important component to the US Military Pivot to Asia. As in previous times, this is where it will launch its wars of aggression in Asia and other parts of the world, thus endangering the security of the Filipino people.

The EDCA, signed under BS Aquino's term, is yet another unequal agreement that could spawn increasing cases of violence against women and children. Before the removal of US bases in 1991, hundreds of sexual abuses by US soldiers were reported but remained unresolved.

According to the Center for Women's Resources (CWR), the red light districts of Subic and Angeles City, the R&R areas for the US servicemen before the US bases were booted out by the Philippine Senate in 1991, are being revitalized. It was also noted that in Angeles City, most women employed as waitresses, dancers, and entertainers came from the poor provinces of the country, many from Samar and Leyte, the provinces hard hit by superstorm Yolanda.

EDCA has injected new life into the country's sex trafficking trade. With the lack of jobs for women and deepening poverty in the country, these traffickers are bound to find many poor women vulnerable to deceit, illegal recruitment, and prostitution. Before the ratification of VFA in 1998, it was approximated that there were 400,000 victims of prostitution in the country. With the opening of ports to the United States for the joint military exercises, and the de facto military basing all over the country through the EDCA, women's groups such as GABRIELA had foreseen an increase on the number of prostituted women.

The 7% average GDP growth, the pride of BS Aquino has not made a difference to the workers, peasants, urban poor and the other poor sectors of Philippine society for whatever wealth generated has only gone to the pockets of those already rich, the main supporters of Aquino. Only 50 families or 0.00025% of the total 20.1 million Filipino families are profiting from this economic growth.

Six years of Aquino's puppetry to the US Imperialist has further widened the gap between the rich and the poor by worsening the already dire situation of 99% of the populace.

***And so.....***

In the Filipino women's hearts burn the flame of revolution; a flame passed on for more than four centuries by women who fought the Spanish colonizers, the US imperialist invader and the Japanese occupiers. And they will keep on fighting in the parliament of the streets and even in the countryside for nationalism and democracy towards socialism.