

## FOCUS ON FILIPINO RURAL WOMEN

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Filipino women carry the same burden as their sisters in the rest of the developing world. The conditions obtaining in a backward, dependent economy force most of them to live under conditions of poverty, inequality and justice. The doors of the opportunity and advancement are still closed to them, except for a few who belong to the upper classes.

The declaration of International Women's Year in 1975 focused more attention on their plight and provided more impetus to efforts aimed at attaining equality, development and peace, but the impact has neither been fully measured nor widely felt. If the general conclusion of the United Nations during the mid-decade conference in Copenhagen may be cited as applicable to developing countries like the Philippines, "many women are worse off today than they were five years ago, particularly those in rural and poorer urban areas." The deteriorating situation is attributed mainly to the "the current world economic crisis (which) has affected women seriously by increasing their unemployment and cutting back on essential services."<sup>1</sup>

The overwhelming majority of Filipino women are found in the countryside. The most recent demographic data showed that they were 14-million strong in 1975, comprising 67.5 percent of the total female population.<sup>2</sup> Many of them work in the fields with their men, aside from performing their traditional tasks inside the home. The burden is enough to make them grow old before their time. In rice and corn areas where 77 percent of females in agriculture are employed, women engage in transplanting, weeding, fertilization, harvesting and threshing. Other females in agriculture are found in coconut farming

(eight percent); in other crops, livestock and poultry production (almost seven percent), and sugarcane farming (four percent). The number of women engaged in farming is increasing rather than decreasing, going up to 59.7 percent in 1974 from 53.6 in 1965.<sup>3</sup>

The 1973 National Demographic Survey showed that 59 percent of employed rural women were farm workers and 18 percent were farmers and farm managers.<sup>4</sup> A recent study also pointed out that the bulk of female workshare in farm operations was provided by hired labor, with family labor contributing only 17 percent.<sup>5</sup> These indicate a marked trend in the countryside: the phenomenal increase in the ranks of the landless rural poor who generally find seasonal employment working for farmers with land to till and who manage to survive off-season by taking odd jobs. They are the lowest paid among the various industry groups. As one source reported, the average weekly cash earnings of fulltime female workers in agriculture in 1975 were P27.00, and of male workers, P40.00.<sup>6</sup> More recent data show that the average earnings for the second quarter of 1978 of female agricultural, animal husbandry and forestry workers, fishermen and hunters were P201 while those of their male counterparts were P657.<sup>7</sup>

### *Foreign exploitation*

The agrarian reform program and the pattern of export-oriented agro-industrialization being undertaken in the Philippines have sharpened the inequalities in the countryside at the same time that they have benefited foreign agri-business interests. For example, the Green Revolution technology purportedly designed to increase

agricultural productivity in the rice-growing areas created a huge market for the fertilizers, pesticides, tractors and other machinery being peddled by the transnational corporations based in the United States, Japan and Western Europe. The prices of these farm inputs rose by more than 400 percent during the last decade while the price of *palay* (rice grains) increased by less than 200 percent.<sup>8</sup> Thus, rice farmers who have land to till, which include those benefited by land reform, find themselves in a worse economic situation. Even if there is an increase in harvest, the bulk of it goes to production expenses. If the farmers themselves are hard put to make both ends meet, what more the farm workers who merely depend on the farmers for livelihood? Clearly, it is the transnational interests who benefit the most from the Green Revolution, along with former landlords who have become rural bankers, farm inputs dealers, tractor lenders, rice millers, and the like.

For female farm workers, the use of tractors and threshers is initially labor-displacing, thus having the added effect of worsening unemployment in their ranks.<sup>9</sup> A study prepared for the International Labour Office and based on the Indian experience further substantiates the aforementioned observation:

The impact of the Green Revolution on women may be seen as an intensification of the problems faced by a vast majority of the people of the Third World who are caught up in a process that stresses gains for the capitalist farmer or for commercial agriculture at the same time that it results in the undervaluation of human resources and the decline of egalitarian standards. The marginalization of rural women comes not only from their being drawn unknowingly into a social division of labour, and from the status of being "housewives," but also from the pauperization of their families as a result of the Green Revolution.

Agricultural production on commercial lines in the Green Revolution has not only

led to pauperization of small peasantry but also polarization between women and men. Marginality and low wages are prevalent among rural women throughout the northern region of the Green Revolution in India. Most of the manual and non-technological work is done by women, while men operate the new agricultural machines and control the inputs as well as the produce. Women's involvement in production is viewed as secondary to their reproductive role, and this is the basis of their marginality and subordinate character in production.<sup>10</sup>

There is another way by which foreign big business gains huge profits in Third World countries like the Philippines. They transfer their operations to these countries to take advantage of cheap labor, abundant raw materials, credit resources and ready markets. Del Monte phased out its production in Hawaii and concentrated on its Philippine subsidiary in Mindanao primarily because of the following reasons: "While Hawaiian plantation workers earn \$2.64 an hour, Del Monte pays its Philippine plantation workers 15 cents an hour. Hawaiian cannery workers get paid \$2.69 an hour compared to the 20 cents an hour Del Monte pays Philippine workers for the same job."<sup>11</sup> Foreign interests are strong not only in the pineapple industry but also in banana, meat processing, coconut products, and fisheries. They are in the country to produce comparatively cheap goods for the international export market, not to help provide the basic food requirements of the people. Thus, it is ironic that while 78 percent of Filipino pre-schoolers are malnourished, the country is exporting high-quality protein foods in the form of fish and shrimp to Japan and Western Europe.<sup>12</sup>

Foreign interests are also strong in the export-oriented garments industry which has also harnessed the labor of rural women. This is reflected in the 1973 National Demographic Survey where more than 17 percent of employed rural Filipinas were classified as dressmakers, sewers and embroiderers. This sector of working women are usually paid on

piece-rate basis and produce their output in their homes. They provide a ready supply of cheap labor which can be exploited when the demand is high (or when urban factory workers begin to make trouble by attempting to unionize) and which can be set aside without any form of obligation (such as separation pay) when the demand is low.<sup>13</sup>

Inequitable relations in international trade, whereby the rich capitalist countries pay low and often fluctuating prices for raw materials and other goods produced by the developing nations, have also severely affected the livelihood of Filipina rural workers and farmers in the sugar and coconut areas.

In the mid-1970s for example, the price of sugar in the world market crashed from an all-time high of US 65 cents to as low as US 7 cents per pound. Attempts to stabilize the price through an international sugar agreement were hamstrung by footdragging on the consumers' side, principally by the United States which buys 25 percent of all sugar traded in the world market. Since cost of production in the Philippines was then estimated between US 8 cents to US 12 cents per pound, the price bust had catastrophic effects, especially on the sugar workers. Many of them were laid off, were hired only twice or thrice a week, or were simply not paid their wages.<sup>14</sup>

In the coconut areas, producers are now suffering from the effects of the low prices of their products. There is a glut in the world market, a situation compounded by the competition posed by alternative products like palm oil. Today, the buying price of copra at the farm level is only half its former rate, thus depressing the income of coconut farmers and creating unemployment among the coconut workers who do the picking, gathering, piling, hauling and husking.

#### *Mass poverty*

Continuing foreign economic domination and the inequitable distribution of wealth

have bred mass impoverishment. An estimated 84 percent of Filipinos (35 million) are said to be on or below the poverty line,<sup>15</sup> meaning that they can no longer meet their basic needs: food, clothing, shelter, education, medical service. Most of these poor people are found in the countryside. USAID reports, based on 1971 data, that 69 percent of the population in rural areas, 39 percent in Manila, and 44 percent in other urban areas were below the poverty line. "Classified by main source of family income, the highest poverty incidence rates were found among those families relying mainly on farming (79 percent), fishing, forestry, hunting (77 percent) and agricultural wages and salaries (71 percent)."<sup>16</sup>

As researchers concluded from the 1976 Family Expenditure Survey of the National Census and Statistics Office:

The gap between income and expenditures appears to grow every year presumably as a result of inflationary pressures and other related factors. In 1971, average income of rural families was given at P2,818 while average expenditure was P3,474, which means a dissaving of P656. This dissaving figure rose to P798 in 1975 as average rural family income was recorded at P4,745 and average expenditures at P5,543.<sup>17</sup>

The situation must be much worse today. Official data show that between 1972 and 1981, consumer prices rose 225.5 percent. Recent newspaper reports reveal that the peso today, when measured against its purchasing power in 1972, is worth only around 31 centavos.<sup>18</sup>

The grinding poverty and hardship in the countryside has driven many rural women to seek their fortunes in the cities. A good number of them wind up as prostitutes catering to tourists, well-off Filipinos and American servicemen coming from the US bases.

### *Low attainment and opportunity*

Adverse socio-economic conditions in the countryside have placed rural women in a more disadvantaged position vis-a-vis their urban counterparts in terms of attainment and opportunity. Their literacy rate is lower, since 28 percent of them never went to school. From their ranks, only 17 percent finished elementary schooling, and only seven percent ever entered or completed high school.<sup>19</sup> Only 2.3 percent of all married women have had any vocational training;<sup>20</sup> the percentage is even less (1.1 percent) for married rural women. The median years of schooling of rural Filipinas is 4.6 years, lower than the 6.9 years of urban women. As one source stressed:

*Taken together, the proportion of rural women without schooling (28 percent or with some elementary education only (44 percent) totals 72 percent. As may usually happen, these women may go through their life with very limited opportunity either for continuing education or to practice very limited skills acquired in school. This implies that while those with some elementary education are counted among the literate, the extent to which this education is functional would be highly questionable.*<sup>21</sup>

A recent statement by no less than the former Minister of Education and Culture that 45 percent of Grade VI pupils cannot read and write lends even more credence to the above observation.<sup>22</sup>

Because of their low level of education and training as well as other reasons (e.g., less occupational opportunities, few household conveniences, higher birth rates and more conservative attitudes), rural women are less likely to be employed on a wage basis than urban women. Many of them are classified as unpaid family workers, yet their involvement in farm work is not given due recognition by government whose agricultural programs are geared towards men. Their participation in the cooperatives development program is minimal

(only ten percent of *samahang nayon* members are women.)<sup>23</sup> They do not share in decision-making as regards farm production, which is usually the prerogative of their husbands.<sup>24</sup>

### *Cultural reinforcement*

The low status of rural Filipinas is reinforced in the cultural sphere, where prevailing concepts still support the traditional notion that the home is still the only rightful place for women. This reality is shown by many studies. Gelia Castillo underscores the results of the 1973 National Demographic Survey which "indicates that only one-fourth of married women 15 years or over considered working as their main activity. Seventy percent regarded themselves mainly as housekeepers. Furthermore, 80 percent said that their main activity also takes place in the household." She adds: "we can say that the Filipina wife spends a median of more than 29 days a month and eight hours or more a day on her main activity."<sup>25</sup> Castillo also cites a 1976 study of the Philippine Social Science Council (PSSC) which came out with the finding that two-thirds of the respondent husband and wives agree on the following concept: almost any woman is better off in the home than in any job or profession.<sup>26</sup> The prevalence of the housewife mentality is reflected in the fact that 8,233,000 of the 13,294,000 Filipinas 15 years old and over are "not in the labor force," meaning that "they are not at work or without jobs and not wanting work or wanting work but not looking for work." The figure for rural women "not in the labor force" is 5,381,000 out of a total of 8,460,000.<sup>27</sup>

The sex-role differentiation starts from childhood when girls are urged to develop an interest in cooking, sewing, cleaning and other "feminine" preoccupations. In school, females take home economics while males take practical arts. The effect in later life is that women still do most of the housework. A study made by the U.P. Department of

Sociology showed that only 35 percent of Filipino husbands help in the household tasks regularly; 61 percent help under special circumstances; and four percent do not help at all.<sup>28</sup> For rural women, the finding is they "have a high time allocation/utilization for domestic chores or non-income home production functions, put against a low income-earning time devoted to on-farm production activities." In some areas, men do share in the housework, specifically in marketing and housecleaning, and shoulder the heavier tasks, such as fetching water, gathering/chopping firewood, gardening, house repair and maintenance. However, females do most of the cooking, preparation of food, laundry, ironing and sewing, generally spend more time on household chores.<sup>29</sup> Conservative religious elements likewise support the old line by preaching that women should be meek, humble and passive; that they should obey their fathers, husband and brothers, and that their end-all and be-all is marriage and motherhood. This feudal conception of the inferiority of the female sex was inculcated by three centuries of Spanish colonization.

Because of her cultural conditioning, the Filipina tends to view her world solely in terms of home and family. She sacrifices her own opportunities for advancement in order to give way to her husband or her children's personal development. This kind of attitude expectedly forms an obstacle to her active and meaningful participation in the conduct of social life and in the improvement of her own situation. In a sense therefore, she seals her own bondage.

A recent study on the role of women in rural development had the following observations regarding the prevailing cultural values: "It was almost categorical that the women have to operate around the home. . . Almost equally categorical was the reaffirmation of the women's basic role as a wife and mother." One effect of these values was that "The type of programmes the

women were involved in were greatly determined by what the agencies had to offer and these were very traditional in outlook, such as home management technology, nutrition, health and environmental sanitation, mothers' class, to name a few." In addition, "Participation of the women in terms of holding leadership positions in mixed organizations for both men and women was very low." . . . "Almost everybody wishes they had more say in community affairs/activities, implying they were being denied the chance to do so."<sup>30</sup>

### *Some progress*

It is in the realm of increasing the awareness and capabilities of rural women that some progress has been made since the declaration of International Women's Year.

Results have been most noticeable in the barangays which are the basic political units at the grassroots level. Barangay meetings are said to be attended by members who are 50 percent women. There are reports that 70 percent of the volunteers in Project Compassion (an integrated program involving backyard gardening, nutrition, family planning and welfare) are women.<sup>31</sup>

The increasing emphasis on nonformal education by government agencies and by non-governmental organizations has also helped to upgrade the basic knowledge and skills of rural women. More than half of the 728,803 graduates of the nonformal education courses conducted by the Ministry of Education and Culture as well as by the private sector were female.<sup>32</sup>

The *Balikatan sa Kaunlaran* (Cooperation for Development) movement spearheaded by the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women is notable for focusing the energies of its more than one million registered members on five important concerns: care for children, concern for environment, conservation, consumer

protection and commitment to justice.

There are many governmental and non-governmental agencies working with rural women, including the Katipunan ng Bagong Pilipina, the Civic Assembly of Women in the Philippines, the Young Women's Christian Association, the Philippine Business for Social Progress, the International Institutè for Rural Reconstruction, the Rural Improvement Clubs and the Kapisanan ng Kababaihan sa Pilipinas. From available literature,<sup>33</sup> however, it is possible to discern that many of these organizations concentrate on income-generating, nutrition and other welfare-oriented projects on the community level.

All these efforts are worthwhile but given the magnitude of the problems confronting rural women, they are never enough.

#### *What is to be done*

If the participation of rural women in development is to be a viable aim towards the improvement of the nation, the socioeconomic context in which it will operate has to be analyzed, and a realistic program has to be made in order to clear the path towards the success of such an aim. Certain socio-economic conditions — e.g., exploitation and domination by global corporations, big local agribusiness firms, handicraft exporters, farm inputs dealers, landlords who have turned capitalists etc. — which greatly affect rural life are hardly even perceived by rural women while they are their worst victims. More often than not, the majority of rural Filipinas will attribute hunger, economic difficulties and death to fate or the supernatural. This is why continuing political education, together with literacy and other training programs, is necessary to explain to the rural women the historical and present roots of their dilemma and how they can solve this together with other sectors.

It is in this area where the Katipunan ng Bagong Pilipina (KBP) distinguishes itself as a

non-governmental organization. With a membership of 18,000, mainly rural women, it devotes a lot of time and effort on seminars, study meetings, literacy and other mass campaigns with political content, over and above involvement in community services and projects. Such campaigns include those for the establishment of a new national economic order based on the principles of the new international economic order, for the dismantling of US military bases in the Philippines, and for peace and disarmament. Consumerism, which can serve as a defense against the reckless profit-making activities of the global firms, is also one area where the KBP is quite active.

The primary programmed activity of the KBP is an educational drive aimed at a step-by-step training of rural women, from the level of no particular qualifications to progressively more responsible roles in organizational and community affairs. This educational drive is broken down into a series of study meetings and seminars on reading materials arranged into kits of different levels: Level I, on how to be a good organizer; Level II, on how to be a good homemaker as well as community leader; and Level III, on how to be an effective officer of the organization. Methods employed include role-playing, case studies, reading and writing assignments, skits, audio-visual presentation and speech-making.

In all its training programs and mass campaigns, the KBP has extensively used the national language. It has translated a lot of materials originally written in English which would otherwise not be understood by the masses. In this way, it is progressively raising the consciousness and the capability of the rural women, and indirectly, the rural people as a whole.

The KBP believes that while it is important to raise the income of rural families and in particular of rural women, awareness of the dynamics behind economic activities and political action against negative factors — such

as the hold of the transnational corporations on the industries that produce the commodities needed by the rural population for livelihood and daily living — are just as important. Raising the buying power of the rural masses will not solve the problem of rising prices over which they have so far no control. Socioeconomic income-generating projects are a valuable means of cultivating the abilities and harnessing the potentials of rural women, but these are not enough to negate the fundamental condition of mass poverty and deprivation.

A primary aim, as one source argues, should be democratic participation — “Involvement of the women in the planning process other than just being passive implementors would go a long way in solving the problems like irrelevancy.” Another important point is this: “There is a need to make women aware of their role not only in the home and barrio, but also at the national level.”<sup>34</sup>

Thus, it is imperative that rural Filipinas look at their problems in relation to the conditions of the larger society and strive to remove the fetters which hinder not only their

own development as women but also that of their country as a whole. They should cooperate with other sectors and organizations having the same goals, not only on the community but also on the national and international level. They should understand and support the UN Declaration on the New International Economic Order (NIEO) which states that the removal of the remaining vestiges of colonialism and neocolonialism is a prerequisite for development; hence, they should take part in a broad movement for national independence and social progress, which are inseparable aims.

They should work hard, together with others, to secure not only for their children but also for their people, the most fundamental of human rights: the right to life, food, clothing, shelter, education, health and equal opportunity. Improving the quality of life, meeting the basic needs of all through social awareness and democratic participation — this is the real meaning of development and this is the only sense by which the hundreds of millions of rural women all over the world, including the 14 million Filipinas in the Philippine countryside, can understand the term.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Women 1980*, booklet issued by the United Nations Division for Economic and Social Information during the World Conference of the United Nations on the Decade for Women, Copenhagen, Denmark, July 14-30, 1980, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Review and Appraisal of Progress Made in Attaining the Objectives of the United Nations Decade for Women*, prepared by the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women, 1979, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Gelia T. Castillo, *Beyond Manila, Philippine Rural Problems in Perspective*, Vol. 2, (College, Laguna: University of the Philippines at Los Baños, December 1977), p. 528.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Isabel Rojas Aleta, *et al.*, *A Profile of*

*Filipino Women* (Manila: Philippine Business for Social Progress, 1977) p. 207.

<sup>5</sup> Emmanuel S. Santiago, *Women in Agriculture: A Social Accounting of Female Workshare*. Women in Development Project Special Studies (Quezon City: Institute of Philippine Culture, Ateneo de Manila University, 1980) p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> Aleta *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

<sup>7</sup> National Census and Statistics Office, *Integrated Survey of Households Bulletin*, Series No. 49 (First and Second Quarters 1978) Table 7, pp. 53-54.

<sup>8</sup> “Anim na Resolusyon, Pinagtibay,” I,1, *Sambisig* (Manila: Rural Workers' Office, Ministry of Labor, May 1, 1979).

For a more extensive discussion see Rene E. Ofreneo, *Capitalism in Philippine Agriculture* (Quezon City: Foundation for Nationalist Studies, 1980).

<sup>9</sup>Santiago, *op cit.*

<sup>10</sup>Govind Kelkar, *The Impact of the Green Revolution on Women's Work Participation and Sex Roles*, paper prepared for the International Labour Office Tripartite Asian Regional Seminar, Rural Development and Women, Mahabaléshwar, India, 6-11 April 1981, p. 107.

<sup>11</sup>US Congressional Record 20231, November 9, 1973.

<sup>12</sup>Renato Constantino, *The Nationalist Alternative* (Quezon City: Foundation for Nationalist Studies, 1979), pp. 45-47.

<sup>13</sup>Enrico Paglaban, "Philippines: Workers in the Export Industry," *Pacific Research* 3 & 4 (March - June 1978): 7-8.

<sup>14</sup>Ofreneo, *op cit.*, pp. 97-102.

<sup>15</sup>"The Meaning of Poor," *Social Development News* (October-December 1978) cited in Constantino, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>16</sup>US Agency for International Development Field Mission, *Philippines: Country Development Strategy FY 1982*, January 1980, Annex A, pp. 1-3.

<sup>17</sup>Lorna Makil and Patricia Fermin, *Identifying the Landless Rural Workers: A Documentary Survey* (Quezon City: Institute of Philippine Culture, Ateneo de Manila University, 1978), p. 50.

<sup>18</sup>National Census and Statistics Office, cited in *Business Day* (June 20, 1981).

<sup>19</sup>Aleta *et al.*, *op.cit.* pp. 202-203.

<sup>20</sup>Gelia T. Castillo, *The Filipino Women as Manpower; The Image and Empirical Reality*,

University of the Philippines at Los Baños, 1976, p. 217.

<sup>21</sup>Aleta *et al.*, *op.cit.*, p. 208.

<sup>22</sup>"The Case for Reading: A Socio-Political Perspective," *U.P. Perspectives* (March 1980), p. 9.

<sup>23</sup>Castillo, *Beyond Manila*, p. 554.

<sup>24</sup>Santiago, *op.cit.*, p. 71.

<sup>25</sup>Castillo, *Beyond Manila*, pp. 545-547.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 567.

<sup>27</sup>National Census and Statistics Office, *Integrated Survey of Households Bulletin, op cit.*, Table 1, p. 33.

<sup>28</sup>Cynthia Banzon Bautista, "Women in Marriage," in *Stereotype, Status and Satisfaction: The Filipina Among Filipinos*, Social Research Laboratory, Department of Sociology, University of the Philippines, July 1977, pp. 2-3 cited in Castillo, *Beyond Manila, op.cit.*, pp. 74-76.

<sup>29</sup>Santiago, *op.cit.*, p. 61.

<sup>30</sup>Restituta Birungi Nyamutale, *The Role of Women in Rural Development - Nueva Ecija, Philippines*, masteral thesis presented to the University of the Philippines Institute of Social Work and Community Development, October 1978, pp. 74-76.

<sup>31</sup>"Review and Appraisal of Progress Made in Attaining the Objectives of the United Nations Decade for Women," *op. cit.*, p. 29.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>Review and Appraisal of Progress Made in Attaining the Objectives of the United Nations Decade for Women, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-15; Aleta *et al.*, *op cit.*, pp. 263-286.

<sup>34</sup>Nyamutale, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-77.