

# Women Organizing

## The Philippines: Prostitutes Unite

A massive U.S. presence in the Philippines has spawned a huge prostitution industry, even though prostitution is technically illegal. Despite the fact that the industry is thriving, the women working as prostitutes live a precarious existence, often trapped in a circle of poverty while bar-owners get rich.

In a new center called BUKLOD women are gathering together to improve their lives through various activities and programs. These include health education, child care, seminars and consultations between the women and outsiders interested in learning about the reality of their lives. While the long term goal of all at BUKLOD is to end prostitution, they believe that they deserve to be recognized as human beings with strengths, needs

and rights - even if for the time being they have no option but to work as prostitutes.

Pearlie, in a tight-fitting sequined dress, was all ready to go to the Mardi Gras celebration in the heart of Olangapo's red light district when she consented to this FLIGHTS interview. She said she still had some time to spare before assuming her duties at the BUKLOD booth where she and her co-workers were selling handicrafts and clothes to carnival goers. Pearlie pointed out that since it was carnival time, many prostitutes would be out in the streets.

Pearlie was one of the first prostitutes to join the newly organized BUKLOD Center for women in 1987. Prior to this, she was a restaurant waitress and club entertainer in Olongapo for six years. She became a BUKLOD organizer in February 1988, after going through an intensive three-month training with the help of a community organizer.

When asked what made her devote all her time to organizing prostitutes, Pearlie said she believes it is only through mutual help and collective action that the prostitutes can contend with their daily problems and eventually rise above their particular oppression and exploitation as sex workers. Towards this end she sees education and skills training as being crucial in enabling the women see other



possibilities in life and expand the choices they can make.

"Organizing prostitutes, even for myself who is an ex-prostitute, is extremely difficult" remarked Pearlie. The prostitutes are literally holed up in the bars every night, and the only way to get access to them is by paying their bar fines, (the amount of money paid by a customer to the bar to take a women out), which is what BUKLOD has been doing to get the women to attend seminars and training sessions. Since unescorted women are not allowed inside the bars, she usually tags along with male friends. At times, bar owners and security men who recognize her as an organizer are outright rude and intimidating. She is already banned from entering two bars where the guards have been instructed to drag her out if she insists on entering.

Inside the bar, she waits it out until some of the women are free to talk with her. This is to make sure that she does not get in the way of their work when they are serving or sitting with customers. She usually starts her conversation with the women by introducing herself as a former bar worker who now works for a women's center. She then explains BUKLOD's services to prostitutes, such as night care for their children, health education, and skills training for supplemental or alternative means of livelihood. Of these, the night care service arouses the interest of the women the most because many of them are, in fact, single or abandoned mothers of both Amerasian and Filipino children.

It is not unusual for her to pay repeated visits to the women at a particular bar, or if the women have moved, at several bars for a number of months. As Pearlie revealed, "It takes time to convince them that I am truly their friend, and a lot more time to make them appreciate the work that we do." After a while, one or two of the women decide to become part of

SIKKAT, the prostitutes group being supported by BUKLOD Center. This always makes Pearlie feel that all the effort was worthwhile.

Up to January 1988, she continued to work in a bar while she did organizing work for BUKLOD; she was kicked out when the manager found out about her BUKLOD affiliation. He was able to rally the bar women behind his move by telling them that Pearlie was competing with them for business when she already earns as an organizer. Moreover, he accused her of being an activist who was out to destroy their source of survival.

This year, she re-applied and was accepted into another establishment, but quit shortly after. Pearlie explained, "It has become extremely difficult for me to re-enter the life of a sex worker. Staying in the bar where I have to serve and please American soldiers eats up my time. There is so much I want to talk about and do with my sisters." On further reflection, however, she said that there is a real advantage for organizing work if she were to become a bar woman again.

Pearlie's work with the prostitutes has not only enlightened her more about the grinding and heart-rending lives of her sisters in the bars of Olongapo, it has also led her to see how every person's life options are to a large extent determined by their location in society. "I became a prostitute, not because I wanted to, but because I was forced into it by poverty and lack of opportunities. It was the hope of my elder brother for me to marry an American serviceman so he brought me here to Olongapo and offered me to a bar. He believed this was my only way out of poverty. Many of my sisters who come here from poor places hold on to the same shattered dream."

"People think prostitution is an easy job. Nothing can be further from the truth. It is not easy to act coy and cheerful when you

are feeling tired and depressed; for your underfed and battered body to be used every night; or to face the grim reality of rejection every morning. Every day I meet women who come to me for food or comfort, or both. How can our lives be easy? As I always say during orientations, prostitutes are the most exploited and oppressed workers on this planet!"

She continued, "The women I talk with say they are tired of the work, of being commodified, but cannot find a way out. Just like me, they dream of retiring someday in a small house of their own, surrounded by their children. Perhaps, there is also a good husband around. Yet we know that unless our country is moved out of poverty and injustices, these dreams remain impossible to reach."

Pearlie is active in the anti-bases campaign and is a familiar speaker during symposia and fora on the issue within and outside Olongapo. According to her, "I guess I have always been an anti-base advocate because I really never liked selling my body to American soldiers." She recounted how, during the Marcos regime when she was still a bar woman, she would sign up her name for a pro-bases rally organized by the bars and local government, yet not show up. "I had to sign up to hold on to my job," she added.

She readily admitted, however, that many bar women who remain uninformed about the dangers posed by the bases believe that these should remain. She pointed out the need for more education among the women, as well as opportunities for them to interact with women of the other sectors in order to broaden their perspective on the issue.

In the course of her work as an activist organizer, Pearlie has met many women who spoke about feminism. She revealed having had an initial suspicion about those feminists whom she thought were "anti-men", a notion that did not easily go away.

However, when she attended the National Conference and Festival on Women in February this year where she heard other Filipino women speak about feminism, she became convinced that "it was not a bad thing after all."

She then described feminism as the struggle of women for equal rights with men. Nowadays, she is proud to be known as a feminist. She ended the interview by saying, "If I were not a feminist, I would not be doing what I am doing among my sisters in the bars of Olongapo."

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