'Learning to use the computer is a political act'
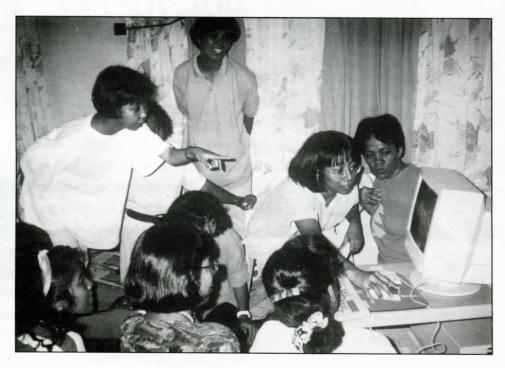## – Joni Rau

By BELINDA U. CALAGUAS

Why do we need to learn how to operate a computer? For the 16 women who attended Isis Manila's first basic computer literacy course held April 3, that question was not just rhetorical. Some of them have long resisted learning computer operations until they found out that they were the only ones left in the office who did not know how to use one.

The answer, emphatically explained by the resource speaker, is that learning computer operations is "a political act." It is "to gain control over the information" fed and peddled around the world by those who have monopolized it these past decades.

The information industry has become faster, bigger and more powerful due to the use of modern processing systems. People's organizations and alternative information centers, which once revolted against automation and sophisticated machines, are now just catching up with the hardware and software to make their ideas, voices and presences felt in the world.

The resource speaker was not just selling a line. Neither was she the demagogue ranting and raving against "the system." Joni Rau, an Isis International associate, worked with computers for 17 years in a company that subcontracted work for the United States' National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

After leaving the company, Ms. Rau continued to conduct computer literacy courses for women in England to enable them to acquire skills for jobs ordinarily reserved for men. Today, she is based in Nepal where she teaches and handles computer consultancies for British-aid projects there.

In simple yet precise language, Ms. Rau talked about the basic concept of input-process-output, explained what was inside a CPU by means of a guided tour, differentiated ROM from RAM and other computer terms. In the process, she demystified computers. She visualized what happened to disks and diskettes being formatted, discussed problems that experienced users in the group have had with their operating systems, and advocated ways of caring for, maintaining and managing the hardware.

There were hands-on demonstrations and exercises, especially for firsttime users. Ms. Rau said, "It will help you get over the feeling that something might explode if you touch it."

At the end of the day, Fe Sarmiento of Womanhealth Philippines, who was a conscious non-user, just could not stay away from the machine. She exclaimed, to everyone's amusement, "I'm just raring to experiment with my office's computer right now!"

The one-day course was initial and experimental in nature. Isis Manila plans to develop the computer literacy course further with Ms. Rau in the coming months. The course can hopefully be made available not only to women NGOs and government organizations in the Philippines but also to those in the Asia-Pacific region.

Isis Manila welcomes ideas and suggestions to help develop an effective training course. No one ever needs to be voiceless in the increasingly computerized world of information.