

Support work for prostituted women

by Kathleen Maltzhan

Prostitution, in the Philippines, is a constant. The most accessible curse in the national language is *Putang ina mo*, for "Your mother's a whore." The tabloids joke about the Brunei Beauties—young actresses prostituting themselves in the island, while Manila's mayor makes international news supposedly for closing the city's red light district and 'cleaning up' the streets. Everyone knows how a whore looks, so when a camera crew zooms in on seven pretty girls in little skirts, eyelashes sculptured, in one of the bars along Metro Manila's most notorious 'strips', Quezon Avenue, everyone knows what the film being shot will be about.

In that same crowd, some of the real Quezon Avenue 'girls' watch the location shoot, inconspicuous in jeans, running shoes, long-sleeved shirts and basketball caps. On the way home, the same camera crew will pass by middle-aged women carrying frayed handbags and chubby mothers in crumpled shorts, and assume that they are vendors. They are not. They are

the invisible face of prostitution, women forgotten until such time as their services are needed.

Within the women's movement, more and more advocates are beginning to tackle the issue of prostitution and the marginalization of prostituted women. This development can be attributed to groups such as Buklod Women's Center and Women's Education, Development and Productivity Organization (WEDPRO), which initiated grassroots work and advocacy with prostituted women long before doing so became a 'politically correct' undertaking.

Buklod Women's Center

When the foundations for Buklod were being laid in Olongapo City in the mid-'80s, the city was the R&R center for US servicemen docking at their Subic Naval Base, and its sex industry, the tonic for sailors' fatigue. Buklod founder Brenda Stolfutz started her advocacy work with long nights in the bars, getting to know the women. She was eventually conducting education semi-

nars, helped along by colleagues. These women next considered organizing a union of bar workers so that the dancers and waitresses would receive decent wages and not be forced into prostitution. The idea metamorphosed into the drop-in center Buklod, now almost 10 years old.

Throughout decades of political education that was integral to the nationalist movement's struggle for the withdrawal of US military facilities from the Philippines, the question of economic alternatives surfaced again and again. With the insights that such education inspired, the women more and more keenly felt and detested the oppression of their lives in prostitution. Individually, however, they had no more options than when they started. Buklod in response developed a course on high-speed sewing. It is now thinking of establishing a small-scale garments factory.

WEDPRO

WEDPRO was formed in December 1989 when the anti-bases sentiment had fully developed. Contracted by the

Violence Against Women

Aquino government to develop a conversion plan for the benefit of the women to be affected by the eventual pull-out of the US bases, WEDPRO later found its meticulously prepared proposals shelved. The group decided to implement some of the conversion proposals that the government ignored. The devastating eruption of Mt. Pinatubo hastened the Americans' departure from Clark Air Base in Angeles City, and when WEDPRO entered the area, its 'entertainment' industry was dead. Building on the Buklod experience, and in the face of the double catastrophe of the volcano's destruction and the bar workers' loss of livelihood, WEDPRO immediately combined its organizing efforts with a socio-economic program. The women were offered small food-vending stalls, with two to three women staffing each. In the next three years, the program had expanded to softdrinks vending as well as rice trading. Meanwhile, the difficulties the group encountered to initiate and operate these ventures highlighted the need to intensify education strategies. Hence, simultaneous with WEDPRO'S efforts to continue developing economic alternatives for the women are its education seminars on such issues as violence against women, sexuality and women's health.

Sinag Kababaihan

By late 1993 to early 1994 when the United Church of Christ in the Philippines conceived of its special project on prostitution, the SINAG Kababaihan, prostitution and prostituted women had clearly become an issue in itself, and not just a problem tied to the US bases or tourism. In Quezon City alone, hundreds of bars-cum-brothels had flourished, and 'street walkers' were regularly rounded up by the police when they became too

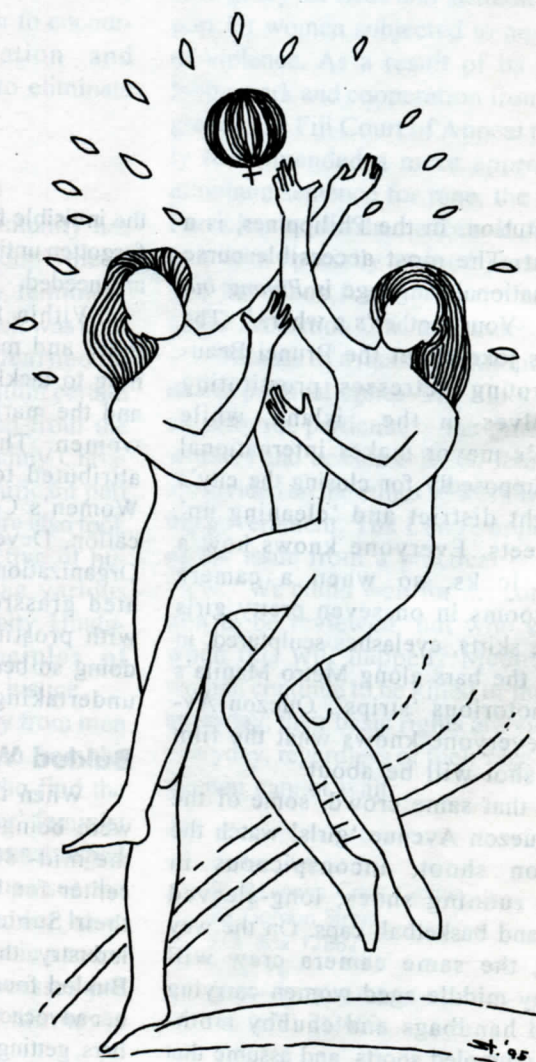
visible. SINAG opted to work with these street walkers. In September 1994, it initiated contact-building in the streets and jails where the women were detained. The unpredictable, highly mobile work environment prostituted women move in necessitated a similarly mobile center. The center serves as venue for women to attend education sessions or health trainings, to secure condoms, to catch up on sleep or simply to trade gossip. SINAG hopes to provide a space where women can define themselves, tell their own stories, generate and give support to process the violence they have encountered and form their own organization.

Pitfalls of advocacy work

Each of the three projects—Buklod, WEDPRO and SINAG—receives a steady stream of inquiries on its work. Still, the volume of sustained feminist responses to the issue of prostitution remains limited. Apart from the problem of scarce resources, which is common to the NGO movement as a whole, the response to advocacy work regarding prostituted women may be slack also because of the working conditions and slowness of "progress" that women's groups are experiencing.

Although by no means as difficult as the problems women in pros-

titution must wrestle with, NGO work is also taxing. The strain of late nights spent squatting on the sidewalks or watching strip shows is inescapable, the risk—and reality—of harassment and violence loom every time a police van passes by, and the plain depression of seeing women bought, sold, thumped and dumped is fatal to job satisfaction. Andrea Dworkins recounts that after writing her book on pornogra-



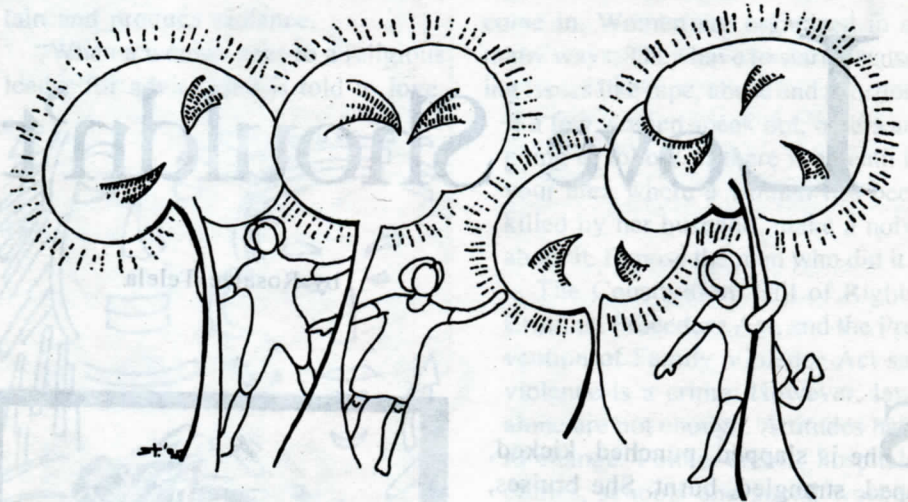
phy, her world was destroyed—she learned to look at life with the eyes of the pornography maker and reader. The result: everything, whether mundane or essential, became instruments of women's torture. Gaining entry to this new world poisoned the one she had come from because she learned how this new world shaped hers.

Working on prostitution is similar. When night after night, an NGO worker encounters men who try to arrest, abuse or buy other women, she is yanked to a realization that for them, all women are whores, and all whores, dirt. Exposed to the full range of men who treat women as commodities—from men in cars with government-issued plates to those in slippers so worn only their callouses keep their soles off the ground, she realizes that most men participate in this ritual of destruction. Her work strips away layer upon layer of her world and leaves her naked, betrayed by society's promise that men and women can live with each other honorably. It touches both the 'external' structures and the contours of the mind, her vision of society, her faith

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in ideologies and the space around her body.

Aida Santos of WEDPRO has had to continually grapple with the politics and psychology of prostitution. "Prostitution work is difficult because of the issues and because it entails achieving a level of honesty within yourself," she says. "It is an



area that tends to push you back to ask questions about sexuality. It has the tendency, if you're married, to push you to think, what if my husband is... or my brother, or father, or son? It has a very direct impact, it gives you some sleepless nights."

At the same time, Santos continues, work on prostitution launches one into direct confrontation with the dominant structures of society. "I always say [prostitution work] is a

classical example of where you see the conglomeration of the issues of racism, classism, gender, imperialism—especially within the context of... prostitution abroad, where southern women are predominantly bartered in the trade".

These are the realities that at times make advocacy and organizing in pros-

titution shattering and exhausting. Yet, these realities present the very reason why such work is crucial. In prostitution, the dominant structures of destruction are magnified and melded and we—all women—are burned, right through to the core. Prostitution sustains and strengthens immeasurably all that the women's movement is struggling to replace.

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