

# UNHEEDING LEGISLATORS TAKE NOTE: WOMEN IN THE PHILIPPINES ARE FAST LEARNING THE ROPES OF LOBBYING, AND NO LONGER GIVE UP QUITE SO EASILY

by Perla Aragon-Choudhury

Source: Depthnews Women's Service, May 1995

When the tenth Philippine Congress with its newly-elected members opens in July, among those expected to figure in the legislative scene are women lobbyists who will be pushing for bills on women. An important bill on sexual harassment barely made it to the finish line in the Ninth Congress, which passed only three women-specific bills.

Eleanor Flores, soft-spoken and ever-smiling, is with the Women's Program of the Confederation of Independent Unions in the Public Sector which lobbied for the passage of the Sexual Harassment Bill.

Ms. Flores has known heartaches working for the certification of legitimate labor unions, one of them in a well-known hamburger store chain. Her helping a graduate student do a thesis on the sexual violence experienced by women workers led to work with the women's desk of other labor union federations, where she helped draft the anti-sexual harassment bill passed by the Ninth Congress.

Ms. Flores recalled one of the tactics she used to get sexual harassment on the legislative agenda. "We were at a seminar in a resort when Senator (Ramon) Revilla (owner of the resort) walked in. I immediately asked permission to 'ambush' him with a request to sponsor the bill."

Lobbying at every opportunity has marked the activism that has resurfaced since 1986, after the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos was forced to flee the country.

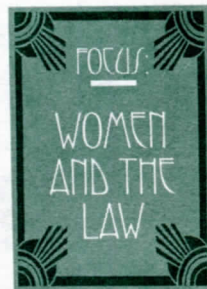
"Plain citizens, NGOs (non-governmental organizations), academicians -- we all took seriously that brief moment of empowerment and wanted to be involved with government," recalls Cecile Hofman of SIBOL (an acronym for "joint women's initiatives for social change") composed of 11 groups. Lobbying by women goes back to 1907 when the first bill on suffrage was filed, and women had to work for it until 1937. "Lobbying has become recognized as legitimate and worthwhile work even if women lobbyists are not registered professionals and have no funds for such activities as cocktail parties. Not only is the issue served; the general public, women and people in government are educated as well", said Ms. Hofman.

For women lobbyists, however, there might be "distinct limitations like the perception that women can become a pain in the neck and that they have to be sweet in their dialogue", she pointed out. Because women advocates have been criticized as being too aggressive for the masculine nature of Congress, Ms. Hofman says they face a challenge in presenting the position of women in a manner acceptable to someone not that open to the issue.

A second challenge is convincing women that legislative advocacy is a course of action that will uplift their status without causing too much disillusionment, and allow them to organize around it. At the local level, advocacy is a good training ground for women to exercise political participation, get a clear grasp of action programmes, and focus attention on a limited number of issues.

Ms. Hofman sees a third challenge: women must become familiar with the whole process of legislation, political dynamics and players in and outside government -- the Church, for instance. "Fourthly, it is important to carry out awareness and consciousness-raising campaigns on women's issues. The one SIBOL ran for the anti-rape bill raised discussion to the national level and encouraged full discourse", she reported.

Ms. Hofman concluded: "In asking for women's full participation, we may have to create a new language for men to understand that we are a disadvantaged half whose empowerment, international documents now say, means improving humanity itself." ▲



## SENTENCED FOR BRIBERY, NOT SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN SRI LANKA

Source: Populi, the UNFPA magazine, Nov1994; reprinted by Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights Newsletter 49, Jan-Mar 1995

When the security manager of a Sri Lankan government agency demanded sex from a woman guard in his department in return for a transfer she needed, he knew he could never be charged with sexual harassment. There are no provisions to punish sexual harassment in Sri Lankan law. Nevertheless, in a landmark case, the Sri Lankan High Court has sentenced him to seven years in prison by defining the sexual harassment as a form of soliciting bribery under the Bribery Act of 1954. Sexual harassment has been openly complained of in Sri Lanka for only one year now; the law is still unclear and insufficient. For the time being, sexual harassers can be convicted only if their actions can be linked to other offenses such as bribery, rape, assault, seduction, intimidation, or intentional insult.