

The **D**iplomat

She SPURNED a career in diplomacy to give HERSELF to the WOMEN'S MOVEMENT and her country's struggle for FREEDOM. But fate put her BACK ON TRACK.

by Hayat Imam

For four years, Aurora Javate De Dios, or Oyie to friends, studied to be a diplomat. But after college, she just could not see herself joining the Marcos dictatorship. So she gave up all thoughts of a diplomatic career and, instead, became part of the political mass movement. In 1972, when Marcos declared martial law, shut down Congress and shackled the media, Oyie went underground. There, she wrote and distributed anti-Marcos newsletters. After a while, she went back to the academe and obtained a master's degree in Asian Studies. Then she began teaching.

But in 1977, the Marcos regime caught up with her and she was thrown in prison for "illegal and subversive activities." Oyie considers it fortunate that her arrest happened in the late '70s, when human rights abuses were not as bad as they were during martial law's early years.

By 1977, Amnesty International was already active and Marcos was under international pressure to observe some basic human rights. But in actual fact, Oyie says the only insurance against torture was if there were witnesses to the



Oyie Javate De Dios: mainstreaming feminist theories.

arrest and if enough publicity and support was generated for the political prisoner. Oyie used her network to let people know of her arrest. Oyie was also lucky that she was "small fry" to the military because by the time Oyie was arrested, many of the underground's leaders have already been captured.

Oyie spent three months in jail and, to this day, she's glad that she was not made to spill any information that could endanger family or friends.

Oyie recalls that being on the run, laying low and being together in prison were experiences that, in strange ways, brought activists close to each other. This is exactly what happened to Oyie and her husband Lito. Oyie thinks that after enduring all these terrible experiences as a couple, who began their married life at the onset of martial law, there is nothing that she and Lito could not face together. "Overcoming the worst reinforced our positive thinking."

Feminism's Early Days

During the 1960's, a strong movement grew against the U.S. war in Vietnam, particularly since Filipino soldiers were being drafted. This anti-war movement went hand in hand with activist demands to shut down U.S. bases in the Philippines. Socialism was a major influence.

Oyie and other Filipina women activists then thought they were working in equal partnership with their male comrades until, in the early '70s, many of the women realized that often, they were actually just making coffee.

The women reacted by launching their own organization in 1971. They named it MAKIBAKA, a Filipino word urging one to struggle. As an acronym, MAKIBAKA stood for *Malayang Kilusan ng Bagong Kababaihan* (or the Free Movement of New Women). MAKIBAKA is largely the result of the efforts of one woman, Lorena Barros, who was perhaps the first Filipina feminist who publicly challenged male

dominance and promoted feminist discussions in the Philippines.

MAKIBAKA remained a wing of the male-dominated nationalist movement. But even as such, men reacted to it strongly by either trivializing the women's efforts, by criticizing the new group for dissipating the movement's energies and by accusing the women of dividing the movement because of their "anti-men" positions.

The chance for MAKIBAKA's members to confront these reactions never came because very soon after MAKIBAKA was launched, martial law came down and Lorena chose to join the New People's Army, the underground's military arm. Lorena would later die fighting. Meanwhile, MAKIBAKA was declared illegal and many of its women members were jailed.

Reaching Out to the Mainstream

Oyie has always sought ways to institutionalize the ideas that are important to women. It is easy to organize women of like minds. But at some point, it is important to reach out beyond women who were already politically involved or motivated. Oyie believes that "feminist theories need to be incorporated into mainstream institutions in order for these to have a lasting impact on women's lives."

Between 1987 and 1994, Oyie helped organize the Women's Studies Association of the Philippines (WSAP), whose most critical success has been to legitimize and incorporate women's studies into the classroom as a new form of pedagogy.

WSAP had to convince teachers and administrators, who were often very resistant, of the value of introducing a gender perspective into every subject. Administrators also had to be convinced that this new trend in teaching and learning would be beneficial to the school, enriching to the students and to the curriculum. Between 1990 and 1991, consultations were held with teachers to get their views. School administrators were invited to meetings that aimed to educate them on the ben-

"As women, we have to organize by ourselves, and initiate and defend our own agenda within an autonomous movement."

efits that their curricula can receive from having a gender perspective.

WSAP had to take the whole organizing process step by step, in a logical and rational manner that was acceptable even to those who were fearful of challenges to family relationships and the social order in general.

Oyie organized, developed and conducted regional training. Spanning four days, the training covered both theory and practice: the history of the women's movement; gender sensitivity training; demonstration teaching in literature and history using feminist methods; and reworking the teachers' own syllabi. Teachers appreciated the teachers' training on women's studies since it broadened their perspective of the social construction of knowledge and sharpened their teaching skills.

WSAP is now in the next stage of the process. Experts from different regions are writing training modules for teachers that now include environmental studies and economics. These modules will be presented nationally, refined and used in test runs before they are disseminated. Plans include future changes in the curricula of Law, Medicine and Education.

Oyie notes with interest that teachers themselves are the source of the greatest support. They become quickly convinced of the value of the approach. Students who are also involved in the process get together once a year with teachers to participate in the process. At the World Conference on Women in Beijing, a workshop was conducted to share these experiences.

Now that WSAP has become an institution and now that Oyie is confident of its capability to carry on its work and grow even more, she is disengaging from active involvement to move on to other issues where she feels she can also make a difference. One such issue is the trafficking of women.

As board member of the New York-based Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW), an umbrella that coordinates international actions with local and regional organizations worldwide, Oyie

began challenging commercial sexual exploitation and abuse of women.

While working with CATW, Oyie also became increasingly aware of the tendency to universalize the "white, Western bias" of feminism. Oyie feels it is important to reject this approach because there are, in fact, "many feminisms." While women share a core of issues, women's varying cultural, religious and political contexts necessitate differences in approaches and priorities.

While "equal pay for equal work" is a high priority in the U.S.A., the issues in the Philippines are grinding poverty and the General Agreements on Tariff and Trade (GATT). "This affects our views of certain issues. For example, prostitution is seen by many Western and some Asian feminists as a choice, as legitimate work. But in the Philippines, where poverty is the major problem, there really is no choice. A study of women's conditions must take into account the diversity of each social milieu. We must be more layered in our analyses."

Back to Diplomacy

In 1993, Oyie was nominated to join the National Commission on Women. For a long time, the Commission was tainted in the eyes of activists because it was a platform for Imelda Marcos. Cory Aquino, during her term as Philippine president revamped it but feminist circles still did not associate themselves with it.

So when Oyie was nominated, she sought advice from a group of feminists who all told her to make a go for it. They feel it is now time for women to try and influence policy. In her new position, Oyie hopes to be able to get government to create favorable policies for women.

At present, the Commission's main objective is to put gender in development planning by sensitizing the key officials of line agencies to gender issues. Towards this end, Oyie has conducted gender sensitivity trainings within the Department of Foreign Affairs and with the training institutes of other government departments.

"Feminist theories need to be incorporated into mainstream institutions for lasting impact on women's lives."

"The women's movement is the last revolution!"

The Commission also plays a critical role in the legislative process. When pro-women laws are being debated, members of the Commission actively try to influence key legislators. Among the Commission's notable achievements are the passing of the Anti-Sexual Harassment Bill and the Bill to Codify Legal Entitlements for Women. The Commission fought hard for the Anti-Rape Bill but it still failed to pass.

In 1995, Oyie was again nominated by the government to be the Philippine representative to the New York-based committee that monitors the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). As a member of the committee, Oyie wants to be regarded not as a government representative but as an independent expert.

Oyie says working with CEDAW has been a meaningful experience for her. Once a year, Oyie attends the Committee meetings with 23 other representatives, most of whom are feminists, to review the progress made by the 139 government signatories to the Convention. As fate would have it, Oyie still ended up doing diplomatic work.

But Oyie is grateful for the opportunity. She feels that it brings to fruition all her years of experience and activism, all the insights that she obtained from hundreds of women with whom she maintains close connections through the network of NGOs. Oyie actively seeks these women's advice and criticism. "Go ahead. Throw tomatoes at me if I do anything outrageously wrong," she says.

Grassroots Connections

Oyie has indeed gone a long way. But she refuses to lose her grassroots connections and is still closely associated with KALAYAAN. Oyie feels that being at KALAYAAN is like being home.

But what really keeps Oyie connected is her family. She says her strong mother and grandmothers and her nurturing and non-sexist father were the influences that shaped her. To them, she says: "I have a mind of my own—and I owe it from you!"

Her children—a young man and two girls—are her inspirations and nurturance. From them she learns honesty and frankness. ☺

DOUBLE-EDGED SWORDS

Good things can be sour and bad things have an upside. Complexities and contradictions underlie trends that have emerged in the last years of this century. Oyie says:

We face a backlash from forces that are threatened, creating a climate of hostility for women. But the issues are now starkly defined.

Science and technology, including genetic engineering and reproductive technology, are benefiting us. But there are serious ethical, moral and environmental issues about how the products of science are going to be utilized, particularly against women.

Easy travel leads to mind expansion. But it also facilitates sex tours.

There is a common women's international movement. But while international connections are important, the real movement must occur within each culture.

The fields of media and cybernetics are full of potential for networking and building solidarity. But it is also a means for exploitation and pornography on a massive scale.

Migration can be liberating. But it can mean low paying, low value jobs and abuses specific to women.