

# gOING bEYOND THE pP b ERSONAL

by Malu S. Marin

*A respected feminist looks closely at lesbian activism  
and the women's movement in the Philippines.*

**L**esbian activism in the Philippines grew out of the women's movement. In the 1980s, when feminism was not yet a buzz word among women activists, there were a handful of women who began the journey of discovering themselves and their sexual feelings towards other women. The atmosphere was not very conducive for coming out. Initial reactions faced by lesbians in the women's movement ranged from aversion to intense curiosity, from mild shock to voyeuristic interest. Some organizations, cognizant that lesbianism was an issue that went beyond the personal, conducted internal discussions and sharings. In general, there were no existing support mechanisms. Lesbianism was not considered a woman's issue, nor was it reflected in the over-all women's agenda.

## **BRIEF HISTORY**

Initial attempts to organize lesbians began at the onset of the decade of the '90s. Encouraged perhaps by events happening globally and locally, women activists started

getting exposed to lesbian issues and to the physical presence of lesbian feminists. These events served as precursors to the blossoming of lesbian activism.

One such event was the Sisterhood is Global Dialogues held in 1988. The dialogues on sexuality was one of the first women-only discussions and this initiative prompted one of the organizer's funders, a big Manila-based foreign funding agency, to withhold an approved grant and demand an explanation to complaints that the organizers were promoting "exclusivism and lesbianism."

In 1990, the International Women and Health Meeting (IWHM), one of the biggest gatherings of international women's health activists, was held in Manila. The workshop on lesbianism in the meeting was one of the most well-attended workshops in the conference. Many Filipino workshop participants said that it was their first time to see and hear out "actual" lesbians.

These international events were important for several reasons. One, they provided avenues for lesbianism to be discussed as a political issue, devoid of the hysteria and uproar that usually accompa-

nied it in mainstream discussions. Lesbianism thus gained a legitimate status—at least during those conferences—equal with other women's issues. Two, the atmosphere of openness in these conferences encouraged some Filipino lesbians to speak about their existence and experience of homophobia and discrimination. Three, the conferences underscored the need to begin the process of addressing lesbian issues in the women's movement. And four, the opportunities for networking and collaborating with lesbians from other parts of the world were opened by these gatherings.

Despite these, the actual birthing of organized lesbian activism did not happen overnight.

The formation of a lesbian activist core group happened only after the 1991 Second National Conference on Health. The organizers of the conference gave the core group seed funding to enable them to convene and begin the process of organizing. The formation of the core group was not without difficulties. The group members, who came from diverse backgrounds, had to deal with conflicting needs and goals. The formation did not last very long, and no follow-up ac-

tivities were conducted after the first series of meetings.

Perhaps the idea of an organized lesbian group was still ahead of its time. There were ongoing initiatives and activities that centered on lesbian issues, but this did not create enough stirrings for lesbians to forge together and unite under a common cause.

In August 1992, KALAYAAN conducted a rap session on lesbianism in Baguio City. The Baguio-based participants continued having meetings after the rap session, leading to the eventual formation of LesBond. LesBond identifies itself as a lesbian feminist organization "envisioning a free, gender-fair, just and human(e) society where lesbians are free from any form of discrimination and oppression." LesBond is the first regional formation to identify itself as lesbian-feminist.

February 1993 witnessed the formation of The Lesbian Collective (TLC) in Manila. A self-propelled initiative of young lesbian feminists, TLC capped its launching by sending a contingent to the 1993 March 8 Women's Day March who walked under a collectively designed lesbian banner. A statement was read during the rally, despite the initial reluctance of the march's organizers to accommodate further changes in the program of activities.

TLC's formation had a lot of impact. For the first time, visible lesbians engaged in a pro-active campaign against homophobia in the women's movement. TLC received invitations from women's groups, enabling it to present its positions on various issues.

However, TLC was not spared from internal conflicts and factionalization, situated as it was in the midst of a conflict-ridden women's movement. By the end of 1994, most of its members became inactive, which was sad considering the group's promise. Yet, despite its current moribund status,

TLC's contribution to the growth of lesbian organizing remains important.

Unfazed by the difficulties of lesbian organizing, other groups started surfacing in 1994. The case of Elizabeth Lim and E v a n g e l i n e Castronuevo, the lesbian couple dismissed by Balay

Rehabilitation Center, a human rights organization, served as the impetus for lesbian organizations and women's groups to get together to form an advocacy and campaign network specifically addressing a lesbian issue. Can't Live in the Closet (CLIC), a lesbian group committed to media advocacy, was established in April 1994. CLIC was instrumental in drumming up international publicity and support for the case of Beth and Vangie.

ALERT or the Advocates for Lesbian Rights is another group that got started because of Beth and Vangie's case. ALERT started with 13 organizations but the number later dwindled to five. The difficulty in mobilizing local support for the case reflects the current state of activism in the women's movement.

Through the years, the diversity of the issues and the growth and expansion of the women's movement have resulted to specialization among women's organizations. The fact that campaigns and advocacy initiatives focused only on specific concerns make it difficult for women's organizations to rally behind issues that are outside their priority. Lesbian issues clearly remain in the periphery of priorities of most women's organizations.

In the same year, The Women Supporting Women Committee (WSWC) was organized. An existing project of Women's Education,



Irene R. Chia

The Lesbian Collective (TLC), the first lesbian group to come out in public did so on International Women's Day in March 1993

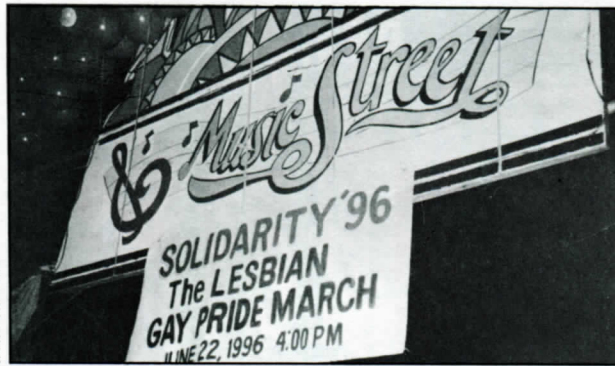
Development, Productivity and Research Organization [WEDPRO], WSWC was formed as a response to the public reaction to a magazine interview of lesbian feminist and WEDPRO executive director Aida Santos. WSWC operates the first lesbian hotline in the country.

## SOFTENING THE GROUND

The existence of lesbian groups and lesbian-related activities and initiatives does not automatically translate into a lesbian movement. "There is lesbian organizing but I can't say that there is a lesbian movement...I always connect a movement with a mass base and that's what we don't have," remarks Tesa de Vela, one of the founding members of TLC.

Lesbian efforts are seen as scattered and sporadic, not yet representing a singular force. Nonetheless, they are necessary given the present conditions. Organized lesbian activism is a new endeavor and it has yet to determine the pulse of the women's movement vis-à-vis its own existence. Likewise, not all lesbians in the women's movement are involved in advocacy for lesbian-specific issues, though there are lesbian individuals working on lesbian-oriented issues who do not belong to any of the existing groups.

There is a strong perception that the women's movement has slowly



Announcement of the Lesbian and Gay Pride 1996.

become receptive to and supportive of lesbians today. Yet, the enthusiasm and openness remains to be reflected in actual policies and programs of most women's organizations. One member of the WSWC comments that the group's unreadiness to address lesbian issues became apparent when it organized a forum on lesbianism and the women's agenda. "We invited six big women's organizations. Only three came. The rest sent word at the last minute that they were not ready to discuss the issue. And during the forum itself, some of those who attended to represent the groups we invited also admitted their unreadiness.

Existing lesbian formations vary in their programs and projects depending on their analysis and perception of the needs and problems of the lesbian community. The groups' approaches and strategies are as different as their primary target audiences.

But there are also similarities, the most basic of which is the goal to address the needs of lesbians within and outside the women's movement.

## DEFINITION OF ISSUES

Like women's issues, there is no singular encompassing definition of "lesbian issues." The framework of lesbian activism is hinged on the belief that lesbian rights are hu-

man rights, and that a struggle must be waged against homophobia and discrimination based on sexual orientation.

But more than looking at lesbianism as a human rights issue, lesbian feminists also recognize lesbianism

as a basic feminist issue. Lesbianism is seen as a rebuttal against a society that upholds and rewards heterosexual relations but does not protect heterosexual women who are abused by men. Instead, it puts women in a bind: If women relate with women, they face the repercussions of that defiance; if they relate with men, they expose themselves to the hazards of day to day relationships with men, a state of involvement and interaction fraught with potential conflicts.

This is not to say that there is no room for tenderness or caring in heterosexual relationships. But the inherent inequality that stems from the present system makes it easier for men to wield dominance and control over women. Furthermore, and much to the chagrin of feminists and proponents of women's rights, men's predominance over women is often rationalized and defended in society, even by some women.

Lesbian feminists battle a system that ensures men access to and control of women's lives—economically, emotionally, sexually, psychologically. Being or becoming a lesbian is staking a territorial claim to one's body and emotions. It is a space where men are not allowed to tread. Of course, this decision is not inconsequential. Lesbians brave great personal risks by standing up for their sexual choices. In the Philippines, as in most parts of Asia, lesbians find that their family

is most often their first battleground.

Most lesbian-feminists live personal lives that reflect their political views. For instance, there are conscious efforts to redefine relationships to free it of heterosexist elements such as role-playing or dominance-subordination. Lesbian relationships that occur in the women's movement somehow acquire new definitions and perspectives.

And because of the women's movement and because of feminism, there are women who have become more open to lesbianism. But there are women who look at lesbianism as a political alternative and a response to the many problems that beset heterosexual relationships. This resolution is simplistic, especially when accompanied by unrealistic—and unfair—expectations and assumptions about lesbian relationships. Thus, when lesbianism ceases to be the ideal that it is purported to be, these women end up frustrated and disappointed with the entire idea and concept of lesbianism.

But for those who have long regarded themselves as lesbians even before their involvement in the women's movement, the feminist analysis of heterosexism has been very useful in crystallizing their feelings. It gave them terms with which to describe their experiences. It provided them with the framework with which to view their existence more positively. These lesbians have chosen to be with women, not necessarily because they had an initial grasp or theoretical understanding of heterosexism, but because they have been oriented towards women even at an early age.

The links between lesbianism and feminism enable lesbian-feminists to get involved in issues that

LE concern all women. During the furor that accompanied Catholic conservative Philippine Senator Francisco Tatad's "election" as chair of the Senate Committee on Women, lesbian-feminist groups joined women's groups in the protest actions. Their actions, however, were not always appreciated.

When CLIC's letter denouncing Tatad's election was published in a national daily, one reader wrote CLIC to "please explain how the rights of its members got mixed up with those of women..." The letter further said that, "it is quite unnecessary for CLIC to usurp the role of legitimate women's groups... Lesbians in particular have no business trumpeting women's rights, since all they do is exploit women."

Such reaction is not the least surprising, given the prevailing mindset that lesbians are not women but "men trapped in women's bodies" or have "hearts of men and bodies of women." In fact, there are lesbians who do subscribe to this viewpoint. Media perpetuates these stereotypes, and sometimes goes to the extent of exaggerating or parodying such images.

The concept of lesbians as women in both personal and political spheres remains to be grasped and understood by many. Lesbian feminists have to work overtime in sensitizing people to their issues as well as in mobilizing support from the women's movement, in light of such reactions.

## CRITICISMS

### *Lesbianism as Western*

Lesbianism, much like feminism, is incessantly besieged by the criticism that its origins are western. This assertion obviously manifests societal resistance to the reality of indigenous lesbian existence. Unfortunately, even some women

activists toe the line. What is conveniently forgotten is that all social movements in this country owe much of their political theories and concepts from outside sources.

Lesbian activists are well aware of this criticism, and have started taking steps to cull data from local sources and redefine concepts and strategies so these may be grounded on local realities. The efforts to give the analysis a local context are evident in the emphasis on the cultural aspect of homophobia.

Being or becoming a lesbian is staking a territorial claim to one's body and emotions.

For instance, the pressures faced by Filipino lesbians come primarily from the family. There is recognition of the interplay of cultural apparatuses: religion, media, value systems and tradition. The analysis examines, but does not dwell heavily, on political apparatuses, given the absence of data on state violence or persecution of lesbians and gays.

Too, the issue of coming out is weighed carefully, taking into account the specificities of Filipino culture. Despite the need for visibility, for lesbianism to have a face and a name, "coming out" occurs at varying levels and does not automatically mean media exposure or appearances. There are levels to which lesbians permit themselves to be exposed, aware as they are that they are risking their lives and identities. To come out is not always to be empowered, for it can also mean exposing one's vulnerabilities.

## Projection

Lesbian-feminists are also criticized for acting and "speaking the language of a small group, or a sub-culture." They endlessly engage in conceptual discussions and come across as too theoretical, even to their fellow activists. This criticism is partly a result of the increasing visibility and exposure of lesbians, especially in mainstream media.

It is the political nature of lesbian-feminism that causes the tendency to be issue-oriented and to focus on the task of redefining concepts. This is typical of any group that is in the process of ascertaining its space and directions in the political arena. There is also the primary objective of popularizing one's perspectives on an issue that hardly gets discussed or addressed intelligently in mainstream society.

However, lesbians must also realize that a hardsell approach is hardly ever effective, given the cultural milieu that they are situated in. The need to educate people about lesbian issues can go hand in hand with theorizing but there must be an appraisal of the target audience's level of understanding and consciousness.

Eventually, lesbian-feminists will have to critically assess themselves and their projection of the issues. There are ways to carry on an advocacy without resorting to too much jargon. Lesbians will have to learn to speak in a language that is comprehensible to non-lesbians and non-feminists. There should always be the awareness that there are limits to what can be said. The media is an independent and unconstrained entity and it operates on its own rules and procedures. Lesbians will have to be clear of their objectives and will have to recognize the limits in using the me-

dia for education and consciousness-raising.

### *Projects-driven*

The current efforts of lesbian-activists are also being scrutinized for concentrating on projects rather than on mobilization and organizing. Lesbian groups for instance are more involved in specific projects that directly address the needs of the lesbian community, rather than in direct organizing of a lesbian mass base.

It must be noted however, that the current efforts of lesbian groups are based on their assessment of existing realities. While it is true that actual groundworking and organizing has yet to begin, the specificity of lesbian conditions and realities must be carefully gauged. The outsider or outcast status of lesbians in mainstream society is not at all akin to situations faced by other oppressed or marginalized sectors.

One of the biggest problems lesbians face is security and safety. Thus, lesbian activism will have to take an alternate route to achieve a parallel status to that of the other social movements. Unless there are systems in place that will assure lesbians of protection, it will remain difficult to organize lesbians as a political force. What the existing groups is doing is sowing the seeds for the eventual sprouting of a visible lesbian movement.

## **BEIJING AND BEYOND**

Beijing and Huairou provided fertile grounds for lesbian activism. An international group of lesbian activists were in Beijing for the Official Conference and in Huairou for the parallel NGO Forum. Expectedly, more lesbians from western nations took part in the lobbying efforts and in organizing activities in the NGO forum. This predominance is not new, not only for lesbian issues but for other women's issues as well.

The conference attested to the diversity of contexts and cultural milieus faced by lesbians everywhere. Some came from countries where it is illegal to discriminate against lesbians. Others came from nations that allow lesbians to legally marry and establish families. However, in the global map of lesbian existence, these countries remain a minority as the rest of the world would rather persecute lesbians or render them invisible.

Everyday, different activities were organized by lesbians from dif-

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ferent regions. The lesbian tent drew in hundreds of lesbians and straight women daily. Regional caucuses were organized and Asian lesbians met every other day for the duration of the conference.

Unfortunately not all lesbians could partake of the relatively open and "safe" atmosphere of the tent. Some women, especially those from the South, felt that the name "lesbian" had excluded them from the onset. These were women who, for reasons of security and safety, could not risk exposing themselves by being visible in the tent. Too, there were women who felt ostracized because they did not identify

themselves as lesbians but considered themselves as bisexuals.

Beijing had opened avenues for lesbianism to be discussed as a critical issue. In fact, it emerged as one of the most controversial and contentious issues in the official conference. The deliberations uncovered the official positions of the member nations, and allowed lesbian activists to identify their enemies and potential allies.

Despite the failure to make the lesbian agenda visible, the experience in Beijing was not a lost cause. As Giney Villar of WSWC sums it, "A lot of people were very disappointed about it. But come to think of it, at least it gave people—those who are against lesbianism and those who are for it—an opportunity to discuss issues. It also prepares us better for what we have to deal with in the next few days and the next few years."

Huairou and Beijing had provided the world with another opportunity to acknowledge lesbian existence. It bore witness to a historical unfolding of a global lesbian movement, a foretoken that it will not be long before the tasks that remain undone will be done by a visible and tangible force. Despite the absence of discussions on issues of exclusion and dominance based on race, ethnicity, religion, culture and class, lesbian activists who were in Huairou and Beijing had established the possibilities for future cooperation and collaboration. The impact of the Forum and the Conference will define and shape the future of lesbian activism. For Filipino lesbians, this translates into a renewed activism and active linkage with their Asian sisters, in and outside Asia. There is no step to take but forward. ♪

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