

Not Quite A CHIP OFF THE OLD BLOCK

Andrea Raquel Edralin Tiglaor or Ria is a 24-year old Filipina feminist who is a co-producer of Rocks Productions, a group that organizes rock concerts, ballets, and plays. Ria finished her B.A. Degrees in Philosophy and Fine Arts at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, U.S.A. Here, in this interview with Irene R. Chia, she speaks about her views on feminism. .

Irene: Many people—women included—find the feminist label loaded. How do you react to being called one?

Ria: I think now I can call myself a feminist although I never thought of myself that way before. Looking back though, I think I already had the values of a feminist since being a feminist is mostly asserting myself not only as a human being but as a woman. I have always put that on the forefront. I always need to speak up for what I believe in.

I already felt strongly about justice and equality for women and girls at an early age. I entered Mt. Holyoke College, an all-women's college with definite beliefs in women's rights, which all the more reinforced my feminist values. I guess that's when I started identifying with feminism. It started in college because

being "feminist" was part of the culture. I would have called myself a feminist much earlier had I been more familiar with the term and its history. I'm more acquainted with the women's movement in the USA because I studied there. While I'm aware that many people think that most feminists are lesbians, I particularly appreciate that in the history of the women's movement in the USA, the lesbians have been its pioneers and that must be acknowledged.

I think I look up to women who are really strong and most of them are in fact feminists. But sometimes there's a negative side to this, because I tend to get annoyed with women who seem to allow themselves to be oppressed even as I know that most women are abused by men simply because they are women.

But I do know too that there are women who play the role of the weaker sex and use this to their advantage which tends to put down women. Since I have always believed in asserting myself, I can't imagine how it would be to my advantage to play the weaker sex. Sometimes this makes me defensive and I tend to overreact.

This I think comes from the need to protect myself from a man's aggression. If a man blocks my way, my first reaction would be to defend myself. My own experience as a woman as well as my exposure to my mother's work on counseling battered women and children, prove that there is more

Ria, at left: Passionate about justice.



aggression against women and I have probably internalized a reactive mode of thinking in terms of this.

Men see that I am a woman: small, thin and they think they can push me around. But they don't know me and they don't know I can be as strong or smart as they are. For me feminism means women are free to do what they really think is right. What you should or shouldn't do cannot be based on your sex. That is how I define myself as a feminist.

Q: So how do you express your feminism? How does it manifest in your behavior and your thinking?

A: As a woman, I don't want to be seen as weak. When I work with men I show them that I am as intellectually capable as anybody else, or even better. It's one way of showing other people that women are their equals and even more. That's the only way I can really help in terms of the feminist movement, to encourage other women to enhance and develop a sharper and logical thinking. My parents' thinking and my background in Philosophy studies have made me put importance in this aspect of my being.

Q: But how do you think is your interpretation of feminism similar to or different from how other women involved in women's issues would view feminism?

A: I can't say that my views on feminism are unique because I'm sure other women share some of my experiences as a woman. The only difference I could think of is the way in which my beliefs came about, and how through my own development as a person, I have learned to live my life with a feminist point of view. I wouldn't be able to judge the different views because there are so many women with their many experiences.

Q: In terms of your work as producer of Rocks Productions, do you think you are able to express your feminism?

A: Oh, yes, definitely. I have a male partner, and we are equally in charge of organizing, directing and managing a concert or show. As a producer and a woman, I make sure that all our male staff and crew respect the women guests and their women co-workers. I'm also able to command authority and respect among our mostly male crew. I think and work as a feminist. And I am able to do that in my work.

Q: Children usually don't follow the line of work their parents do and your mother is very much involved in women's causes. What do you think will your career path be?

A: Well, even if I feel the same passion as my parents have for justice and freedom, I don't feel I have to belong to any organization to be a feminist or to help other people. I guess that's my little rebellion. My career path at the moment is of a business nature, like what I am doing now as a producer. Our company is moving towards advertising and publications wherein I will be able to use my knowledge in art. I am also pursuing my painting, one of my passions.

Q: Okay, but as a feminist, what issues are you most passionate about?

A: Justice, that's my passion. I wanted to be a lawyer when I was younger. In primary and secondary school, there's no justice in the way the administration treats the students. There are teachers there who humiliated students. These things should not be happening, most of the time there is no justice because sometimes people, especially women, are not used to

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speaking out for themselves. Probably that's how women are conditioned: to be passive.

Q: What do you think are the top three issues for women in the Philippines and why?

A: First is poverty. Many Filipino women do not have the financial capability to stand on their own and that's why they have to depend on men. As opportunities are mostly given to men, the more dependent women become on their husbands or partners. I think this inevitably keeps women from becoming free and happy.

Second are the very restrictive moral issues imposed by the church and society on women. Women have to give birth. Women cannot use

contraceptives. Women who are liberated are called bitches.

The third issue is objectification. Women always have to be attractive, useful and most of all "feminine" to be respected and to have a place in society. If a woman diverts from these "norms", she is punished.

I think all these women's issues have a direct co-relation with men. That's the reason why I didn't want to work for a company. I already know the dynamics in an office where the men are the ones usually in power. I don't want to deal with that. There will be trouble because I would not let those things happen to me. I really looked for ways so I can work in my own terms. In my work I feel that I am in charge of things and I don't have to worry about pleasing anybody. Also my male partner respects me as a woman.

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Q: What actions are women taking to address these issues?

A: The women's organizations in the Philippines are fighting for reproductive rights and women's rights. They go to urban and rural areas to re-educate women. I think it's only the women's organizations who do this.

Q: In which direction do you think is the women's movement heading?

A: I think the direction it's heading is towards a more unified women's movement. And it is important for the women's movement to reach out to young students and children. I think educated children should be initiated into feminism because they are the ones more likely to get in positions of power.

I also think the women's movement should get into the mainstream through media. The majority of people still see the women's movement as a reactive group. I think the women's movement should try other avenues

and be attuned with the times. People are more cynical nowadays. They've already heard of activism before and they think it doesn't work anymore.

There is a lot of work to be done for feminists in the media. On TV commercials, programs, movies, advertising, and in the arts, we still see women being objectified and commodified. I think women should be portrayed as strong and positive. I think feminism will work better if we infiltrate the system and break down the oppressive structures and misconceptions that put down women.

Q: Being a daughter of a feminist, do you see any difference or similarity between you and your mother?

A: First of all, my mother works more effectively in an organization. She likes the interaction within organizations. My mom is more systematic and process-oriented in the way she works with people. I tend to be more "to-the-point." She's vocal but I think I'm 10 times more vocal.

She believes in the activist style of getting things done. I guess my generation is more individualistic, probably because we're more cynical. During her time, she had causes to fight for but now there are too many problems, too many causes. It's harder for people to get together to fight against one cause because people are too involved in their own personal dilemmas. Now we're finding out that people have more psychological baggages that they have to deal with first.

I was also involved in organizations (Filipino, Asian, College Networks etc.) and what I didn't like was that there were a lot of internal problems. When the organization becomes bigger, problems like funding or people pushing for their issues occur. That's why I'm not in any organization now. I think in some sense, my mom and I are similar in what we both believe in. She's married and she cooks because she likes to cook. I can be strong but I can also serve a man or a woman. It doesn't bother me for as long as I know I'm doing what I think is right. You don't have to follow the ABCs of being a feminist. I would feel constricted if I were in an organization because I would prefer to do things on my own.

But our difference is that I'm too aggressive sometimes, because I want my views to be heard and understood right away. My mom is more

even-tempered than I am. She's a saint compared to anyone I know. I'm very proud of her. I look up to her and I try to follow her but in another way. Our personal situations are very different, the people I've worked with and I've known.

Q: What do you think are the kinds of backlash that feminists have to endure ?

A: For one, feminists are being perceived as anti-family because feminists are more willing to accept different forms of family. Feminists have no quarrel with single mothers, or two-women or two-men families.

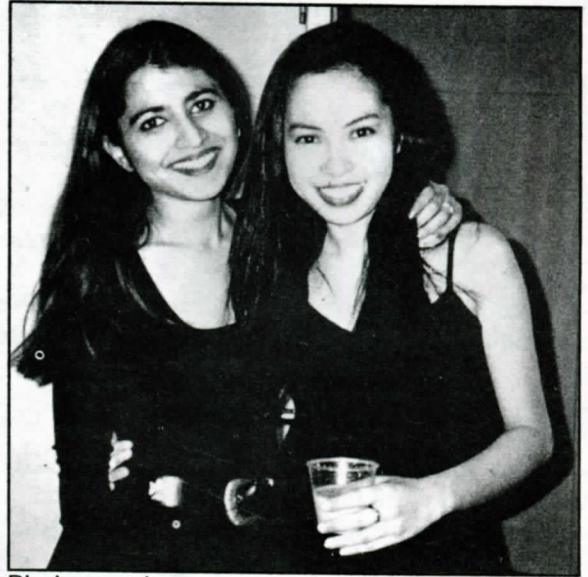
Another is the pressure on younger women to be independent because being independent means being strong. It shouldn't be a must, because it goes back to the thinking that women should be functional. If you're a woman and you don't have a job you get asked: "What? You're just a housewife? That's all you do?" All my peers are trying to achieve and be on top of their careers and to be "superwomen." I think it will come to a point when women will feel that the objectives of the women's movement, might become more frustrating than fulfilling if they tried to reach these ideals all at once.

Q: What do the women's movement think about lesbianism and is there a lesbian movement to speak of?

A: I don't really know what the feminist movement thinks about lesbianism. But I do know that the feminist movement in general provides a lot of support to the lesbian movement especially on the issue of women rights but I don't think lesbian issues are always dealt with intelligently, especially in Philippine society.

Homosexuals are more accepted than lesbians because the society is scared of stronger women. I guess that for most people, lesbians would be the extreme of what a strong woman could be. To completely not have relationships with men and disavow all of a woman's typical aspects is rarely discussed in schools, on TV, or movies. Perhaps there are more lesbians in foreign movies but in Filipino movies, you see lesbians called "tomboys" becoming "women" again. So it doesn't reflect the reality that there are lesbians.

Lesbianism simply is not yet accepted and people are not ready to talk about it. When people talk about lesbianism, they get nervous.



Ria knows how to work hard and play hard.

I guess it goes back to women being the weaker sex. Even women are scared of stronger women in general. I once wrote a philosophy paper on 'Cyborg' women, women who can change themselves through sexual operation, changing themselves physically, even mentally. It's being free. You won't be contained in your body and your person as a woman won't be defined by your body parts.

I really look forward to more women in media trying to change the perception of women because media is one of the most powerful tools of communication in this day and age. We should educate people through these terms because that is what the younger generation understands. They think of it as reality. It is easier to spread the word and get your message across because young females can relate to it and it will especially help younger males in becoming more gender aware.

When strong women are portrayed in media, they're always portrayed as evil. In alien movies, for example, the evil monster is almost always a female: the mother creature. The message that is sent subconsciously is that a strong and powerful woman is evil. You'll see that everywhere: woman as villain. If ever I would start a group, that would be the direction that I would want to pursue, to show women as they truly are, through art and the visual aspect of communication, that women are a vital part of the human race.☺