

The Philippine Women's Movement

# Claiming autonomy

by Josefa (Gigi) Francisco

*The Philippine women's movement has successfully defined its place alongside the nationalist democratic movement that toppled the dictatorship of former president Ferdinand Marcos. It has established its activist space alongside all the other movements that continue to work for the betterment of the country. But the call for an autonomous women's movement persists and one feminist who struggled for the women's place/space is raising questions.*

**I**n the pitched battles against the dictatorship of former president Ferdinand Marcos, the Philippine women's movement fought side by side with the rest of the nationalist democratic revolutionary movement. This revolutionary movement is still working to establish genuine national democracy in the Philippines but some, if not many, of the older Philippine feminists have decided to establish and guard their autonomy from it. The nationalist democratic revolu-

tionary movement was and, to a large degree, is still guided by a strategic program of political action and by a distinct and massive political organization that involved both legal and underground personalities. These functioned as a closely coordinated movement around the theory and practice of "democratic centralism."

The movement's primary players are activists of the First Quarter Storm, a period in the history of Philippine student activism characterized by mass mobilizations and camp-ins, a period that is a watershed in the entire history of the struggle to depose Marcos. Years later, many of the women activists from that period had either completely left direct political work but remained "allies" or active supporters of the nationalist democratic political force, or had been deployed for some semi-legal or legal support work for the nationalist democratic revolutionary movement. These women, whom I refer to as

the autonomous nationalist democratic feminists, were invigorated by feminist ideals and ideas that came outside of the ideological scope of the nationalist democratic framework.

The conjuncture that led to the autonomy of the women's movement involved three major developments that began in the first half of the 1980s and intensified up to its second half. The first development was the intense involvement of the nationalist-democratic revolutionary movement in legal activities within a wider, broader and politically more colorful anti-dictatorship struggle. By the second half of the 1980s, the political terrain had changed to one where legal and open party politics and social activism through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) had become a possible option for the revolutionary movement.

The second development was the ideological discourse on feminism. Women in the revolution-



A banner from the 1980s points to where women ought to be.

ary movement were discussing how feminism fitted into the nationalist democratic revolutionary framework. At around this time, views and strong feelings about feminism, or the women's liberation question, were circulating within the ranks of the nationalist democrats. Some activists were saying that "feminism was dividing the ranks of the united masses" and that "feminism was a bourgeois concern" and that the "woman question was secondary to the class question." Finally, there was the idea that "the woman question emanated not from patriarchy (which was a non-concept) but from the combined effects of capitalism and backward feudal values."

These views on the woman question were rooted in the Marxist analysis that does not recognize the existence of women's op-

pression and the exploitation of the power hierarchies and contradictions arising from the material basis and relations of production. In the Philippine revolutionary tradition, women's lower status is attributed to the backward feudal culture's continuing hold on people's minds. Capitalism's major sin is the commodification of women's labors and bodies.

But violence against women and the psycho-sexual oppression of women are aspects of women's conditions that have not and cannot adequately be explained by a Marxist, classical materialist view, outside of blaming capitalism for the corruption of people's humanity and undermining humane relationships. Marxist analysis does not recognize patriarchy or male power as a condition of oppression and exploitation. Its understanding of

patriarchy is limited to Engel's *Origins of the Family* treatise and, as such, is linked to the economic base or mode of production.

The third development was the political and organizational framework of organizing and mobilization among women. The autonomous nationalist democratic feminists felt that, by and large, the nationalist democratic revolutionary movement simply mobilized women as a social force for class and national issues but did not address their problems, problems that resulted from patriarchy, whatsoever as women. Furthermore, organizational relations within the militant nationalist democratic women's coalition that was established to act as the political center for women became more and more difficult.

It was against this backdrop did the call by nationalist demo-





"Women unite for human rights." declares this streamer, also from the '80s.

National Midweek

cratic feminists from KALAYAAN or the Katipunan ng Kababaihan para sa Kalayaan (League of Filipino Women for Freedom) for the "autonomy of the women's movement" increasingly became serious. This group, in fact, was not the result of the national democratic political machinery but was the outcome of the women's own efforts. The feminists' call for autonomy meant "not being subsumed under the organizational machinery of the revolutionary movement." But they did not mean to be separated from the goals and visions of the nationalist democratic agenda, which they wanted to continue supporting and advancing. In other words, the nationalist democratic feminists advocating for autonomy saw themselves as "allies" in advancing the nationalist democratic cause in the broader society. They saw themselves as networking for nationalist democratic formations, forg-

ing a united front with the middle classes and generating international solidarity for the Philippine struggle.

However, they strongly believed that an atmosphere of organizational respect, and not centralism which often meant toeing the official line, was absolutely necessary for feminists to be able to better pursue the discourse on the place of feminism in the ideology and program of national democracy.

Moreover, this group of feminists recognized the women's movement as "broader and more politically colorful than the militant nationalist democratic movement." They felt that their organizational identification to this broader movement was more effective in advancing the goals of both feminism and the nationalist democratic agenda.

Yet, the call for autonomy never reached clarity in operational and technical terms. It remained an idea at the level of substantive discussions and theoretical discourse within a limited group of women. The only thing clear to the group was that the organizational expression of their call was in the realm of legal and open politics.

Individually, separately, distinctly, these feminists pursued their call for autonomy

within their own organizations. Initially, the women maintained their links with one another, even launching joint activities. But the link was weak to begin with and got even weaker for a number of reasons. One, the call for autonomy was never formalized as a clear political agenda. Two, the women found themselves increasingly pulled away from each other by the intensity of their involvement in their respective women's groups. Three, the dynamics of their work in NGOs and personality differences led to a major falling out among the women. Thus, the already fragile ground for discussing feminism and the nationalist democratic struggle and for collectivizing the gains and problems related to autonomy was further eroded.

Despite these weaknesses, the activities of these women helped bring about significant changes in the women's movement, the most important of which was the establishment of several autonomous women's organizations and networks between the period of 1987-1991. This, in turn, resulted to the following: a nationwide reach of the women's movement, new forms of women's groups and networks which included crisis centers, women's studies, women's health organizing, feminist research groups and, much later, lesbian organizing and women organizing around the issues of official development aid (ODA) and law. This also resulted in the emergence of new approaches and styles in education for empowerment and in the projection of women's issues such as domestic violence, trafficking and the commodification of women, violence against migrant women and rape to the forefront of militant organizing and campaigns.

By the 1990s, each of these



so called "autonomous" women's groups and networks, spurred by the success of the initial years, began pursuing their own organizational plans and strategies more intensively. By this time too, whatever efforts there were at collective strategizing and consultations among existing women's networks were being hampered by personality conflicts, the necessity and pull of international work, fundraising and other similar considerations. The group of feminists that raised the call for autonomy drifted farther and farther away from each other even as they maintained their sisterhood. It was as if after their "feminist enclaves" had been secured, the individual women no longer saw the value of exerting efforts to "talk with each other." On the contrary, they were perhaps more inspired by talking with other women.

At this point, the original spirit that bound these women in their call for autonomy slowly died. It happened even before the nationalist democratic movement was split by its own ideological and political debate in 1992-1994, which, in turn, may have caused some of the feminists to become cynical about the ideological and political value of mass organizing and militant activism in the Philippines. Naturally, the cynics proceeded to distance themselves from the nationalist democratic revolutionary movement. The aim of enriching and revitalizing a mass movement, which was a major part of the original call for the women's movement's autonomy, was lost.

**T**oday, the question of autonomy continues to crop up; but the context has changed. The actors have changed. Perhaps even the political intent for raising the con-

cern for autonomy has also changed. Earlier, feminists raised the call for autonomy because they wanted to push a clear and defined feminist agenda alongside the nationalist democratic one. They raised the call for autonomy but believed that a relationship with the nationalist democratic revolutionary movement was important. Then, too, the nationalist democratic revolutionary movement was still reaching an organizational understanding of the woman question at the same time that the autonomous feminists were themselves seeking to clarify the essence and substance of their feminism. But all these have now changed.

Today, we no longer find a massive and monolithic nationalist democratic movement and political organization. The ideological and political debate that rocked it has produced three splits. Moreover, there are now stronger articulations of socialist feminism, green socialist feminism or nationalist socialist feminism across these different movements.

Women's groups that now visibly claim for themselves the title "autonomous women," and who have made efforts to distinguish themselves from politically aligned women's groups and networks, or would rather conduct women's activities and women-only advocacy do not seem to be as enthusiastic about nationalism anymore. Neither do they seem enthusiastic about political mobilizations and militant campaigns aimed at the revolutionary transformation of the State, or about educating and mobilizing the grassroots for revolutionary change. So tell, where lies the concern for autonomy?

Indeed, the question of autonomy for the women's movement is a critical one and having

been one of the women who first raised and struggled for it, I am with the other women in seeking answers in order that we may achieve new heights in our feminist politics. There are many questions about ourselves, our politics, our relationships that we need to address. A major demand in this whole exercise is to undertake the act of an internal critical examination of what we did, and are doing. How are we to conduct our relationships, politics, ethics and networking within the already clearly defined autonomous space of the women's movement, a space that Philippine feminists carved out through their earlier struggle? What did we feminists want and are wanting to achieve?

It is perfectly all right and it is indeed our right to carve out a space for women to love and celebrate with other women, or to put up crisis centers and shelters for women victim-survivors. What is not all right is for us to have the resources and network to create a gap between ourselves and the rest of the masses of poor Filipino women. ♪

*This article, originally a speech delivered before the Women's Legal Bureau (Philippines) was updated by Josefa (Gigi) Francisco for Women in Action.*

*Josefa (Gigi) Francisco is a socialist-feminist who has been a supporter of the Philippine struggle for national democracy at the same time that she was at the helm of the Philippine women's movement. Gigi was the former executive director of Women's Research and Resource Center (WRRRC)(Philippines). She is presently regional coordinator for Southeast Asia of Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN). Gigi teaches International Studies but whenever she can, she trains grassroots women's groups, community organizations and other non-governmental groups on women's empowerment and gender-fair development.*