

# Rethinking Identities

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*Editors note: Reggy Figer and Ray Nonnato Leyesa are summer interns from the College of Mass Communications of the University of the Philippines. This article is part of the requirements in their practicum with Isis International-Manila. This topic was assigned to them to get a glimpse of young Filipino men's perceptions on women and feminism.*

"Twee-wee-weet!"

Walking down the street, she hears the loud whistles coming from a group of men idling in front of a convenience store.

"Tweet-teeweew! SEXY!"

The woman ignores them. "It's just the way they are," she thinks.

Or is it?

Feminism, Philippine-style, has come a long way. It has always been there in the first place, from the *babaylan*

or *katalonan* who held exalted positions in ancient Philippine society. The *babaylan* or *katalonan* was usually a woman who performed rituals, healed the sick, and preserved and transmitted traditional knowledge. With the imposition of a patriarchal culture by the Spanish colonizers, Filipino women lost their honored status. Machismo became part of our culture and tradition, underlying even the ideas about egalitarianism that began to develop in the 20th century, at the beginning of which the Philippines came under the rule, then the tutelage and influence, of the Americans.

But despite the advances in the promotion of women's rights, studies show that consciousness of women's rights among Filipinos has grown slowly, and is limited to

such areas as the academe, the civil service and the professions.

Social and cultural biases continue to hamper the promotion of women's rights, including those fostered by religion and the educational system.

Has nothing really changed? Isn't it true that we have entered a new age, an age where minds are more liberated and people have a higher level of awareness? Do Filipino men still think the same way about women?

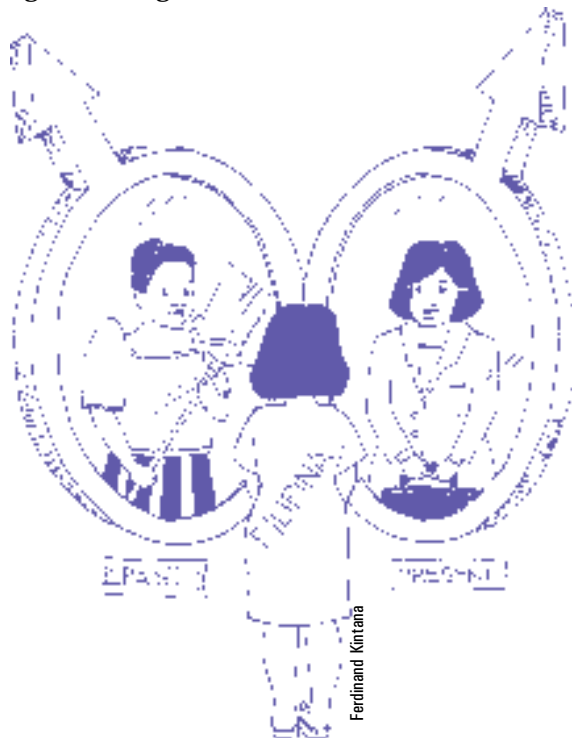
We are students (both male) of the University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication, majoring in communication research. Last summer, we spent our internship period at Isis International in Manila.

We wanted to know if Filipino males of today really think that women are capable of competing with men. You should understand, though, that what we did was not a complete study but rather a preliminary look into the question. Consider this as an opportunity to hear our opinions, and those of the students we also talked to.

We conducted a series of interviews with male students from three schools in the Metro Manila area: our own, the University of the Philippines, known for its liberalism and academic excellence; Adamson University, a Catholic institution; and Yamaha School of Music, where aspiring composers, lyricists and singers go for training.

Our first interviewees were Don Mauhay, a fourth-year political science student and Alvin de Silva, a history graduate, both from the University of the Philippines.

Don admitted that gender discrimination exists in the country. However, he strongly believes in the power of education and the inevitability of change.



Alvin agreed with what Don said. He pointed out that mass media plays a big role in the process, and also that men's views towards women evolve through the successive generations. It would be difficult to introduce and incorporate new ideas into a generation that already has an established lifestyle, he said. "For example, when your grandfather was growing up there was great inequality between men and women, and this was what he instilled in his children or grandchildren. As these generations become

more aware, there would be a change in their perceptions of women."

Next we met Ian Oscar Enage, 19, studying accountancy also at the University of the Philippines. His family lives in a rural area where women do not usually work outside the home. He described a woman's role in Philippine society as being rigidly defined by "certain behaviors, tasks and privileges associated with her sex." He thinks that this view has been slowly changing particularly in urban areas. Ian also expressed the need to empower women particularly in the social and political arenas.

We then met Rommel Osias, 19, a third-year management major, and Allan Villanueva, 20, second-year student of the Yamaha School of Music. They were pretty easy to spot in a crowd because of their luxurious, long hair.

Both agreed that the very essence of their lives, what and who they are today, comes from their strong mothers. Since being widowed, these women have devoted trying to pick up the pieces, making sense out of it, and working...and working! From that, they have realized that women have the capacity to do work. That woman can stand on their own feet. That women can actually make a difference!

Lastly, we met Christopher Cabatutan, 20, and a fourth-year student in computer engineering at the Adamson University. In the interview, he stressed that "women

should be involved in any sector of the society.” Their voices, opinions and ideas should be heard. Christopher cannot understand why older men still look at women as a weak sex, when in fact, women also take part in nation-building.

“Women also have the potential and abilities to make this country a better place to live in,” he explained. “We just need to make a collective effort to empower them. I guess our generation should take the

were courageous enough to express their sentiments about women’s issues. They realise and recognise the strength and power of women in nation-building.

As a matter of fact, Allan who is a musician has promised us to write a song on the struggle of women against the patriarchal system in the Philippines. He has also pointed out that women and men alike should help put up a music institution just for women “so that they could

Generally speaking, the attitudes of Filipino men towards females are becoming more positive. Modern ways of thinking and the realisation that women are entitled to equal opportunities are slowly entering the minds of Filipinos. The process, however, is very slow, but the gears are turning.

However, there are a lot of things left unexplained or that remain fuzzy. Among the questions that should be looked into is whether the

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initiative for this.”

Of course, men like Don, Alvin, Ian, Rommel, Allan and Christopher are a distinct minority on campus. Their views are nearly drowned out by the shrill interruptions of social and cultural biases, to the extent that they are even labelled as homosexuals for upholding feminism. Older men, in particular, either react negatively to feminism or they don’t care to think about it. As one village schoolteacher said, “What does that have to do with me?”

Everything in this world, in one way or another, has something to do with us. Sure, feminism is the struggle of women for equal rights. But there is more to it than that. Feminism is an attitude, an orientation, and a reconstruction of our relationships, the meanings of our lives. It is about rethinking identities. “A revolution,” as Ian so rightly says.

One thing is sure; these six men, young and educated,

make sense of their own individuality and expand their power.” They need to work on this, he said, because the Philippine music industry is still dominated by men.

Moreover, men are either actively or passively complicit in women’s oppression and so we should take an active role in challenging other men for women’s empowerment. “Just as I educate myself, I should also educate other men regarding this issue,” Allan declared.

What conclusions can we draw from these interviews?

Filipino women today are more aware of their unique contribution to society and thus have become self-confident and assertive. As a consequence, the men have started to share power in the spirit of partnership and complementarity. Survival in the 21st century will depend on this continuing partnership and on the restructuring of institutions supporting women empowerment.

socioeconomic status of individuals, or their place of residence (urban/rural) affects their perceptions of women. How do the elite differ from the rest of society? Does money have to do with it? What are the concrete actions we men have to do to protect and uphold women rights?

This last question, especially, is just left hanging in the air. Men are asked what they are going to do about it, and their answers right now are as clear as mud.

But still, there are things that should and could be done.

By demanding the equal distribution of power, most likely there would be a dramatic shift in our social priorities, our choices about how we live and what we consider important. This would also be a guide for men about how to become the men we really want to be—happier, healthier, more ethically consistent and living more emotionally resonant lives. ♪