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# A Revolution within a Revolution: Women Red Fighters in the Philippines

by Mithi Laya

*The writer examines the gender content of the Philippine national democratic revolution being waged by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), National People's Army (NPA) and National Democratic Front (NDF). Mithi Laya speaks from her own close observations of the movement, as well as from her encounters with several women revolutionaries during her integration/research in the Southern Tagalog region a few years ago. Women in Action has assigned her a pen name for security considerations.*

Most of the women involved in the underground revolutionary movement in the Philippines are unarmed and in clandestine organisations that support the armed struggle being waged by the communist-led

NPA. And, as many foreign groups and publications have themselves noted, the contribution of these clandestine organisations to the NPA's operations in the countryside for three decades now can not be underestimated. These organisations, where women play significant roles in the education and indoctrination, organising and resource mobilisation, comprise the backbone that has propped up the armed struggle, together with the support from the peasantry in areas under the movement's control or clout. These organisations, in turn, find their support base in members of a number of "legal," above-ground organisations—to the extent that the state, especially at the height of the dictatorship

of deposed president Ferdinand Marcos, consistently labelled certain people's organisations as mere "communist fronts" to discredit their legitimate demand for change altogether.

Be that as it may, women have been known to perform intelligence work for the armed movement, in addition to their "typical" role of couriers and caregivers of wounded NPA fighters. But still many others have braved physical and cultural barriers, and enlisted themselves as full-time NPA members. In the late 1980s, believed to be the ebb years of the revolution following the movement's tactical blunders and erosion of influence on the course of mainstream politics, one of every 10 Red fighters was a woman. Some women

have held leading positions in different NPA units and in the guerrilla army's command echelon. Also, at least two women for every three men were organised in the revolutionary mass movement in the countryside.

Women's participation in the armed struggle see-sawed in the early 1990s. In recent years, however, based on pronouncements of the Utrecht-based leaders of the National Democratic Front (or NDF, the umbrella organisation of revolutionary groups including the Communist Party of the Philippines or CPP, and the NPA) published military reports, the number of women in the guerrilla movement has increased.

It should be noted, though, that women revolutionaries did not come about only in the emergence of the communist-led national democratic revolution in the 1960s. The country's history of resistance to colonisation—Spanish and American—and to the occupation of the Japanese in the 1930s is punctuated with stories of women's heroism in war and in crisis. Written accounts of women joining the revolution (and leading tactical battles) are available but rare. Only a few names stand out—Gabriela Silang, Rosa Sevilla, Trinidad Tecson and Melchora Aquino, and the accounts of their leadership and combat skills are without much detail at that.

### **The revolution's feminist ideology**

The growth of the NPA membership and mass base nationwide, as well as the resurgence of underground revolutionary activity, can be

attributed to the present crisis in the country. Women, in particular, pushed to the edge of poverty and sexual and social violence, are being radicalised by their own experiences. Then and now, women have volunteered time, talent and treasure (whatever material possessions they may have had) in the name of the

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national democratic revolution's goals of social justice and lasting peace.

The triad of the CPP, NPA and NDF advancing the revolution has shown an appreciation of the woman's question—that is, the recognition of the historical exploitation of women as a sector within a social class and as a gender; the need to transform an unjust social system along with the task to liberate women in all aspects; and the indispensable role of women to achieve revolutionary victory.

Guiding the translation of these principles to revolutionary "praxis" are policies, con-

cepts and courses about the woman question and the women's liberation movement.

- ♦ The movement's Special Course on Women is part of basic revolutionary education that discusses the problems and interests of the sector within a class and as a gender; roots out several women's issues to social defects and historical exploitation of women; and calls on women to unite and struggle for sexual and social liberation.

- ♦ Documents such as "The Women's Liberation Movement" and "Summed Up Experience of the Women's Liberation Movement in the Philippines" lay the theoretical and practical framework of the women's movement in the context of the national democratic revolution.

- ♦ The communist party's Policy on Marriage stresses equal rights of man and woman in a relationship, shared responsibility in child rearing and family, and "principled" or class-predicated love above physical attraction. The policy also allows for abortion and divorce on health reasons and a short list of serious and legitimate arguments and conditions. Polygamy is banned.

- ♦ The NPA's "Three Points of Discipline" and "Eight Points of Attention" explicitly require all members to respect women and penalise sexual opportunists.

- ♦ The eighth item in the NDF agenda states that one of the tasks of the national democratic revolution is to "liberate women in all aspects."

Indeed, there is evidence of the revolutionary movement's effort to address the woman question in its political agenda and organisational ethics.



However, parallel to this effort is a long-running criticism of the movement's "feminist ideology" that classifies women as merely one among the many "oppressed sectors" requiring emancipation. The movement's definition of gender oppression, it has been pointed out, is still hinged on a class analysis that ignores the commonalities of discrimination that women suffer across class, race and tradition. Embedded in such a feminism, critics within and outside the movement have noted, is a stratification of the "liberations" the revolution has to achieve, within which women are only a special group or sector and women's emancipation is only secondary to class emancipation. Consequently, the revolutionary movement's discourse of women and gender equality is more subdued than its admirable dissection of the ills plaguing Philippine society in general, and its carefully crafted agenda. Also, while constantly reminding the state of its obligations under the Geneva Conventions governing rules of war and treatment of prisoners, the movement has been silent on the issue of women and children in armed conflict. Recent media accounts, moreover, report the NPA's recruitment of 12- to 15-year-olds to become combatants.

### **Herstories**

The problem with narrating the stories of present-day women revolutionaries is the lack of support—documents, statistics, corroborating testimonies—for a scrutiny of a clandestine movement's appreciation of gender issues and women's concerns. Obviously, this is partly due to

security considerations. But there have been women "remolded" and "tempered" by the revolution who recall moments of their triumphs and tragedies as women fired by their political and ideological commitment.

*Kumander Liwayway.* Almost legendary in the oral history of peasants and comrades in Southern Quezon, she is known to have roamed the hills, crossed the rivers and streams, and visited every peasant's house to patiently explain the legitimacy of the revolution. *Kasamang* (Pilipino word for "comrade") *Liwayway*, more popularly known as "Kumander Liwayway," is said to be the first woman NPA leader in the area.

Peasants and Red fighters recall her to be as strong and vigilant "as a man." She led many tactical offensives to victory, captured government soldiers, and seized arms and ammunition from the enemy that became part of the NPA's earliest arsenal in the region. She also repelled several enemy attacks, sometimes converting defensive situations to offensive attacks. She allegedly lost her left breast in a gun battle.

The CPP-NPA trained her well enough to maximise her physical capacity, military skills and courage. But *Kumander Liwayway's* renown in the revolution was short-lived. When she became intimate with a comrade and had sexual relations with him, she was demoted and soon acquired the status of an "outcast." She could not stand the isolation and loneliness away from her partner after the NPA assigned him far from her.

She quit not long after.

*Ka Marita.* A member of an

NPA support service unit, *Ka Marita* faced the complicated life of a guerrilla fighter and a single parent to two children.

In between her revolutionary tasks, she taught her boy the alphabet and basic arithmetic. Her daughter suffered a mental illness and during one of her frequent attacks of manic depression, she was raped by a lumpen villager.

The revolutionary movement immediately gave justice to *Ka Marita's* daughter by penalising the rapist. But the incident raises a question that has surfaced many times for women revolutionaries caught in a bind between the demands of the revolution and those of the family. It is easy enough to espouse day care and other support services for women wishing to engage in production work, but participation in a revolution is an entirely different matter. Underlying this is an ever-constant tension that suggests the incompatibility of family with revolutionary struggle.

*Ka Chit.* She earned the respect of comrades for being a good writer and teacher. But, coming from a middle-class, "petty bourgeois" background, she experienced much difficulty adjusting to a guerrilla lifestyle. An intellectual, she found some peasant comrades too simplistic and anti-theory. A year in the guerrilla zones, however, she married a peasant cadre.

After about two years, her comrades in the party denied her and her husband's application for a "honeymoon." By then *Chit*, who was in her mid-thirties, was concerned that she was still childless even as her biological clock ticked away. The couple had a heated



Women guerillas: caught in the maelstrom of their social and gender liberation

argument with some party cadres, and thereafter left the movement. They eventually returned to their respective assignments. All they just really needed and wanted was a month-long honeymoon.

*Ka Carmen.* She deprived herself of petty bourgeois caprices, struggled against family and social pressure, and dedicated her time and effort to the revolution. In 1989, she met her lover—a party cadre legally married to another woman with four children. At first deterred by the movement’s prohibition on extramarital affairs, the two soon relented and carried on a secret relationship.

Carmen became pregnant after four years; and again after two years. She refused to reveal the real father of her children to “spare” her lover from party discipline. She opted instead to bear the criticism of comrades and disciplinary actions meted out for violation of the movement’s policies on courtship and marriage.

Ridden with emotional contradictions and the practical problem of raising two children in secret while still serving the revolution, she decided to leave both her lover and the movement for the two were equally uncompromising. This pained Carmen for the movement constituted her family and her life before the crisis.

A decade after, Carmen was again in a protest rally. She never saw her lover again, she said, but admitted to still loving him, the father of her two children, at the same time that she could neither forsake her political principles.

*Ka Wendy.* Martyred at age 20, she died in battlefield and left a reputation of being a charming comrade. Other than this writer, however, nobody else knew she was a lesbian. Did she find no need to confide this to her comrades? Was her sexual orientation too petty or too private an issue to share with an organisation to which one swears absolute and unconditional allegiance?

## Gender awareness for progressives

For a movement that calls itself progressive, the revolutionary organisations involved in the armed struggle in the Philippines need further sensitisation to gender and women’s issues that their own women cadres face. Despite theoretical guarantees and organisational mechanisms, “women’s issues” are yet to be included in the agenda of revolutionary meetings and activities—more so in light of the dominance of men in the movement’s leadership—from the basic fighting unit to the party’s central command.

Women bring with them a whole new management and leadership approach evolved from their direct experience of alienation and marginalisation, and this will be especially relevant in filling the need to refine the movement’s policy and practices regarding such matters as the disposition of married revolutionaries; upbringing of children of full-time revolutionary couples; handling of comrades under disciplinary action for violation of the movement’s marriage rules; venues for discussing emotional contradictions; and the handling of cases of lesbians and ageing women in the revolution.

The experiences of comrades Liwayway, Marita, Chit and others illustrate how women, in their being women, are caught in the maelstrom of their social and gender liberation—even as they stake their lives in a revolution for national liberation. ☺