

Tapping Media for Women and Governance

By Tonette T. Orejas

MANILA—A few months after Edna Tabanda won as vice governor, the second highest political post in Benguet province in the hinterlands of northern Philippines, she realised it was not enough to try making governance work for women.

In Benguet, where poverty is stark due to minimal resources for development, she had to come to terms with the fact that she needed to reach out more to her constituents and they to her, if governance must be participatory and uplifting to many.

Tabanda had various messages for women in tribal communities who, although contributing a lot to the province's commercial vegetable production, are uncompensated or underpaid for their labour. She told them: Women are capable of being leaders, of holding public office. Women can participate and benefit from community development. Women have equal rights as men.

She clarified it isn't herself she wants to project even if she is a rarity in the male-dominated politics of Benguet. That she made it in politics and is exerting efforts to make it truly serve ordinary folks is already an important statement.

Tabanda espouses transformative leadership, the kind that improves women's position in society and that

provides resources and opportunities for women to meet their needs and realise their full potential.

"It's not all traditional politics," says Tabanda, president of the Network of Elected Filipino Women for Good Governance, referring to the politics of patronage that is still the norm in the Philippines.

Gender equality is at the core of her messages. How to say it isn't a problem. How to beam it is the problem. Media or the press, she thought, could help her. The few women who are already in local governments like Tabanda—a mere two to 30 percent in the Asia-Pacific region as of June 2001, according to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP)—have long wanted to tap the media.

It is for the likes of Tabanda, and those in governance and decision-making, that the recent Media and Transformative Leadership Congress was organised, said Khunying Supatra Masdit, president of the Center for

Asia-Pacific Women in Politics (CAPWIP), one of the organisers.

"Media is the frontier to be conquered. It's undoubtedly an essential element in the campaign for a culture of transformative leadership," she said.

Tough Frontier

It isn't an easy frontier, according to journalist Melinda Quintos-De Jesus, executive director of the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility, one of the congress organisers.

Media is a double-bladed sword. "It is both part of the problem as it is part of the solution," De Jesus told some 250 Asian participants. It is not easy becoming an attractive copy in radio, television, newspapers and on the Internet. The likes of Tabanda face tough challenges ahead to put women's issues, concerns and aspirations to the attention of the public and policy makers.

The scant attention lies in age-old conventions of journalism where there is, as De Jesus pointed out, a bias for bad news and out-of-norm news.

The drive for profit likewise eases out stories that don't boost ratings, circulation and advertisements. Technological advancements, which media empires have used to expand audience

reach, have focused “only on the news interesting to and concerning only the wealthiest and most powerful nations of the world.”

“The expansion has not been accompanied with proportionate inclusion of people around the world,” De Jesus noted. News empires, in being too big, have lost grasp of issues that are genuinely relevant. She observed that the press has “lost touch with the people who live on the margins, effectively relegating their issues to the margins of the policy conversation.”

Media, much comprised now of the middle class than of the working class who at first ran it, has lost links with the ordinary folk. In certain instances, she said this has resulted in a “stronger alliance of the press with those in power and in the establishment rather than those out of the power loop.”

Everything’s not so bleak, though. Thanks to a public that’s critical, De Jesus said the free press around the world has done some soul-searching over questions of content and conduct.

Telling the Untold

It has not been impossible to work with media and to put gender issues into the media, some groups have learned. Bandana Rana of Sancharika Samuha (Women’s Communicators Forum) in Nepal has approached the work with a clear view of media’s role.

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“One of the most important aspects of communications for women leaders and development workers, therefore, is actual outreach to mainstream media as the largest informer and maker of public opinion,” she said.

The media, in her mind, should be a partner. “Unless the voices and activities of women leaders are reported, from progressive women’s viewpoints, and on an on-going basis, stereotypes and generalisations will be perpetuated.”

To Rana, a lot is at stake; there are still stories that are largely untold. “The best of women and development work can also be rendered useless if not adequately and appropriately reported by the media.”

Rana’s group, working since 1997, has improved gender coverage in the media through gender training

for journalists, monitoring of women’s issues in news, providing news service, holding monthly talk programmes between journalists and social workers and award-giving for outstanding reports on gender issues.

There are some journalists in mainstream media whose writings are focused on gender issues. One such network of journalists is the Women’s Feature Service (WFS), a UNESCO project which dates back to 1978. The WFS in India sees its features published in over 50 newspapers and magazines in the country and abroad, according to its executive director Angana Parekh.

Building bridges with media, she said, isn’t only about landing in the news. The common ground is credibility and trust, where distortion or sensational reporting of facts has no place.

Situations do vary. In Tabanda’s case, the press works in the city, hardly coming to far-flung villages.

“In my case, I have to innovate,” Tabanda said, announcing plans to publish newsletters using the local language, training persons in development communication and trying out the proven ways to say the untold about women.

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