

Changing RA All the Rules

WORKING for the REVOLUTION ALONE will not assure women of their PLACE in the new society. WOMEN must work to specifically ENSURE THEIR RIGHTS.

by Hayat Imam

It is in Princess' nature to be an activist. As a student, she had already been involved in issues that set the directions of the political and social climate in the Philippines. In the late '50s, she became a representative of the University of the Philippines' Student Council. There, she met fellow council member Dodong (Francisco) Nemenzo, who later became her husband. She credits Dodong for her political awakening.

At that time, the McCarthy period and the "red scare" were at their height and very few people admitted openly to being socialists. But even as a university student, Dodong espoused socialist views and promoted readings, discussions and sharing of information about the socialist analysis. Despite some initial resistance, Princess felt challenged and provoked by these thoughts.

Socialism offered a vision of a society that would minimize the inequalities in the access to and control of resources. It embodied a spirit of collective sharing and mutual aid that would reduce the alienation and dehumanization in society.

Despite the recent "failure" of the socialist experience in many countries and all the mistakes committed in the name of socialism, Princess feels that this vision is still inspiring.

In the '60s, women activists thought they were on equal footing with their male comrades when it came to involvement in issues. It took some time before they realized the crux of the problem: That women did not identify or choose the issues to which they were applying themselves. The issues which concerned women and moved them deeply were not being addressed or taken seriously.

Even among progressive couples, when it came to family relationships, old stereotypes slipped in. Women were expected to put primary emphasis on looking after the family and the household.

Theoretically, the socialists did deal with the question of women. But, in reality, the socialists' systems became subsumed to patriarchy. Princess believes that social movements are progressive only while the struggle is going on. But once established, states become conservative and family relationships are looked at in the same old way.

According to Princess, the women's struggle is indeed the "longest revolution."



Princess Nemenzo: government persecution forced her underground and separated her from her children.

The cycle will continue to repeat itself unless women themselves define and make sure of their own roles within the system. The women's struggle, Princess agrees, is indeed "the longest revolution."

To sustain herself, Princess gets strength and inspiration from her mother who was a great influence on her. Princess' mother was a professional, an academic who earned a doctorate degree and organized women during her time as president of various women's groups. In the 1930s, she worked for women's right to vote.

The Personal Side

Princess found out early enough that a woman who wants to apportion her time between her family and a profession by which she can contribute to the larger society will always find herself in a dilemma. Whatever decision a woman makes, she has to grapple with feelings of guilt.

Princess and Dodong were married when she was 20 and had just graduated from college. Both of them then went to the University of Manchester in England to study. Soon after, Princess had her first child. She managed to look after the baby,

breastfeed for six months and write her thesis all at the same time. Dodong helped care for the child and supported her academic work as well. But when she became pregnant again, Princess, together with her eldest child, came home to the Philippines to have her baby. After eight months, she left the children with her parents and went back to England.

Three years later, when Princess and Dodong returned to the Philippines, Princess was shocked to find that her two boys did not know her at all. Pained, she vowed that she would win them back. She eventually did but so many years later, her second son would still remind her that "she left him."

When they came back, Princess and Dodong tried to live normal lives even as they continued their political work. Princess started teaching at the Philippine Science High School when her third and last child was about a year old.

But life was never normal. People were always coming in Princess and Dodong's home that it was a veritable "headquarters." Their children grew up in this environment.

When martial law was declared in 1972, Princess and Dodong's only choice was to leave their children with their family again and go underground. During this period of hiding, they could only see their children infrequently and, usually, only one at a time. After three months, the military caught up with Princess and Dodong and they were both jailed, Princess for six months and Dodong for over a year.

In prison and even among torturers, poverty and class also made a difference. Students, workers and peasants were the most brutally tortured. As an academic, Dodong was treated with some deference. Still, he was beaten, threatened, grilled and put in solitary confinement for long periods.

The women's detention center was located in the bachelor officers' quarters. As a result, Princess and the other women detainees were subjected to constant sexual harassment. One officer in charge of operations came up frequently with phony reasons to bring Princess to his office for so

called interrogations. When he began to summon her at night, Princess put her foot down and categorically refused to go. Princess was released earlier than Dodong so she made it a point to visit him every Sunday with her children.

It was a most strenuous time, especially for the children for whom it was impossible to be like normal children. Instead of having fun or socializing, the children spent their weekends visiting their father in jail. But when they heard that their parents had been arrested, the children were glad. "At least we know where to find you now."

In the meantime, Princess was struggling to make ends meet. She took a job as editor with the Institute of Philippine Culture (IPC) at the Ateneo University of Manila where she later became a researcher. At the IPC, Princess started working on land reform issues and population policies.

Meanwhile, Dodong had been trying for a long time to get a visa for a research post at the Australian National University in Canberra. Then, in 1982, Dodong was finally allowed to go and Princess felt no hesitation in packing her whole family off to Australia. The move turned out to be a very positive experience for the whole family. Finally, they found the time for enjoying the simple pleasures of picnics, travelling and being close to one another.

Because Princess's children grew in an activist family, it is not surprising to see that they are all politicized in varying degrees. They became so even when Princess and Dodong refrained from putting any pressure on them to join activist groups. After only a year in Canberra, Princess's two sons returned to the Philippines and became increasingly involved in political work and political demonstrations.

At one of the key political rallies against Marcos in 1984, police shot Princess's oldest son in the back. The bullet punctured his lung, the liver and the diaphragm and missed his spine by only an inch. Princess rushed home and found her son lying in a hospital's Intensive Care Unit. Doctors said that the boy was saved by the fact that, being a runner and an athlete, his

lungs were in great shape. Princess still remembers the outpouring of support from both friends and strangers from Australia and the Philippines. People created a fund and sent in contributions large and small.

Role in the Women's Movement

While it was difficult to find work in Australia, Princess was nevertheless extremely active. She was part of solidarity groups against oppression and tyranny in the Philippines and Asia. She also worked closely with the peace movement and the Women and Development Networks of Australia. She collaborated with feminists and developed her international networks. Princess also contributed to the discussions on the impact of development on Third World women and expanded her own feminist awareness.

By this time, the *Katipunan ng Kababaihan para sa Kalayaan* (League of Women for Freedom) or KALAYAAN was being set up in the Philippines. Even though she was not in the Philippines at the time of its organization, Princess was very much a part of KALAYAAN and contributed from afar by fundraising for the group in Australia. Upon her return to the Philippines in 1985, Princess formally joined KALAYAAN.

Previous to Princess's return, in 1983 three months after the assassination of Filipino political leader Benigno Aquino, Filipino women organized huge anti-dictatorship demonstrations. Women went on to create a whole range of women's groups, all organized around the anti-Marcos struggle. On the occasion of the International Women's Day in 1984, Filipino women held a national conference and decided to form GABRIELA, a coalition named after a Filipina revolutionary who fought against the country's Spanish colonizers. The individual letters also stand for General Assembly Binding Women for Reform, Integrity, Leadership and Action. As a coalition, GABRIELA served as an umbrella for organizations of various political persuasions.

The 1986 presidential elections changed the nature of GABRIELA. There was

internal dissension between groups who wanted to support Corazon Aquino in the elections and those who wanted to boycott. The latter prevailed in the internal GABRIELA debates, causing a number of organizations to resign. Those who remained formed a smaller coalition that was more clearly identified with the national democratic movement. Princess was elected Secretary General of GABRIELA's Manila chapter. She later became its chairperson.

The Fight for Reproductive Rights

Coming back to the Philippines, Princess found women organizing around important issues like prostitution, trafficking, equal pay for equal work and violence against women. But glaringly absent were discussions on reproductive rights and abortion. The issue of reproductive health was coming up among some health care groups but the issue did not figure in the field of human rights.

In 1985, for the first time, a KALAYAAN forum on International Human Rights Day declared women's rights as human rights. A speaker added reproductive rights as a new dimension to the women's struggle. Many human rights activists, including prominent people, had difficulty with this concept because, until that time, human rights had only been discussed in the context of political and military repression.

For a long time, the concept of reproductive rights remained theoretical. It became real only in the context of the writing of the new Constitution of the Philippines in 1986.

The discussions on the Constitution moved Princess into action. She began to organize around the issue of reproductive rights and, with other women, developed a counter-strategy to the "pro life" groups that were organizing heavily to have the rights of the fetus included in the Constitution. Women's groups sent a petition with hundreds of signatures to the Constitutional Commission asking it to deny the "pro life" demands because they would seriously limit women's lives.

As a concession to their lobbying efforts, the Constitutional Commission reformulated the provision in question to provide "equal protection to the mother." But it also clearly included "equal protection to the unborn." This process, though disappointing, deepened the consciousness of many women. Princess was convinced that it was now imperative to continue organizing on the issues of reproductive health and women's rights to control their own bodies. By this time too, Princess had already committed herself to women's reproductive rights and self-determination as well as to democratizing the rural financial system through people's and women's participation.

But an organization was needed in order for initial efforts to continue. So, in 1987, Princess and her colleagues set up Woman Health, whose mission is to promote, defend and advance women's reproductive rights and self-determination. Today, Woman Health's work is conducted with an awareness of and attention to the particular period and cultural setting of the Philippines.

The organization deals with the issues of reproductive rights within the context of a comprehensive women's health program and within the framework of a third world country affected by international economic forces. Princess says it is important to understand how all these forces affect our health and our lives and also how they affect our ability to defend these rights for ourselves.

While Princess's primary involvement may be in the specific field of reproductive rights, her feminist analysis of society is so much more comprehensive. Princess's vision goes beyond greater women's involvement in the system. She is not satisfied that there are more places for women in the system; she wants the entire system changed. Only in this way, Princess says, will women truly participate in shaping the world. "We don't just want a piece of the pie. We want to change the recipe.")

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