

Vignette: Exemplifying Gender and Governance

7wo women, a generation apart, now infuse local governance with the unmistakable hues of gender: one a housewife, the other a medical doctor, both forced into politics by extraordinary circumstances.

Soft-spoken and unassuming, Hilongos Vice Mayor Altagracia Villafior, now in her 80s, started as a Municipal Health Officer in the mid-50's. Two decades later, she turned to private practice. She wryly says that it amounted to the same thing because she just as freely dispensed with medicines and her services. Another near-two decades later, she was "forced" to run for mayor and did such a good job that she was reelected twice although statutory limits kept her from a fourth term. She has been Hilongos vice mayor since 2001 and the GBI project's staunchest champion in Hilongos.



Scratch the surface and the parallels are striking between Gracing, as she is fondly called by colleagues, and the articulate Sorsogon Mayor Sally Lee, who is in her 60's: informal mentoring in politics by male kin (a father-mayor for the former, a spouse-governor for the latter); priority programs that care for the weak and the vulnerable – day care centers for Gracing and centers for victims of gender violence and senior citizens among others, for Sally; a premium on health, nutrition and the environment manifested in Gracing's urging land-poor townsfolk to plant vegetables in pots, plastic bags, backyards, old *bancas* (rudimentary fishing boats); and Sally's public toilet project to curb water pollution; and the list can go on.



Both are feisty, forthright and hold their ground on matters of principle. During her first year in office, Sally closed down a public hospital that was bleeding the city budget; Gracing demanded and got a generous supplemental GAD budget to fund, primarily, the travel for a 36-person contingent to a project's training workshop in Bohol, vowing no one would be left behind.

Early into Sally's term, the rising incidence of cases of domestic gender-based violence compelled the establishment of two GAD support structures: a City Gender and Development Council (GADC) and a halfway-house for victims of domestic violence. Created through an Executive Order in 2002, GADC is a multi-sectoral body composed of 15 representatives from NGOs, academe and government agencies engaged in health

and gender advocacy, and in implementing health and GAD programs and projects. The latter, *Balay Bukas-Palad* (Welcome House), is a solid three-story structure built through a generous P1 million allocation from the Mayor's Office.

Gracing confesses to an abiding love for people, growing up among them, feeding them and tending to their needs, settling disputes, and seeking redress for battered wives. It is no wonder that during her watch, the number of day care centers multiplied from seven in 1993 to 63 currently, in 51 barangays. Credit this to her conscientious fund-raising from all sources: from the central office, the LGU, and even from her former patients.

Though cognizant of the need for some basic infrastructure (such as barangay roads), Gracing prioritizes human development through interlinked programs of health, nutrition and education. She ended her nine-year term as mayor with P9 million in savings (used to partly finance a new spanking *munisipyo* by the incumbent mayor).

Gracing lauds the increasing democratization in decision-making as manifested, she says, in the fact that people's organizations (POs) are now involved in planning at the barangay level; GAD allocations are discussed by the barangay council and don't remain the sole prerogative of the barangay captain; and barangays now submit plans to the municipality, which used to exclude the former from decision-making.

After all is said and done, what difference does the project make?

Groping for words, Sally, perhaps, says it best: "In my first three years as mayor, so many programs were put in place, yet I could not feel them; so much was spent, yet I could not see it. We wanted to be assessed. We had much learning as part of the League of Cities, but I still felt I was in the dark. We are part of eight international programs, UNDP, UN Habitat, etc. for which we are thankful. But the WAND-UNIFEM project taught us assessment and planning, budgeting and strategizing."

Indeed, GRRB, with its unrelenting thoroughness, is making all the difference.

Notes

- ¹ National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women "Terminal Report, Local Level Gender Budget Initiative in the Philippines" (Manila: 2005).
- ² Anything that benefits women, or women and men, is attributed to the GAD budget, e.g. vaccines or medicines. A comic example is the immunization of both female and male carabaos.
- ³ Staff members of national government agencies are required to wear Filipino dress to office every Monday.
- ⁴ "Terminal Report, Local Level Gender Budget Initiative in the Philippines", *Ibid*.
- ⁵ Such as state universities and colleges (SUCs) and government-owned and controlled corporations (GOCCs)

- ⁶ The three other countries are India, Morocco and Uganda. Sixteen countries are covered by the national-level GBI project.
- ⁷ Full socio-economic profiles of Hilongos and Sorsogon City are found in Annexes 3 and 13, respectively.
- ⁸ Dorotan is a social activist and development management consultant with extensive experience and expertise in programs related to health, gender, governance and sustainable development, among others. Annex 1 lists project staff members, consultants and resource persons.
- ⁹ Originally the project was to run for a year but various contingencies reduced the project period to ten months.

References

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