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Women in Revolution: The Philippine Version

Evelyn Miranda-Feliciano

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FILIPINO WOMEN IN HISTORY

Our legends, pre-Spanish records and historical literature reveal that Filipino women had been on an equal footing with men as a matter of course and were in the forefront of many struggles. The creation account of man and woman in the legend of *Malakas* and *Maganda* (Strong and Beautiful) showed that both emerged from one bamboo tube simultaneously in partnership and togetherness, bettering at first glance the rib story in Genesis. Women in the pre-Spanish and early Philippines (before 1600) inherited property equally with their brothers. Women engaged in commerce as well as men and could enter into contracts and business arrangements without consulting their husbands. When married they could have babies only when they wanted and initiate divorce if they so chose. Women were central to the religious life of early Filipinos as priestesses though there were male priests as well.

But the three centuries of Spanish rule crushed that freedom and egalitarianism. The strong 'machismo' spirit of the Castilian culture prevailed. Now, the Filipina was put under the total control of men—father, brother, husband, priest, soldier, lover. She was domesticated in the convent where she was taught to pray, suffer, accept God's will and do intricate needlework in the process.

Towards the twilight of Spanish rule, one woman by the name of Gregoria de la Cruz carried the momentum of the revolutionary movement after her husband, Andres Bonifacio, the founder of the Philippine Revolution, was treacherously killed by a rival faction. And so the ascent of Corazon Aquino to the presidency, after the assassination of her very popular husband, has its models in our historical past. It really did not come as a total surprise at all.

FILIPINO WOMEN IN THE FEBRUARY REVOLUTION

Let us go back to EDSA and the revolutionary days of February 1986. On that nerve-wracking Monday, the 24th, which dawned with a teargas [P. 344](#) attack on the vigilantes by the Marcos men, the defection of low-flying Sikorsky helicopters from the Air Force, the false alarm of Marcos' departure and the massive turn-out of citizens on to the streets, I spoke to four women of differing stations, ages and circumstances, and they had only one answer to my question: 'Why are you here?'

A young mother who was suckling her child on the road embankment answered: 'I want my little one to grow up free. It's for her that I am here.' And we smiled and understood each other. At noontime, I sat next to a pudgy, middle-aged woman on the grassy spot under a miserable-looking coconut tree by the side of Gate 2 of Camp Aguinaldo. She told me she was a retired *comadrona*, a midwife from a town public hospital. And she was there along with a niece and two other women neighbours because she had made a vow two years ago to attend all cause-oriented rallies since Ninoy's

assassination. Now she wanted Marcos out. 'He has oppressed us long enough. Now, we will show him he cannot forever kick us around.'

By mid-afternoon, we edged our way closer to the other Camp across the thickly populated avenue. We sat on the street embankment along with countless others. To my right was a young college girl from central Philippines with her brother. Very politicized, extremely articulate, she foresaw a better country with the kind of struggle that we were in. 'We may die,' she expressed fearlessly. 'But that's the price of freedom.' To my left was a well-looking grandmother just helped by her maid to sit beside me. I smiled at her and said, 'You should be taking your siesta at home at this time.' She side glanced at me and in good humour glared: 'And miss a piece of the action? No, no, no. My whole family has been here since two days ago. My grandsons and granddaughters. If they are not afraid to lay down their lives for democracy, why should I? After all, I am already old.' I squeezed her hand resting on the cement. 'You are admirable, I agree with you,' I said.

During the revolution itself, the voice of hope, anguish and glory was a woman's, who almost single-handedly broadcast to millions of Filipinos through Radio Veritas events that were unfolding at EDSA and elsewhere. She practically pushed us to join the revolution from our sleepy town of some 60 kilometres or so away. And when the radio transmitters were put out of action by the Marcos hatchetmen, she continued from somewhere secret—inspiring, goading, appealing. June Keithley was also a heroine.

Finally, we find the icons and pictures of Mary, the Blessed Mother of the Catholic Church prominently hoisted up on the gate of the rebel [p.345](#) camp; held high to ward off oncoming tanks and soldiers like *talismans*; flapped against walls and jauntily carried about by devotees. 'Why the predominance of Mary's image?' asked one evangelical participant, belligerently, of a priest lecturer in a session on 'Theological Reflections on the Revolution'. The priest quietly and patiently explained the role of symbols in life and especially in religion. And although he acknowledged the possible abuse and misuse of symbols in the Catholic Faith, he also pointed out their benefits and advantages. 'Apparently,' he said, 'we, the Filipino people found in the symbol of Mary the spirit of grace, nurture, inner strength and all encompassing love. Now what soldier for instance, would kill his mother? And as we all know our revolution was almost bloodless. It was even winsome, festive and laughing. Only a woman's touch can do that.'

Now a woman's touch prevails in the highest seat of the land. Meanwhile, the rest of us have gone back to our usual work at home, in the office, in the field, in the classroom. And we find hardly any conflict between keeping vigil in the streets and wiping running noses. Or holding up placards against tortures and looting, and hanging clothes out to dry. Or throwing confetti out of office windows, and throwing out garbage. Filipino women, despite the prevailing impression existing in a 'machismo' society, intuitively know what they want and what they are able to do. They also know how to go about their business without aggression and the infringing of ethical propriety. I also feel that the 20-year iron rule of Marcos helped sharpen our sensibilities and goaded many of us to interest ourselves in causes, issues and principles. We were forced to look beyond our curtained windows to see the lives of others, the tragic fate of our nation, and were challenged to do something. And that golden opportunity to act and be counted, came in the last gasping years of the Marcos regime. Its crowning glory was the February revolution.

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

But then we ask: From the biblical perspective, how should we regard this tremendous and growing power of women in our land? I am reminded of a woman judge in the Old Testament who is mentioned in this matter-of-fact way: 'Now Deborah, a prophetess, the

wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time' ([Judges 4:4](#)). The writer uses no condescending tone here. No effort to take special significance from the fact that the judge and the prophet was a woman. His is an objective, straightforward narration of fact. This seems to say that God, [P. 346](#) the Lord of history, takes it for granted that at some point in a people's life, women may rule and exercise power. And there is nothing extraordinary in this arrangement. Huldah, too, was a prophetess during the reign of kings in the Old Testament. Queen Esther did her part to save her own people, the Jews, in her exiled land in Persia. England in more modern times has been ruled by strong women, and has had Margaret Thatcher sitting on the Prime Minister's seat. Golda Meir of Israel was well-loved by her people. Prime Minister Bandaranaike had her time of leadership in her country, Sri Lanka. So did Indira Gandhi. And now Corazon Aquino of the Philippines. Scripture is explicit about husbands being heads of their wives, but nowhere does it mention that only men can be heads of their countries. That silence gives women a lot of divine and democratic space to expand their potential to leadership and to become world-class leaders.

Furthermore, the rise of female power can be regarded in general terms as an outworking of God's Kingdom values here on earth. Values of equality, of dignity of persons, of justice, of holistic development. For too long, women have been looked upon as mere appendages to the exploits and achievements of men. They have been relegated to the position of second class citizens whose main and sole domain is the hearth and the home. During the snap election campaign last year, the former dictator of the Philippines twitted the now President Corazon Aquino as only good for the bedroom. It was one of his greatest mistakes, which the women voters never forgot. Marcos considered Filipino womanhood so low in importance, yet himself lived under the thumb of his wife, Imelda.

And it is tragic that such thinking about women is still prevailing among people of Christian orientation and even among the most orthodox. We always seem conveniently to forget the affirmation of sexual equality of the 1st century Christians, as expressed by Paul in [Galatians 3:28](#).

There is neither Jew nor Greek;
There is neither slave or free;
There is neither male or female
for you are all one
in Christ Jesus.

I believe that the oneness of which Paul speaks is not a monochrome denial of racial, class or sexual differences but one of mutuality and sharing and respect regardless of colour, class standing and sex. In Christ, each of us is a person saved by grace in our own right. Each is [p. 347](#) endowed with divine gifts. Each has the potential to become what God wants us to be. If women are treated shabbily in the unredeemed world, in Christ they are raised up and placed again on the same plane as the men. Salvation does not mean only personal forgiveness and restoration of fellowship with God; salvation frees us from the straightjacket roles that sin-tainted human cultures have imposed upon us, so that we might be truly free to be and to *become*.

REFLECTING A YEAR LATER

As a Christian, I would say that the jubilant, forceful and winsome people's action, including female power, in the 1986 February revolution needs to be thankfully recognized and be given due honour. Besides that, the gains made by women in socio-economic and political involvement should be continually nurtured and directed towards

national development. The Revolution of 1986 has opened the eyes of Filipinos, and perhaps other peoples of the world, to the fact that it is possible to transcend our petty squabbings, factions, class and sexual prejudices and other dividing lines to a unity of spirit, heart and soul to bring about freedom and democracy in a troubled land.

In the Philippines, the women made a distinctive contribution towards bringing that about. From the baby girl suckling her mother's breast, to the midwife, to the high-society grandmother, to a girl peanut vendor, to the nun facing the tanks, to the resplendent icons of Mary, to the brave women of media and election computers, and to Corazon Aquino herself.

Dave and I retraced our steps to EDSA in February, 1987, exactly a year after the revolution. The women were there again, standing side by side with the men. The old and the young. Even the lame and the blind. All jubilantly and courteously jostling each other for vantage points to see the on-going parade. Again we melded together, became one happy family as a nation and as a people, no longer to oust a tyrant but to celebrate our newly-founded freedom and power. As a Christian and as a woman, it was both a sobering and exhilarating experience to me.

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Indispensable But Marginalised: Women in the Australian Church

Rosamund Dalziell

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The Australian church would not exist without women's participation and ministry, but their contribution has never received the recognition it deserves. Indeed women have been marginalised in many areas of the church's life. Declining church attendance by women as they enter the paid workforce must force the church to reassess its assumptions about women and its own future. Loss of female volunteers to the paid workforce is making the church aware of how much its activity has depended upon women. Women themselves are confronting the church by calling for equitable participation in decision-making, church structures, mission, workshop and in the ordained ministry. The World Council of Churches has acknowledged the problems faced by women in the church by launching the Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women, from 1988.

Women who have been misunderstood, marginalised or in some cases exploited by the church include women in the paid workforce, women working at home, women called to the ministry, missionaries, single women, and even women married to ministers or to candidates for ordination. Their opportunities for ministry have been restricted, their spiritual experience rejected, their voluntary work taken for granted and their right to participate in decision-making denied. The church is slowly changing, but more slowly