

23 Women in Electoral Politics and Legislature:

The Abanse! Pinay Case Study 1

Abanse! Pinay is a women's party-list group formed in 1997 with the aim to push for a women's agenda in the House of Representatives. By that time, the formators of Abanse! Pinay assessed that the situation was ripe for a women's political party. First, there was the 1995 Party List Law which enabled marginalized sectors to be represented in Congress. Although women as such do not constitute a "sector", there was already an acceptance in the country that women are marginalized on the basis of their gender, and thus have specific interests to represent in legislative branch of government.

Second, the 1990s saw the strengthening of feminist organizations which brought to fore the advocacy for women's participation in the public arena i.e., in decision-making spaces, from the community to the national level.

Third, and this was a reflection of feminists who eventually formed Abanse! Pinay, it is critical that feminists engage electoral politics to institutionalize policies and practices that are gender sensitive and responsive. While there have been significant gains with regard to campaigns against work discrimination, domestic violence and the like, women were "...still begging from the table of the patriarchs".

For some, it was also an issue of being consistent, and a natural progression of their work in inspiring women's political participation, as well as an experiment if they can put their feminist theories into practice:

▶ *The main line of activities is the training of women in entering politics, in identifying possible women leaders... in formation of a women's agenda. So in a sense, the way I saw it, we are just roaming around the periphery of politics but we were not involved, and I myself personally, I became uncomfortable that after so many*

years of inspiring these women to take leadership positions in local politics, we in PILIPINA did not even want to attempt to enter politics. So when the Party List Law was enacted, we said this is it, let's go for it. We will lose moral ascendancy over women if we ourselves are afraid to engage in electoral politics. We thought of the party list as venue to test our theory and idealism.

Thus Abanse! Pinay was established. Its immediate goal was to participate in the 1998 national elections and win seats in Congress. In more general terms, the objectives of Abanse! Pinay were to:⁶⁷

- (1) Develop, advocate for, and engender a women's agenda in the legislature and in governance. Issues and how they affect women's lives will be articulated and responded through legislation
- (2) To organize and develop a women's vote. Women and men will be mobilized to support the campaign of progressive women candidates, participate in crafting the women's agenda and engage other candidates to take a stand on priority issues that affect women's lives

Interestingly, some of the formators of Abanse! Pinay are members of multi-sectoral political blocs and lobbied in these spaces for the integration women's human rights issues and concerns. However, a common experience of these women was that gender issues would often be assumed under "broader concerns". Some felt frustrated that even the claim of representing half of the population in the communities, and in some cases, even majority of the members, seemed to be not enough reason to put a specific women's agenda in the political

67 "All About Abanse! Pinay Party List", a brochure on Abanse! Pinay.

bloc's platform. After much reflection and discussion, the women decided to form a women's party list group, Abanse! Pinay.

Ironically, though, many women, even feminists who strongly advocate for women's political participation, are wary, if not outright uncomfortable, of running for elective posts, and putting their hands into "dirty politics". Abanse! Pinay went into electoral politics not only carrying a women's platform, but also a call for transformative politics. It was clear to the members from the beginning that they will not play up to the traditional campaign tactics of goons, guns and gold (the so-called three G's of electoral politics). As one member put it, "*Kahit matalo tayo basta clean*". Being clean meant that the organization will not accept donations or support from traditional politicians ("trapos") and known anti-women personalities, even if Abanse! Pinay has only very limited funds and, they admitted, know-how in running a nationwide electoral campaign.

Lacking in resources and political machinery, the Abanse! Pinay instead sought creative means of "going after every vote", in addition to tapping support from their network of families and friends. An example of a creative method was "pyramiding", a strategy patterned after direct sales methods, and very familiar with women:

- ▶ *Abanse! Pinay will count on a core of 50 women (yes, just 50!) who will each convince 20 others to vote and organize Abanse! Pinay. Each of these 20 individuals will then talk to 15, each of the 15 to 10, each of the 10 to five, each of the five to two, and each of the two to one.* ◀

The media, in particular, was a strategic way of reaching out to many people in a short time. Although Abanse! Pinay did not have resources enough to pay for political advertisements, they still gained media coverage because they were active in the information dissemination of the party list

law.⁶⁸ Another way they promoted their party and its women's agenda is through attending events where they are invited as speakers. The month of March, which is also celebrated as the Women's Month, in particular, was a good time to "campaign". Because the members of Abanse! Pinay are well-known feminists and advocates of women's human rights, they would be invited in the many women's congresses, seminars, fora, and social functions during the month. On looking back, the members found it amusing that while some of them were also running for local government positions that election year, they promoted Abanse! Pinay more than themselves in their communities. One member recalled that after making a long pitch for Abanse! Pinay and the women's vote, she suddenly remembered that she was also a local candidate ("Oh, yes, and vote for me too!").

There were also fundraising events such as *lugaw* or dances for a cause. Some organizations and individuals also pledged support to the campaign. The support came in the form of money, services and promotion of Abanse! Pinay in their respective circles. Abanse! Pinay chapters were organized in several cities and provinces nationwide, and these operated mostly on a volunteer-basis.

Gender sensitivity was, of course, non-negotiable in the all-women party list organization. However this was sorely tested. Politics entails winning over potential allies and as Abanse! Pinay members realized, they cannot always come on too strongly about their feminism in this male-dominated arena. A member has this experience when she ran for councilor in their area:

- ▶ *My brother called his friends who were barangay captains because he was also a barangay captain. There were so many sexist jokes because many of them were men, and the jokes were really sexist! Then there were also these female captains*

68 The Party List law was passed in 1995; the 1998 national elections was the first time people voted for their party list representatives.

but... they were also like the men, like they have really imbibed the culture... I felt that there was a time that they were not like that but they learned it because they wanted to belong. I told them, Could we stop the green jokes? It was okay with them. But my brother told me later, "Ate Velo, don't be a purist. I know that it was not proper to tell such jokes but if you want to win them over".

Similar episodes were encountered by Abanse! Pinay members, particularly those who had first hand experience in running for local offices. Apart from this, they felt that as women candidates, their lives were under closer scrutiny than those of their male counterparts – from their family lives, to their educational attainment, to even how they dress.

In the case of Abanse! Pinay, running on the platform of women's human rights presented unique challenges exactly because their platform was on women's human rights. The question, "What about the men?" was a constant refrain in the political sorties and events they went to. Even colleagues from non-government organizations (NGOs) had asked them, "Why a women's party? Haven't women gotten what they want already?" To which, Abanse! Pinay members asked back, "Have we?"

There were also issues raised on the specific details of their platform and in more than one incident, their pro-women stance had taken a backlash.

▶ *There was one person in Cotabato who asked, was Abanse! Pinay in favor of divorce? Lorna Capunan, a lawyer, said, "Of course, we are in favor of divorce." Maribel [Ongpin] chided her, don't say that because in the provinces there are still many people who are very conservative. So we very discrete about our stand on reproductive health and rights after that.*

In another occasion:

▶ *Our slogan was, "Women's Health, Women's Rights, Women's Lives". We really built it on the women's health issues specifically reproductive health. The thing was, we were victimized by black propaganda. Word got around via txt that Abanse! Pinay... was pushing for legalizing abortion, and the church had sermons against us particularly in the Viasayas.*

Macho politics was only one dimension of the whole gamut of issues that Abanse! Pinay members dealt with when it first engaged in electoral politics. Essentially, the women were grappling with their idea and practice of power, and the seeming conflict between their activist stance and electoral politics.

▶ *Popularization work in NGOs is different, and it is also a different matter to translate this into votes. How do we do this, can we do it? we discovered that not because you have influence over the people as an NGO, you also have political influence. Karina David was the Secretary General (of Abanse! Pinay) during the first campaign... she said, "Can we tell this to the people, that we will help you, vote for us in the elections." Is that the right or necessary approach of NGOs who engage in electoral politics... how different are we then from the trapos? What is now our difference from them?*

As one of the formators described the experience of Abanse! Pinay, it has always been a struggle to maintain the group's idea, sanity and principles at the same time being politically pragmatic. The campaign period is only part of the story of any group that ran on the platform of transformative politics; winning a seat and being one of the 264 legislators in the House of Representatives is another, and more challenging part. For Patricia Mangrobang Sarenas, the Abanse! Pinay standard bearer in the 11th and 12th Congresses, it was clear that her work is to promote the interests of women in the legislative arena. She was aware that at the end of the day, the most immediate measure

of a legislator's effectiveness is the number of laws she has authored and passed for the group she represents.

This is not an easy feat, particularly for Party-List representatives who are marginalized, and has no political clout to speak of in Congress. Per formal rules and procedure they are on equal footing with district representatives; in practice, Abanse! Pinay had to join the House majority to gain leverage in their bid to head the Committee on Women. Even then, there was a practice that first-time representatives would not be given Committee leadership. They were eventually given the Committee, however the strings attached caused much discussion within Abanse! Pinay. Their alignment with the administration, in particular, was criticized by Party members

On the other hand, had they not joined the House majority, would they have gotten to head the Committee on Women which has a powerful role in the enactment of bills directly concerning women's rights and welfare? It was noted that not all Party-list representatives got the opportunity to head the House Committee directly relating to their sector. At worst, the Committee leadership would even be given to the very people who will protect the status quo. For instance, Sarenas cites the time when a banker chaired the Committee on Cooperatives Development when a Party-list representative from the National Confederation of Cooperatives (NATCCO) would have been otherwise the more logical person to lead.

There was also the challenge of promoting women's human rights and gender concerns within Congress itself. The Gender and Development budget which Abanse! Pinay members actively lobby in their respective local government units (LGUs), was also absent in the very space which had made it into law. Abanse! Pinay immediately set to work on this, and also spun off several other initiatives to mainstream gender within Congress. These included organizing gender sensitivity trainings, capacity building on the

use of gender-fair language in bills, meetings and caucuses with legislators, particularly the women legislators, on gender issues. In the course of their work on then still a proposed law for solo parents, Abanse! Pinay also mobilized and convened meetings with the House employees who were solo parents on their rights.

Part of Abanse! Pinay's core principles is that all issues are women's issues. Thus they were also involved in the discussions and lobbying on various sectoral concerns across the country, conscious to bring into the discussion the gender dimensions of these issues. At the same time, they also involved male legislators in gender issues, identifying potential allies among them, and encouraging them to be advocates for women's human rights.

To a degree, the gains of Abanse! Pinay in the above regard can be credited to the personality of its representative, Patricia Mangrobang Sarenas. Clearly, gender issues are not popular in Congress, and to convince the House to formally adopt a gender policy is a formidable challenge. In this sense, organizing and strengthening one's clout is imperative. Being a "batang Mindanaw" with Ilocano parents, marrying into a political family, and having worked for many years in local, regional and national-level coalitions, made it easier for Sarenas to find commonalities with other representatives. She also described herself as naturally friendly and got along well with everybody, even with the staff of the representatives. In politics, this characteristic is important primarily because politics is essentially a "numbers game". That is, it takes a majority vote to pass your bills, and it takes influence to be heard among the more than 200 legislators who are all promoting their interests.

In the long run, Abanse! Pinay members could say that they have accomplished much in terms of their legislative agenda because they were open to building working alliances with non-feminists and *trapo* politicians. However, there are still concerns over the extent they

are willing to negotiate and concede on their feminist principles. Nevertheless, Abanse! Pinay was also conscious to draw the line against cooptation.

▶ *That is the danger in the culture there, where the culture of patronage politics is still the norm... the dominant culture which can easily co-opt the language, the strategy used by the progressive women's movement. Because you are doing gender mainstreaming, you have to deal with other stakeholders in the universe of policy advocacy, the tendency is always the least common denominator.* ◀

One of the things that Abanse! Pinay did not compromise is their stand on corruption. Their Priority Development Assistance Funds, or the so-called "pork barrel" of legislators, were used mainly on the building of around 100 women's centers. Within the Party, the standard bearer/representative also submits expenditure reports of her allocated budget to the party officers.

Constituency building is also critical, particularly in politics where clouts and numbers matter. Part of Abanse! Pinay's goal as a party-list organization is to establish a women's vote. The women's vote however is not simply construed as women voting for women, but women *and men* pushing for the women's agenda and consciously integrating a gender perspective in all issues and arenas.

In this sense, members acknowledge that fielding women as candidates and administrators in strategic positions in local and national government agencies is only one strategy to build a critical number for the women's agenda lobby. Alongside of these should be the continuing advocacy and organizing work in mainstream and alternative areas where there are Abanse! Pinay members: in social welfare, education, law and media, to name a few. In the immediate term, organizing is critical to strengthen the political base of a party-list organization such as Abanse! Pinay. In the long term, members recognize that with or without their party-

list representative in Congress, it is integral in their vision as feminists that avenues should be opened up to empower women, particularly politics and public decision-making.

However, and particularly because Abanse! Pinay is a party-list organization, it draws its legitimacy as a member of the legislation mainly from the group it claims to represent: the women. And unlike district representatives, their constituents are not bound by geographic localities, but are found across the country and constitute half of its population. Therein lay at least two crucial challenges to Abanse! Pinay as a women's party-list: First, how to draw in and mobilize women to participate in promoting their gender-specific interests in Congress. Second, how to unify the diverse and multiple identities, affiliations and stances of women on various issues, and codify this into national law.

Of the two, it is the first one which is more familiar to Abanse! Pinay. Gender sensitivity trainings, developing women leaders, conscientization and organizing of women around their practical and strategic needs are already being done by party members prior to their engaging national electoral politics. With the second concern of unifying women, none of the Abanse! Pinay members subscribe to the idea of women as a monolithic category. However, this became a practical difficulty in lobbying for a law that will protect women from the most common form of abuse they experience. One group called it domestic violence (DV), another called it abuse of women in intimate relationships (AWIR). And both lobbied hard to have their versions of the law passed.

The difference had been more than just the title of the bills. The most heated debates raged around the issue of the proposed laws coverage. The Anti-DV lobbyists made the household the point of reference. Women abused by their housemates, regardless of their relationship with the abuser, would be

covered by the law. Children should also be protected from such abuse. On the other hand, the Anti-AWIR group qualified that it is the nature of the relationship of the women to the abuser which is the critical factor. Being in an intimate relationship with their abuser makes the woman specially vulnerable to violence. They further contended that abuse of children is already covered by another law and there was no need to insert provisions for them in the proposed law.

The situation did not spoke well of the advocacy to promote women's human's rights, and was used as case by many to macho legislators to dismiss the abuse of women as an issue. Not a few times were there remarks such as, "How can we address this issue if the women themselves do not even agree on it?" or "There bicker the women again." On the part of Abanse! Pinay which supported the Anti-DV bill, they were thrown aback that some women's formations which they have worked with on several occasions did not even speak with them of their move to file a new bill. The Anti-AWIR group got another woman legislator who was powerful in the Committee on Women to sponsor their bill. Recalled one Abanse! Pinay member:

For Abanse! Pinay the points raised by the Anti-AWIR group were also considered in the Anti-DV bill. Although the bill makes as reference the household, it was clear that the men will be not be covered by the law. With regard to the inclusion of children, this was a strategy for the bill to be more acceptable to male legislators who while not recognizing the existence of gender-based violence, would sympathize with a woman and her children's abuse.

The law was passed in 2004 as the Anti-Violence against Women and their Children Act (Republic Act 9262). In the final version, many of the provisions of both the Anti-DV and Anti-AWIR bills were integrated. Yet it taught a "painful" lesson in politics to Abanse! Pinay:

► *In the case of domestic violence versus AWIR controversy, ano ba ang primary value natin? Halimbawa, will you be a purist na let's say, ito ang aking feminist principles, I'll stick to this... we come from a feminist background, ano na, we always go straight in our feminist principles or we can surrender from time to time the better to promote our legislative agenda because when you are in Congress, the first thing is to pass laws... not just to make privileged speeches but to act.* ◀

Clearly for Abanse! Pinay, there were gains and losses in engaging the State through electoral politics and within the national legislature. Between the gains and losses are the challenges, the biggest of which is how, without being blind to the differences and dissidence among women, strengthen the unities within the women's movement and transform them into a political force.

Abanse! Pinay won a seat in the 11th and 12th Congress, and lost in its bid in the 13th and the 14th Congress. The reason was the increased minimum votes that party-lists groups must be able to mobilize in order to be elected. There was also a question over the accreditation of some party-list groups which do not represent marginalized sectors, for instance, professional and business groups. A month before the 2007 elections (for the 14th Congress), the party-list Akbayan also exposed to the media a list of "admin fronts" i.e. government-supported groups running for House seats, thus not qualified as party-list.

The two consecutive losses of Abanse! Pinay disqualifies them to run for a fifth time. This is in accordance to Republic Act 7941, or the Party List law, which states

Sec. 6. Removal and/or Cancellation of Registration. – The COMELEC may *motu proprio* or upon verified complaint of any interested party, remove or cancel, after due notice and hearing, the registration of any national, regional or sectoral party,

organization or coalition on any of the following grounds:

- (1) It fails to participate in the last two (2) preceding elections or fails to obtain at least two percent (2%) of the votes cast under the party-list system in the two (2) preceding elections for the constituency in which it has registered.

This is a setback for Abanse! Pinay, however, it is only with regard to their work within legislature. Legislative advocacy, building women's capacities for leadership roles and strengthening networks continue as these are already integrated in the women's empowerment strategies of Abanse! Pinay members, even before their Party-list was born. Looking back on their experiences while in Congress, some members opined that it may be more strategic to position women leaders at local elective posts. At the local level there would be more space for more immediate and direct intervention on women's marginalized situations.

24 Establishing a Gender Quota: *The Akbayan's Women's Committee Case Study 2*

The gender quota is an affirmative action that aims to encourage women's participation in leadership positions by reserving a percentage of seats for women to fill in. In the parlance of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the gender quota is a "temporary special measure" which a State is obligated to undertake, and should be discontinued when it has achieved its goal of de facto equality of women with men in the arena of public decision-making.

In the Philippines, it is the party-list organization Akbayan which authored and leads in the lobbying efforts to pass a bill that calls for the allocation of 30% of leadership positions for women. This includes positions in all elective and appointive positions in the government, government owned and controlled corporations, the military, police and even political parties. Specifically House Bill 5496, or the Gender Balance Bill,⁶⁹ aims targets:

1. To promote the women's active participation in the electoral process;
2. To ensure women's access to political representation and decision-making; and,
3. To institutionalize reforms in the recruitment, selection, and appointment of women in all levels of the government bureaucracy.⁷⁰

The ultimate aim of the Gender Balance Bill is to have equal or 50-50 representation of women and men in public offices.

69 The full title of HB 5496 is "An act strengthening women's participation and representation in elective and appointive positions in the government, including government-owned and controlled corporations, the Armed Forces of the Philippines, the Philippine National Police and other law enforcement agencies, and for other purposes (Gender Balance Act of 2006)". Full text of the Bill is available at <http://www.pcij.org/blog/wp-docs/HB5496GenderBalanceBill.pdf>; accessed 05 May 2007

70 Section 3, HB 5496

Accordingly, it raises to 40% the gender quota in appointive positions in the government by 2010, and by 2013, it projects that the 50-50 representation in these bodies shall have been achieved.⁷¹

If passed, this is a landmark legislation promoting women's human rights in the country.

Although it is not a woman-specific organization or party, it is not surprising that Akbayan would sponsor such bill. Akbayan has been known in the political arena as a progressive party-list organization formed by key blocs and individuals in the social movements. The impetus for Akbayan has been two-fold: on the level of strategy and organization.⁷² First, there was recognition on the critical importance of engaging the State from within, while continuing to mobilize pressure groups from the mass base of social movement. Second, and with regard to organizational concerns, it was also recognized by these progressive blocs that a machinery, distinct and separate from their mother organizations and coalitions, would have to be created to focus on the electoral and parliamentary arenas of intervention. Women leaders and feminists in particular have been part of the Akbayan even in its formative years, thus shaping the political party agenda.

Akbayan was formally launched in 1998; in May of the same year it participated in the national and local elections. Since then, it has consistently promoted the human rights of marginalized groups such as peasants, indigenous peoples, rural and urban poor, LGBTs, children and women – and in all cases, ensured that a gender perspective is integrated in its platform issues. Apart from

71 Section 4, HB 5496

72 Abao 1997(275–276)

the Gender Balance Bill, Akbayan has also sponsored and co-authored bills addressing reproductive health, discrimination against LGBTs and prostitution, and the Magna Carta for Women.

Yet while the organization lobbies within Congress to pass women-friendly policies, women in Akbayan also lobbies within the party to promote gender equality. The Akbayan's Women Committee was formed early on by the party to ensure that the women's agenda is represented. Soon enough, the Women's Committee found themselves locked in a power struggle to address the gender-based discrimination in a supposedly progressive political formation. A case to point was the sexual harassment of women members and heckling using sexist language was not unusual during the Akbayan pre-Congress, albeit quickly defended by male members as simply *lambing* or *biro*.⁷³

Lambing or not, this has become a tension point among the women and men of Akbayan. For the feminists in Akbayan, tolerance of such harassment, whether deliberately done or not, will deter women participation in the party beyond gender-stereotyped or male-defined roles.

The debate on gender-based discrimination was further heightened when the feminists in Akbayan forwarded a gender quota as a matter of party policy. In their proposal, 30% of leadership positions in all levels (from national to local) would be reserved for women members. Akbayan women leaders present in the said pre-Congress recalled during the conversations:

▶ A: [O]n the floor the [women] seemed bitchy because only 30 percent and you can't even give that to us, and that's only a token number. I remember I was the one facilitating the session and there was a strict instruction to me to not divide the

house. Because if the house gets divided, we lose.

Q: Why would you lose?

A: Because there was really strong resistance from the men

A: At that time there were more groups of men. It was really more because there were more men than women not being united ◀

The Visayan bloc in the Akbayan pre-Congress in particular stated that party leadership should be based on merits not gender. One sarcastic individual even stood up and said in the plenary, "*Gusto nyo sa inyo na lang lahat!*" [If you want, you can have it all!]. On the side were also comments like, "*Ayan na naman ang mga kababaihan*" [There goes the women again].

The debate went on for four hours. Feminists were resolute and stated that 30 percent was in fact a concession for women who form majority of the party electorates. Supporters of the gender quota also cited that such system has worked favorably in other socialist parties, and that the gender quota is in fact a concrete translation of Akbayan's recognition of women's important role in party building.

Still others were concerned about the operationalization of the gender quota: 30 percent of what? nominated leaders or candidates? it is already difficult to form local chapter, what more if we put a gender quota? Also, are there enough women to fill in the reserved 30 percent leadership seats for them? The organizers in particular were complaining more because they know it will be their responsibility to meet the 30 percent gender quota.

By the end of the session, the members came to a compromise that the pre-Congress body will adopt the gender quota, but it will be subject for review if women in the main Congress did not meet the quota. Eventually, the gender quota was adopted by the General Assembly to become part of Akbayan's policies.

73 Abao 1997 (282)

Looking back at the first pre-Congress, the Akbayan Women's Committee admitted that the resistance to the gender quota also stems from the fact that they did not prepare or "groundwork" the political blocs enough on the concept. However, they also recognized that the more critical aspect of gender sensitivity within political blocs and formations that are not specifically women-centered or feminist was the main barrier to the members' appreciation of the gender quota system. And it is still on this aspect of gender sensitivity, more than a decade after the first pre-Congress, that the Akbayan Women's Committee has to make a significant dent. Some of the Committee's observations on this regard are the following:

- > Members have yet to internalize the value and vision that necessitated the institutionalization of a gender quota within the party. It is often the case that women are fielded as official delegates to party Congresses as a matter of the chapter's compliance to a policy, rather than stemming from the belief that women's representation in the party is important.
- > Second, the gender quota is essentially one of the ways by which to encourage women to become active in the public domain as leaders. However, this strategy is watered down by the persistent gender stereotyping of women. Women leaders are often found along traditional lines of "women's work" i.e. secretariat and financial management. As one Women's Committee member joked, secretariat work is oftentimes burdensome for women, while the role of the treasurer does not mean very much when the chapter has no funds.
- > Third, and an echo from the first pre-Congress, is the question: are there enough women to fill in the 30 percent reserved seats for them? While it is true that women form half of the membership in Akbayan – and perhaps even more in some local chapters – the key concern

here is their *qualification* and *willingness* to become leaders. Put this way, even women members themselves may agree that there are not enough women to fill the reserved slots.

Yet this also highlights a crucial gap in the appreciation of the gender quota system. As a measure to address gender inequality in decision-making venues, it should not be taken in isolation of other ways to support women's empowerment. By itself, the gender quota has little value to women. For one Women's Committee member, who also sits at the Akbayan Executive Committee, the gender quota policy is readily appreciated in large party gatherings like pre-Congresses and Congresses because it contributes to the visibility of women. But in the everyday grind of women balancing roles of motherhood and community leadership, the policy has minimal significance without practical assistance:

- ▶ *I am telling them that can't we not not have meetings at seven in the evening because we also have women members who have children to take care of. What I want more to do is to give washing machines to Akbayan women members so they can attend meetings and lead the group.* ◀

Creating enabling environments for women's political participation also calls for their economic empowerment. Increased incomes, better livelihood opportunities and access to basic goods and services are some of the practical issues Akbayan political organizers have strategized around to encourage women to be more involved in community decision-making. As one Akbayan organizer bluntly put it: For what are you working o doing political work? Have livelihood programs so you can support your activist work.

Women's hesitation to become public leaders may also be rooted in the demands of the work. Being a woman leader in a Akbayan entails commitment to a schedule and list of tasks that often requires a woman to strike a compromise, if not outright choose, between her responsibilities to her family and the party.

▶ Doris was a councilor at the same time an Akbayan leader. She had a very tight schedule... we would be in the national council meeting then later fly to Bohol and we would do this in a span of four days. What she does literally is to pass by her house, put down her bag and talk for a while to her children. She would be flying out in a few hours again but she would talk to her children first. I asked her how she balances all of her responsibilities. She answered that it was a good thing that her husband understands her life and that she really loves what she is doing. ◀

While not typical, the snapshot of a woman activist's life above illustrates the balancing act women active in politics (in this case, within the party and as an elected government official). Another Akabayan woman leader shared that she had to give up her child-bearing years to focus on the movement, a sacrifice that not many women would do:

▶ *If there was something I gave up for the movement, it was my child-bearing years. Although I don't really regret it, a part of me thinks I made a mistake. But there is also a part of me that knows that at that time it seemed like a good decision. I really have no time to make a baby. I think I know that I cannot take care of the baby anyway. At least I know I am feminist in that sense that I asserted that I do not want to be pregnant. However I think I've gone too far because I am already 40. I'm also a control freak in that way because if you look at my datebook, you'd say, "Ay! You only have to implement you life."* ◀

Feminism or "feminist" has become a key word in describing the politics of the Akbayan Women's Committee, even as some Akbayan women hesitate to use the term to describe their work or themselves. Ironically, Akbayan as a political party officially claims to be a "feminist" organization. The narrative on

the Akbayan website about their "brand" of socialist feminism bears quoting:⁷⁴

▶ *Akbayan is a feminist party. It recognizes that gender inequity permeates in all structures of society. The intersection of male dominance or patriarchy with capitalism, semi-feudalism, ethnic and racial hierarchies, historically creates the complexion of women's oppression. Thus, Akbayan works to address the unequal power relations between men and women in both the public/productive and private/reproductive spheres of life as it works towards democratic, egalitarian and humanist socialism. Akbayan seeks to empower women and contributes to the struggle of the women's movement in eliminating all forms of violence against women.*

Akbayan seeks to eliminate homophobia as a patriarchal tool to keep both women and men in tight boxes of stereotypical behavior and roles. A human rights violation, homophobia manifests as any act, remark, treatment or attitude that discriminates or abuse another person on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. ◀

This is the "public" stance of Akbayan with regard to its advocacy on women's human rights and gender equality. However, another story unfolds within the party. The issues raised by the Women's Committee's in their Open Letter to the Third Regular National Akbayan Congress,⁷⁵ is particularly insightful:

74 <http://akbayan.org/>; accessed 07 May 2007

75 The 3rd Akbayan Congress was held on 14–15 October 2006. The Women's Committee Open Letter was also titled, "The Akbayan Women's (Unofficial) Report." As footnote to the document, the Women's Committee stated that: "Unlike other Congress documents, this document has not been developed to seek official Congress approval. We have produced other resolutions for that purpose. As mentioned earlier this paper is meant to inform the body about our reflections. We do not even claim this to be an "official" report – it is a "report" nevertheless, from us (who gathered for a Pre-Congress). Moreover, we do not claim to represent the views of all Akbayan women.

On the gender quota

We know this situation [the seeming inability to fill the 30 percent reserved slots for women] is not necessarily about the lack of “able” women, rather the conditions are such that women have more disincentives than incentives to lead or manage the organization. *Ang mga babaeng lider ng Akbayan ay pagod, tumatanda, kakaunti.* [The women leaders of Akbayan are tired, getting on their years, and few] The lament of a significant number of Akbayan women is not new: *nag-aalaga kami ng anak, nag-aalaga kami ng baboy o taniman, at binubugbog pa kami ng aming mga asawa.* [we take care of our children, we take care of our pigs and gardens, and we are even battered by our husbands].

On the gender dynamics within the party

We know that men are not the “class enemy” so to speak. But why do we feel that very few men within Akbayan actually know how to relate to us women *as equals*. *Either nilalandi kami o ginagawa kaming secretary/assistant* [italics in the original]. We often laugh at ourselves over this – that some of us have experienced even worse: Akbayan men sometimes just forget that we exist at all. We laugh but we know that this is not funny.

On the practice of feminist ethics by Akbayan members

We also know that some of the Akbayan men still go to those “girlie” bars and still look at women as sources of entertainment. Moreover not a few of us have received sexist jokes – usually through text messages – that make fun of us women.

On the translation of feminist principles in advocacy

Furthermore, there is the reality that the rest of our Akbayan bills and advocacies are gender blind. This means that, to a large measure, women's concerns have been “ghettoed”: concerns that are not explicitly about women's rights are not considered to have a women's “angle”. If feminism has a view on practically everything, Akbayan then is definitely not feminist because we do not use gender lenses in analyzing problems or determining political strategies and actions.

It is clear that the main arguments against labeling Akbayan as a feminist political party comes from the observed incongruence between the ideology and practice, with the practice of feminism is as the more important criteria in claiming feminism than the knowledge of and self-identification with the ideology.

Related to this, not a few women members themselves are reluctant to call themselves as feminist. A great majority cited the lack of confidence to articulate feminism as an ideology as reason for this reluctance. Some also cited negative experiences with self-identified feminists as cause to disavow feminism. Still, for others, feminism is just another term and does not matter at community level work. The Women's Committee themselves admitted that they and their advocacy have been more visible at national Party conferences than at the ground.

Whichever it is, the Women's Committee sees the need to define “feminism”, or more specifically, feminism in the context of Akbayan. For the “here and now” the Committee forwarded a working definition of “feminism” in their Open Letter:

- (1) the struggle for women's rights (i.e. including and most especially the struggle “of” women “for” women's rights
- (2) sensitivity and responsiveness to the concerns of women

- (3) equality between men and women, and
- (4) the empowerment and “wellness” of women

However, the Women’s Committee admitted that this definition still needs to be validated, particularly by the women members, mainstreamed and translated to concrete programs and actions of Akbayan.

Despite these odds, Akbayan women continue to push for reforms within their political party, and hopefully, the gains will be magnified in society through Akbayan’s public advocacy. The 2006 Akbayan Congress in particular saw the women more assertive in pushing for gender-responsive provisions in the revised Constitution and By-Laws. Some significant provisions inserted in the new version were:

- > the explicit statement of “socialist feminism” as a core principle of the party (Article I, Section 3 (e))

Socialist Feminist:

Wich sees class and patriarchy as the root causes of gender inequality; opposes class exploitation and gender oppression; asserts that the personal is political and that women’s rights are human rights; values reproductive and productive work of women; works towards the elimination of the sexual division of labor; moves for the transformation of perspectives on gender relations, sexuality, reproduction, and the family; and promotes women’s empowerment as a strategy towards class and gender equality and equity

- > Mandatory allocation of at least 20% of membership dues to direct services for survivors of violence against women (VAW) (Article IV, Section 2 (d))
- > Included in the fundamental duties of Party units at all levels is ensuring that their programs are gender-sensitive and gender-responsive (Article V, Section 7 (a)); and

focal persons for women’s concerns may created for each unit (Section 8)

- > Inclusion of VAW as a ground for disciplinary action, whether the aggrieved is a member of Akbayan or not (Article XI, Section 2 (f))

But again, the above are policies; what had been lacking in the past is the translation into concrete actions. Even more alarming to the Akabayan feminists is the extent of the “gender insensitivity” within their Party. The Party’s touted feminism was sorely tested in 2006 by two events: a rape case wherein the victim and the accused were both Party members, and which resulted to the expulsion of the latter; and the Third Akbayan Congress where the Women’s Committee was frowned upon for asserting the 30% gender quota rule on women’s representation in Party decision-making bodies, including the Party-list nominees.

The second event was even more significant in the light of the gender quota as one of the policies established early on in the Party. The tensions during the Akbayan Congress and frustration of the women can be gleaned in their letter to the National Council:

- ▶ *While our intention in raising the protest was to argue for the application of the policy to the election of party list nominees, we certainly did not plan to ruin everyone’s night nor disrupt party unity. Ours was just an exercise of our rights as duly designated delegates from the Women’s Committee, an exercise we deem important in our struggle for empowerment both within the Party and the society at large. While we did not anticipate the level of adverse reactions we received from our men and women comrades, we firmly stand by our positions and arguments.*

To the charge that they are simply *diskuntento* (not contented) and spoilers to the Party socials that would come after the session, they argued further:

► *It was the best time to put the protest on the table. We wonder when would be the other "right" time for such protest. We recognize that all of us were tired after "the second 14 hour day", but comments like "the band was waiting and the beer getting warm" is a subtle reflection of the embedded male-ness or machismo in the party. We too were tired and want to party and socialize, but they just have to wait for we want the body to recognize that the 30% quota for women was not met as stipulated in our constitution. Ours is just an assertion of our thoughts and rights at that time, which should not be misconstrued with us being aggressive or irrational.* ◀

This frustration within the Party is tempered by the inroads have forged at the societal level which cannot be denied. It is to Akbayan's credit that more and more grassroots women are enabled to participate in public political actions as carrying their sectoral platforms, if not yet their gendered identity. In the conversations among Aurora and Zamboanga Akbayan women, consistent are their statements "*Tumapang kami*" [We became courageous] and "*Nagkaroon kami ng pakialam sa mga issues*" [We became involved in issues], referring to the values they have imbibed since they became party members. Another significant contribution of Akbayan to empower women at the grassroots level is the advocacy for gender and development (GAD) mainstreaming in the local government units. In particular, the lobby for the implementation of the GAD budget has become one of the key issues where community women have been mobilized to address their practical and strategic needs.

There is hope, and the Akbayan Women's Committee sees that they cannot give up just because the road to gender equality within the party is long and difficult. The struggle within the party is part of the bigger landscape of working for the transformation of society. This is how one woman leader

explained her choice to be involved in Akbayan rather than in an all-women's party:

► *One of my insights about that is being in a mixed organization is necessary because in our advocacy, it's not only the women that you need to convince. At least in a mixed organization, you would have the benefit of discussion among men and women members, and you would have been gauged more or less the levels of consciousness and awareness and perception of men. So when you go out, and you know that you have male advocates with you who are also knowledgeable of the issue, in a way you feel more confident because you also know the perspective of men. Second is the sharpening. As a woman you are more challenged to sharpen the women's agenda and convincing powers so that you can fight for and pass the issues and concerns you are advocating.* ◀

If the Akbayan women can achieve gender equality within their party, then a significant part of the struggle in society on the same platform is won.