

# **WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY PHILIPPINE LOCAL POLITICS**

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## **Introduction**

The participation of Filipino women in politics cannot be gauged merely by their role as candidates or political officials. Women's participation in Philippine politics is done through the broader context within the policy process. For instance, women dominate the Philippine bureaucracy; at the highest level (equivalent to the senior executive service) they have reached 36%, achieving even higher proportions in some offices. In civil society organizations, women are active, both as leaders as well as members. In fact, the work of women NGO and political leaders has led to gains for women through successful advocacy for the passage of more gender-oriented policies and services.

However, despite these broader involvements, the number of women running for political positions has not increased dramatically. In an assessment of Philippine gains from the Beijing gender commitments in 1995, training of women leaders handled by NGOs and the academe have been numerous, but have not led to a dramatic increase in women's participation in electoral politics, as enunciated by global targets of 30%.

This presentation shows the participation of women in Philippine politics, specifically at the local level. It attempts to provide explanations about their small participation, validate some assumptions about their recruitment in office, and show how they lead in terms of the female

agenda. Lastly, it aims to evoke further discussion on prevailing issues hindering their more active political participation.

### **Women in Philippine Local Politics**

Data show that elections for legislative positions yield, at the highest, 17% women among the winners. This is broken down into 12.5% of Senators, 17% of members of Congress, and 17% of members of provincial, city and municipal legislators. A similar proportion is reflected among the chief executives; for instance, two women have become Presidents, though both ascended through the so-called people power “revolutions”. In other words, they did not run for office, initially at least. At the local level, as many as 19 % of provincial governors are women, as well as 15% of city and municipal mayors.

Public policy formulation and execution fall into a continuum; the President is at the national level and the local chief executives play vital roles in that continuum. That makes the study of women mayors and governors important, insofar as understanding women’s role in Philippine politics. Working with women local officials who attend our training programs and seek our consultancy in the Center for Local and Regional Governance of the National College of Public Administration and Governance, University of the Philippines, has provided me with some insights on their official, and sometimes personal, circumstances. These gave me the challenge and commitment to study women in local Philippine politics and to underscore their achievements. Thus far, I have conducted studies of women local chief executives (governors and mayors) involving winners in three elections since 1995.

Statistical data from elections conducted in 1992, 1995, 1998 and 2001 show an increasing proportion of women among elected local chief executives. For governors, the

proportion of women was 6.6 % in 1992, 10.7% in 1995, 16% in 1998, and 19% in 2001.

Women city mayors accounted for only 2.9% of those elected in 1992; their proportion rose slightly to 5.9% in 1995, jumped to 9% in 1998, and reached 13.54% in 2001. Among municipal mayors, the proportion of women in 1992 was 7.6%; it rose to 8.14% in 1995, to 14.4% in 1998, and 13.8% in 2001. While I do not have figures here for 2004, I can say that the gradual increase has not changed, or has very little variation, for reasons which may be culled from later discussions.

The increasing trend of women's participation in local politics as governors and mayors may belie our earlier statement that there has not been much increase in their participation in elections. There have been, but these have not yet met the global targets of 30% which are achieved in some countries by affirmative action, usually expressed through quotas. Nonetheless, there have been dramatic increases starting in 1998. These will be explained later in this presentation.

My three studies covering women mayors and governors who won in the elections of 1995, 1998, and 2001 were undertaken towards the end of each term, or near the next elections. That timing enabled me to capture what the women leaders have achieved during their terms. I sent questionnaires to all women elected, with the proviso in later studies that they need not send them back to me if they had answered the survey questions before. I was interested in validating findings about the manner of recruitment of the women leaders to their posts, in determining their career preparation for their jobs, and in finding out if they have consciously placed gender and family concerns in their agenda.

In the absence of figures from my previously published papers on the first two studies, let me here summarize conclusions from the three studies:

1. Profile of women local chief executives (LCEs)—They cluster in the ages of 50 to 65, and are married. This means that they entered active politics after their child bearing and child rearing years.

2. Political experience—They have been in politics for at least five years. They have served in other elective posts as Councilors/provincial Board Members, Vice-Mayors/Vice-Governors. A few have served as *barangay* (village) heads.

3. While they may have been candidates for only five years, most have been politically active for a longer period as campaigners for candidates or in media and NGO advocacy groups.

4. Political recruitment —Most of the LCEs come from political families; the families of their husbands or their own families being politically prominent in the area. A few were drafted by socio-civic organizations; still fewer ran on their own.

5. Factors for winning—Not surprisingly, the LCEs consider the following factors as crucial for winning elections: family support, personality, name (i.e., family name), party support, and support of community organizations, in that order.

These validate earlier findings about what Roces and earlier authors call “kinship politics” in the Philippines. We can say through the survey, however, that while many of the governors and mayors won through family political connections, they have not been unprepared for the political tasks they have chosen to take on. Moreover, they have had individual careers and have had administrative/managerial experience.

6. Forging the female agenda. At first glance, the project priorities of the women LCEs are not “gendered”. They respond to what they consider to be important needs of their

constituents—infrastructure, agriculture, livelihood. However, they also enthusiastically embark on “clean and green,” day care, and health and nutrition projects.

7. The women LCEs have, increasingly through the years, been concerned about children and family. Many of them target women for their livelihood agenda, and many have been proud about winning national competitions on nutrition and on projects for “child friendly” communities. Some have even opened offices to respond to issues confronting women and families.

8. Source of funds—The women LCEs have been aware of fund sources for their gender projects. Many tap the so-called “development fund” from their internal revenue allotments (IRA), and a few utilize what has been called the “gender budget”. (The IRA is a share given by the national government to local governments from internal revenue tax collections, distributed according to a set formula. The gender budget was included by Congress in the general appropriations act starting 1997, mandating government offices to set aside 5% of their funds for gender concerns.) The IRA is tapped more often.

Using interviews and documents, I did case studies on ten outstanding women LCEs—three women governors, three city mayors, and four municipal mayors, to get more insights and to validate the survey results. Indeed, most of them came from political families, have had experience in politics as campaigners or in lower level electoral posts and had as well been active in their non-political careers. What set them apart as good leaders are their efficiency and dedication to their jobs.

## **Implications/Conclusions**

Is there anything new about these findings? Apart from validating impressions by data, there may be none. However, new things may be found in the following interpretations, culled from my earlier studies and from my insights as I interacted with the women whose cases I highlighted:

1. On the aspect of kinship politics—One interviewee explained the phenomenon succinctly—“Kinship may be our entry point; but you should judge us by what we do after we get elected.” This was also echoed by the husband of a mayor, a former mayor himself, who said “I told her that ‘our name will get you elected; but after that, you will be judged based on your own actions.’” Those two women have received awards as outstanding city mayors. One downplays her husband’s prominence, but the other credits her success to her husband’s familial politics.

2. There is an unspoken lofty principle in Philippine kinship politics which is seen in other areas of the Philippine political experience. In a paper I gave earlier, I talked about the widows in Philippine politics, as exemplified earlier by Senator Magnolia Antonino and later by President Corazon Aquino. But much earlier in history in the broader context of politics, Gabriela Silang took over the reins of the Ilocos revolt after the death of her husband, Diego Silang. These widows and others took upon themselves as their missions keeping alive their husbands’ principles. The same goes for the wives of living politicians who had done well in their jobs; they are expected to perform as well as their spouses.

3. But beyond the those who stay in power, we have the political heirs and substitutes. The sudden increase in the proportion of women LCEs in 1998 and 2001 which I presented in the beginning can be attributed also to kinship politics. Because the 1987 Philippine

Constitution provided for mandatory term limits of three terms or nine years to politicians (except the President who gets one term of six years) many of the women LCEs who were elected in 1998 and 2001 were what are now called “breakers” ( a term coined by themselves), wives (and children) of politicians who have reached their term limits. A few have stayed on, but many gave up their posts after only one term; unfortunately, some of them had done well in their brief stints in office.

4. Projects--While typical politicians look into projects that have visual impact, like infrastructures, and while well-meaning local chief executives attend to economic needs in agriculture and livelihood, women LCEs describe their roles as governors and mayors as extensions of their roles as mothers—nurturers and care-givers. That is why they attend to health, education and social service needs. However, until the follow-up question which asked specifically about their women-oriented projects, many of the LCE respondents do not mention those in the list of their (first) priorities. The few who mention them, however, usually go beyond the usual social services; they are able to gear their livelihood activities toward women, or are able to establish special programs or offices for women and families.

5. Those who specifically provide for the welfare of women know how to tap sources of funds; few rely on aid from higher level politicians.

Women LCEs generally perform well in office; many of them receive awards for their province or region on projects like clean and green, nutrition, child friendly facilities; some receive national recognition from award-giving bodies. They should be given more opportunities to run for office, not just as “breakers” to keep the family dynasty in power, but to run for office for themselves, or for the larger female community.

As we said in the 2005 Philippine Report on women in power and decision making in the assessment of country achievement on the Beijing Plan of Action, while the Philippines pledged to motivate more women to participate in politics and to provide mechanisms to enable them to do so, there is evidence only of training for women to become more effective in politics. What hinders the implementation of meaningful women's participation is quantity. There are still serious impediments against affirmative action policy for more women's electoral participation. Our lawmakers think that women's needs have been adequately served by other policies providing them greater access to credit, provision of day care centers and other social services, participation in what are normally male-dominated fields like the military, or the still loosely-interpreted gender budget; all these despite their low remaining numerical participation in politics. As for the women, whether their cup is half full or half empty remains an issue still to be resolved among themselves.

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