



# PHILIPPINES

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Statement of  
**Hon. Esperanza I. Cabral**  
Secretary  
Department of Social Welfare and Development,  
Republic of the Philippines  
at the  
36<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations *Committee on the  
Elimination of Discrimination against Women*  
15 August 2006

Madame Chairperson and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the Philippine Government, I wish to thank the Committee for reviewing our Fifth and Sixth Country Reports, and our responses to the pre-session questions, on the implementation of the Women's Convention or CEDAW.

Let me now introduce the members of the Philippine Delegation:

Co-Chair of the Delegation is Ms. Myrna Yao, Chairperson of the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women. Deputy Head of Delegation is Ambassador Bayani Mercado, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Philippine Mission to the United Nations. Also with us are Undersecretary Ethelyn Nieto of the Department of Health and Undersecretary Luzviminda Padilla of the Department of Labor and Employment. Our Gender Experts include two Commissioners of the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women: Dr. Amaryllis Torres for Academe and Atty. Evelyn Dunuan for Indigenous Peoples; its immediate past Chairperson and former member of the CEDAW, Prof. Aurora de Dios; and Ms. Emmeline Verzosa, Executive Director of the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women. Ms. Marie Yvette Banzon, Mr. Felix de Leon, and Ms. Cecilia Rachel Quisumbing, members of the Philippine Mission to the UN, join us in the delegation.

Since our last report before this Committee in 1997, numerous events have transpired that have had direct impact on the state of implementation of the Convention. Allow me to narrate the gains we have made, the setbacks and issues that continue to obstruct fuller implementation of the Convention, and the strategies we have put into place to advance further in our endeavor towards attaining gender equality.

In the Philippines, we have seen substantial gains from the gender mainstreaming policy of the government. Laws, policies, executive and administrative orders in national government, and local ordinances that work for gender equality, have all provided the mandates to develop programs that can effectively close the gaps in the benefits and opportunities enjoyed by women and men.

The Framework Plan for Women serves as the gender equality framework of the present government under President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. The promotion of women's human rights is a key component of the Plan, along with the promotion of women's economic empowerment and gender-responsive governance.

Pursuant to Article 2 of the Convention, several legislations that correct the historical disadvantages of women in different aspects of national life have been enacted, or are pending before the Philippine Congress.

In June 2006, President Arroyo abolished capital punishment, a step welcomed by human rights advocates everywhere. The sentences of 1,200 inmates on death row have been commuted to life imprisonment, including those of twenty-seven females death convicts.

In line with Article 6, landmark legislations for dealing with violence against women and human trafficking have successfully been promulgated. The Convention can now be cited as a reference in cases filed under these laws. As part of their implementing procedures, the justice department directed all prosecutors to give preferential attention to trafficking cases. Performance standards, assessment and case management tools for gender-sensitive handling of violence against women cases have been formulated for prosecutors, law enforcers, social and health workers, and local officials.

The government established arrangements with NGOs and Philippine embassies in destination countries to provide overseas workers who are victims of trafficking or exploitation with a wide range of protective services, including temporary residency status, relief from deportation, shelter, and access to legal, medical, and counseling services.

Due to these concerted efforts, the Philippines has been cited for its progress to implement its anti-trafficking law. Due to its initial progress to combat trafficking in persons, it was removed from the US State Department's Watch List of countries with severe incidence of human trafficking. It was noted that, in the past year, the courts have convicted seven individuals for trafficking

offenses and sentenced four to life imprisonment. Sixty-seven offenders have been charged and 31 prosecuted for violations of the law.

In compliance with Article 1 of the Convention, the *Magna Carta for Women* is in the final stages of review in the House of Representatives. Its provisions are in keeping with those of CEDAW, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Bill commits the State to recognize, affirm and intensify its efforts to guarantee the rights and fundamental freedoms of women, especially those in the marginalized sectors. A similar bill is to be filed in the Philippine Senate, and the two will eventually become our Gender Equality Law.

Knowing from our earlier experience that the process of enacting laws that address women's rights entails several years of unrelenting lobbying and advocacy, the national machinery and members of civil society will continue to engage legislators until the current set of proposed bills are passed.

The democratic processes that combat formal and systemic forms of discrimination are also at work in our local governments. During its Pearl Anniversary in 2005, the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women gave public recognition to ten Local Government units that have incorporated gender mainstreaming principles in local governance.

Gender and Development Codes and local laws have been formulated in line with the provisions of the Convention. Gender analysis has been applied in the design of local programs that address priority gender issues. The public and private sectors have been mobilized to deal with cases of violence against women, prostitution, and exploitation; improving access to economic opportunities; providing shelter and utilities for poor women; and broadening women's rights to health care, social protection, and political participation.

While gender-responsive policy from national government and insistent advocacy from civil society have succeeded in harnessing the participation of many local governments in the campaign for gender equality, it is undeniable that much more needs to be done. Strides taken to Influence local officials to re-design their programs within a gender framework are especially difficult in

places dominated by traditional politics characterized by patriarchal values, patronage and corruption.

The national machinery and the budget department have issued two joint circulars to institutionalize gender mainstreaming in the activities and budgeting processes of local governments. A circular from the department of interior and local governments directs them to involve women in development planning through the formation of councils that represent different sectors of the community. Gender indicators have been incorporated in the Local Government Performance Management System. These measures are consistent with Article 4 and General Recommendation No. 5 of the Convention.

Women, Juvenile and Children's Protection Desks have been organized in the stations of the Philippine National Police. They collaborate with local officials, civil society groups, social welfare offices and the judicial system in the implementation of the different laws that safeguard women's rights. The justice department has assigned additional prosecutors at the regional levels to focus on trafficking cases, and has a program to orient local judges on the provisions of laws pertaining to the protection of women and children. Various women's groups are constantly working with different leagues of local chief executives to develop their commitments to the implementation of the provisions of the CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action and the Philippine Framework Plan for Women.

At the core of the state's efforts to transform Philippine society into a democracy that works for gender equality and the empowerment of women is the national machinery: the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women (NCRFW). Pursuant to General Recommendation No. 6, the proposed *Magna Carta for Women* incorporates provisions for further strengthening the Commission. It formalizes functions that the NCRFW is already undertaking but were not previously included in its Charter. A critical element in the proposal is the stipulation that the Commission's Chairperson report directly to the President in cabinet meetings on the implementation of the Act.

The formal provisions and mechanisms for the implementation of the Convention are definitely in place. However, the extent to which we are able to advance women's rights and gender equality needs to be viewed in the context of other circumstances in our national life.

Continuing poverty in the nation exacerbates gender issues. Almost a quarter of the population and close to a third of Filipino women live below the poverty line. Rural women bear the brunt of impoverishment, and occupy the lowest rungs of the economic ladder in agriculture. With devolution of powers and the transfer of responsibility over many public services to local governments, there has been uneven distribution of social services, infrastructure and economic resources across the land, with urban areas getting the lion's share in many instances. Women's choices for employment, health and educational benefits have been constricted by these structural adjustments.

The fight against poverty is the focus of the Medium-Term Philippine Development Plan. Government aims to generate 1.4 to 1.6 million jobs annually. Key industries expected to generate employment include those in tourism, agribusiness, housing, ICT, exports, and mining. Women's employment opportunities will invariably increase, inasmuch as they are visible in many of these industries. The challenge, however, is to ensure that new jobs in these industries will promote women's labor rights rather than exploit or discriminate against them.

The promotion and development of small businesses is viewed as a critical strategy to spur economic growth. Various loan funds are now available to aspiring entrepreneurs, workers in the formal and informal sectors, and for rural families. Over the past ten years, credit assistance has been extended to more than 770,000 women in the 60 poorest provinces.

The KALAHI-CIDSS Program is the Arroyo government's flagship program in response to the serious problem of poverty. The Program fast tracks the delivery of social services and empowers rural communities to address their immediate and long-term needs. Its top two community projects are the establishment of water systems and the construction or rehabilitation of farm-

to-market roads. Other projects include electrification, day care centers, school buildings, and health stations. All such projects respond to the practical gender needs of women. Within six years, the Program will have assisted two million poor households, or around 10 million Filipinos.

KALAH I has also funded capability-building activities and innovative income-generating projects. In collaboration with the Technology and Livelihood Resource Center (TLRC), ENTREPINAY groups composed of unemployed women have been organized in some 200 communities. TLRC provides training and helps the women's groups to start small-scale home-based businesses. Many of them have become self-reliant and productive members of their communities.

Another circumstance that intensely affects women is the peace and order situation in our nation. Sad to say, peace in all regions and for all sectors of our society remains elusive. The most problematic challenges to peace and order are on two fronts: Communist and Islamic insurgencies. Peace negotiations between government and both Communist rebels and Muslim separatists have been in progress over the past years, but neither initiative has yet led to a lasting truce.

The President has instructed local governments to initiate community development programs in areas where extreme poverty makes the residents vulnerable to the influence of rebels and insurgents. She called for broader inter-faith dialogues between Christian and Muslim populations, and strengthened the Peace Panels engaged in dialogues with insurgent groups.

Civil society groups, members of the academe, peace and equality advocates have launched their own initiatives to promote the rights of indigenous people, religious and cultural minorities. Earlier this year, a multi-sectoral national workshop on indigenous women, peace and development drew up a Plan of Action to promote and protect the rights of indigenous women to be free from VAW and other forms of abuse and exploitation.

Sex role stereotyping is another factor that retards the advancement of gender equality in Philippine society. While this remains a source of

discrimination against women, significant gains have been made to change gender values anent sex roles, male domination and female subordination.

In the past two decades, several laws and policies have been promulgated which promote the value of shared parenting and egalitarian relationships. Male workers are now entitled to Paternity Leave. Parental leaves enable either parent to attend to sick children. Day care facilities have been established in public and private offices. Through the Early Childhood Care and Development Act, the social welfare department provides services to children below the age of six, and trains parents and caregivers on responsible parenthood, prevention of child abuse, and children's rights.

The Women's Studies Association of the Philippines, initially consisting of five universities and colleges, now boasts of more than a hundred members from public and private tertiary institutions. It has been instrumental in the integration of gender concerns into undergraduate and graduate programs and in the conduct of training courses for teachers in basic education. Eight regional Gender Resource Centers recently completed a workshop on the application of CEDAW in gender mainstreaming. A module for integrating CEDAW in the curriculum is currently being developed.

The Department of Education has revised its textbooks in basic education to convey gender-fair values and images. It has also introduced GAD Exemplars, which includes core messages for a gender-fair society and a discussion of gender issues. Government training institutions have integrated gender equality issues in their in-service training curricula for civil service workers.

For many years now, the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority has encouraged the enrolment of women in non-traditional trades, and its women graduates have repeatedly excelled in International Skills Olympics. Courses offered by the labor department emphasize the role of women in unionism and encourage women workers to become union leaders and officers. It has developed a system for monitoring compliance with the provisions of the Anti-Sexual Harassment Law in the private sector, including



the institution of company mechanisms to deal with sexual harassment, as part of Labor Standards. It also sets strict policies for the processing of contracts of female overseas migrant workers, which are consistent with the Philippine Labor Code and provisions of the Convention against discrimination and exploitation.

In mass media, there is a growing pool of influential journalists, filmmakers, artists and practitioners who articulate gender issues and concerns. Policies and legislations are being proposed to curb the display and circulation of pornographic materials in public places and on the Internet. A commercial television channel recently recast its image to become the “channel for the Filipina.” This year, the NCRFW launched a media campaign on the Convention as the central theme of the Women’s Month celebration.

Traditional views on sex roles have been more difficult to break in the area of reproductive health and rights. To date, family planning remains largely a female responsibility, and the number of male spouses who use contraceptives remains low.

Family planning and population policy revolves around ‘four pillars,’ namely: responsible parenthood, birth spacing, respect for life and informed choice. Natural family planning methods are promoted, and service providers are trained to deliver and popularize them. Responsibility for the provision of reproductive health information and services has been devolved to local governments, who may choose to implement aspects of the Responsible Parenthood Program or totally ignore it.

But even while there have been setbacks, there have also been positive developments that augur well for women’s health rights. The health department has instituted programs for women’s health and development, safe motherhood, breastfeeding, breast and cervical cancer prevention, and for the care of older persons. Adolescent health is addressed through educational and service programs that emphasize the youth’s right to exercise responsible sexuality in order to reduce the incidence of teenage pregnancies, early marriages, sexually transmitted infections and other psycho-social

concerns. The National Insurance Act now pays for prenatal examinations and maternity expenses for normal deliveries. A law has also been promulgated for the promotion of public awareness on HIV-AIDS and its causes.

The transformation of gender constructions from traditional stereotypes to ones consistent with gender-fair and gender equal values remains a significant challenge. Diverse strategies in this regard will continue to be a major component of our legislative and civil advocacy.

Article 7 of the Convention calls for measures to eliminate discrimination in public and political life. Let me say that, despite the persistence of gender gaps in many aspects of our lives, Filipina women are well-represented in key positions of power and decision-making.

To begin with, the Philippines enjoys the distinction of being one of the few nations in the world today that has a woman as head of state. I am one of two women in the Cabinet, as Secretary of the Department of Social Welfare and Development. Our Department is a key player in the state's fight against poverty and in promoting access by marginalized groups, including women, to social and economic opportunities and benefits.

Women are well-represented in the judiciary. Five of fifteen Justices in the Philippine Supreme Court are women, along with 17 of 25 Appellate Justices and 2 of 6 Justices sitting in the Court of Tax Appeals. In 2005, women judges in lower courts ranged from 26 to 32 percent, except in the Metropolitan Trial Courts where they comprised half, and in the Shari'a, where there were no female judges in the District Courts and only one in the Circuit Courts. About a third of constitutional agencies, government-owned and controlled corporations, and bureaus of executive line agencies are led by women, along with career diplomats occupying positions in Philippine embassies and consulates worldwide. These profiles compare favorably with those found in more developed countries.

The number of women in elective positions has steadily risen since our last Country Report was made, but is not as substantial as one would wish for.

Women occupy four of twenty-three seats in the Philippine Senate, and there are 32 women who sit in the House of Representatives, compared to 178 men. Similar patterns describe the proportion of women elected as local executives and legislators.

Women heads of offices, diplomats and bureaucrats have been staunch allies for advancing women's rights. Career executives have played critical roles in the institutionalization of gender mainstreaming processes in national and local governance. Female legislators in the different tiers of government have sponsored laws that translate provisions of the Convention into national mandates and local ordinances.

A number of legislative and executive policies have also been adopted to increase women's participation in sectoral bodies established by the state, at both national and local levels. The Civil Service Commission has issued a memorandum circular for the equal representation of women and men in the highest positions within the bureaucracy.

Despite these gains, we are continuing actions to improve gender balance in the bureaucracy, legislature, and the judiciary. Legislative action, policy formulation, and intensive capacity-building for aspiring politicians and women in civil service are among the strategies that are in place.

Efforts to eliminate discrimination against women and to achieve gender equality have not been confined to the state bureaucracy. Today, the larger federations of trade unions endeavor to address these issues in the workplace. Women leaders in business have bonded together as a crucial stakeholder for the economic empowerment of women. As earlier mentioned, private banks and government financial institutions have set up credit assistance programs for economically poor and property-less women. Educational institutions have been increasingly drawn into national and global programs that promote women's empowerment and gender equality. Media practitioners have been mobilized to highlight gender issues in their work.

Women's rights and gender advocacy have become nationwide and multi-sectoral concerns of different women's groups, be it in the cities, farms, or

fishing villages, both in Christian and Muslim areas. Programs have been directed towards enlarging the spaces for women's participation in governance, broadening the scope of women's rights, and uplifting the situation of impoverished, abused and discriminated women. Civil society groups have proven to be staunch and tireless partners in the concerted quest for gender equality.

Our efforts towards eliminating gender inequalities have not been confined to our territorial boundaries. Filipino women in gender equality advocacy have constantly striven to link their work with like-minded women and organizations across the globe.

We are also proud to say that many Filipino women have been elected to head UN agencies, including the CSW and this august body. In our part of the world, Filipinas have been visible in regional and international fora, associations and networks to mainstream gender concerns in economic relations, in education, culture and politics.

Finally, I wish to state that the Philippines has achieved considerable progress in disseminating information on CEDAW and the Optional Protocol. Our Fifth and Sixth Country Reports are based on data collected and collated by different governmental and non-governmental agencies, and finalized only after the drafts had been presented in consultative meetings with multi-sectoral stakeholders.

During the Philippine celebration of Women's Month this past March, the NCRFW mobilized national agencies and local governments to initiate and participate in a series of events intended to raise public awareness on the Convention as an instrument for promoting women's human rights. Training sessions, fora and other capacity-building activities on the Convention were carried out.

The Philippines' Reports to CEDAW and our responses to the follow-up questions of the Committee were presented to our President and her Cabinet. As a result, President Arroyo and the Cabinet committed to prioritize a bill that aims to repeal the Labor Code's prohibition of night work for women workers.

They also agreed to certify the immediate passage of the *Magna Carta for Women*.

Madame Chairperson and members of the Committee, I have provided you with the highlights of the Reports we have submitted to this Committee.

We now welcome your comments, assessments and advice on these matters. As always, we are prepared to apply your expert views, insights and suggestions to the furtherance of our implementation of the Convention and the Optional Protocol.

A pleasant good morning to you all.