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The Women's Media Circle in the Struggle for
the Empowerment of Filipino Women through Media and Communications

by Anna Leah Sarabia

I belong to a small women's non-government organization called the Women's Media Circle, which is composed of professionals in radio, television and print, and who have dedicated their efforts to the empowerment of women through the communications media and the arts.

What is the basis of our existence as an organization for the empowerment of women through the communications media in our country? A dictum of six words: No voice, no choice, no power.

In 1985, it might have been simple enough for the women in the Philippines to hope for their voices to be heard through the good graces of those who had access to media. That would have meant appealing to friends in radio and television to please help make visible the glaring issues of the day, which at that time meant much of what the Marcos regime seemed to signify to most activists: corruption, lack of freedom of expression, a heavily controlled government that depended on the whims and desires of a single family and their friends; women's issues were focused on sex-trafficking, state violence against women, and sex tourism. However, issues such as wife-beating, rape, incest, sexual harrassment, the lack of access to credit, the
legal disparities between men and women, the lack of political and economic advancement of women, the sexism in the media: these were hardly ever raised, even by women within the Marcos-controlled media.

It would have been easy to discuss these even within a dictatorship because -- as far as we experienced -- because when we presented the format of a feminist radio program to one station manager in the government network, the only parameters we were given were to keep off direct criticism of the Marcos family, the Marcos government and the military. I was surprised simplicity of the directive, for we could very well carry one for months on women's issues without mentioning the Marcos family. But the Women's Media Circle did not exist in a vacuum. When we began our pioneering program Womanwatch in October 1985, women activists all over the country were preparing a massive rally. We went on the air in October 27, the eve of the Filipino Women's Day of Protest. For the first time, the women leaders of the anti-marcos movement acknowledged the existence and contributions of women activists and organizations. Women then began to be a very visible force in the fight against dictatorship.

After Cory Aquino became president, the enemy was not Marcos anymore: and the basis of women's oppression remained. We no longer had a dictatorship, but why were women still getting a bad deal? Finally, when the smoke had cleared several months after the People's Uprising, we realized that the struggle for human rights, social justice and the development of women had just began. After the political upheaval, a new society did not emerge. Rather, a new class of power-wielders took over where Marcos and his cronies left. Land-owners, businessmen and oligarchs whose properties and positions were taken over by the Marcos
boys, returned to their former positions with the restoration of a certain kind of democracy. Some became even more powerful: those who owned huge tracts of land, were given the power to control access to public transportation, car manufacturing, logging, shipping, real estate development, telecommunications, publishing and broadcasting. In short, those who owned so much of the land what was standing on it, were allowed to control also our waters and our airwaves. Media only reiterated and reaffirmed the status quo.

In this kind of situation, free and direct access to both government and commercial broadcasting outlets has been made extremely difficult for small independent and activist production groups, who had made brilliant use of the “alternative media” to help overthrow the Marcos government. Those independent producers who are now thriving are directly the same people who already had control of media outlets during the Marcos government, or are allied by kinship or partnership to the owners of the networks, advertising agencies, government agencies or powerful religious organizations. Even available airtime is controlled by a kind of “blocktimers mafia.”

Despite our track record of 10 years as an organization of professional and feminist media producers -- or perhaps because of our insistence on our feminist vision -- we had to almost beg for airtime in mainstream radio and television which we were even willing to pay for. When we began broadcasting our television program Womanwatch in 1986, women were looked upon as a harmless entity, concerned mainly with housekeeping and prettying themselves for the delight of men. Our host was a physically attractive women, who was a vocal anti-Marcos activist, and who had made her name as an art gallery owner and a professional basketball team manager. Through her weekly appearance on our television
program, she became readily recognizable as a media personality throughout the country. She then managed to win a seat in the Congress and in the Senate, and became for many years an oppositionist. Our program, which was running on the government network, was thus identified by media persons as an important venue of her criticism of both the Aquino and the Ramos governments. By the end of our ninth year on television, our program was put off the air. The reason given was that independent producers could not longer have access to public affairs airtime in that station.

Last year, when we came up with a proposal to produce a youth-oriented program, however, we realized how tightly the doors had been shut to small independent producers like us. It isn't enough for us to just come up with the money, or an attractive format. It was necessary to have strict control over what is broadcast, either by station managers -- who only want profitable programs -- and by the censors, euphemistically called the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board. In a democracy like ours, where freedom of the press is a constitutional right, that freedom to speak, to have a voice is muffled by the priests of profit and the guardians of religious morality. If you want access to the general audience, you either conform to the rules of Corporate Media and government media, or stay out of the way - in the unprofitable and sparsely populated communities. (KBP ruling)

As far as independent producers have experienced, the media industry does not want to people to have choice. Despite the praises that have been recited all over the world to the advancement of women through access to cellphones, email, internet, cable TV and handycams, corporate, government and religious media does not want its audiences to make real choices in life. It wants you to make a choice about what detergent to use, or what fast
food outlet to patronize. It wants you to go out and make a choice about which politician is the lesser evil. It wants you to abdicate the power to choose to some god and his ministers.

We are not trying to sell products through advertising; we aren't telling people how great our mostly male political leaders are; and we aren't saying praise the lord every time we meet a pregnant teenager who calls our hotline for help after being beaten up by her boyfriend. We make radio programs for and about women; we project through public service announcements that women can excel and even outdo men if given the same opportunities; we make visible on television the contributions of women to society, despite the lack of support from their partners and from authorities; and we show young women that they deserve respect and that they have the right to choices about the control of their health, their bodies and their destinies.

But because we do not promote government propaganda, or sell products and lifestyles of the rich and famous, nor are we trying to convert people and win souls to occupy kingdoms in heaven, how do small groups like the Women's Media Circle manage to survive in such a hostile environment? How do we even manage to land one or two hours a week on mainstream television and radio networks that are controlled by powerful men who would rather see women silent and demure?

It hasn't been easy. We do this by finding the small small cracks in the walls and chipping them open. By presenting our ideas to sympathetic individuals — usually women in powerful positions who are aware of our mission and who are willing to listen. By persistence, hard
work and personal sacrifice. (Preparing for TV program with small staff and a group of students whom we are constantly training because they eventually leave for better paying jobs in the industry. "Forced labor" of members of our families.)

We also have learned to work with "the enemy." We have learned to seek the expertise of women advertisers and government bureaucrats whom we know. And we have sought the intercession of women and progressive Catholic bishops for development aid and funding.

It is not a one-way deal, though. We are constantly exchanging ideas with people -- women -- from these sectors in order to make them aware of women's issues. In the current language, we are indirectly helping them by making them more gender-sensitive.

We have lobbied for legislative reform through our programs, and have in some ways helped women politicians form a women- oriented agenda. We have linked arms with the Philippine National Police to help establish the first Women's Desks in police precincts nationwide dedicated to victims of crimes against women and children.

We are engaged in coalition building for women's political and economic power. We are working with service and research-oriented women's groups to promote women's health and prevent teenage pregnancy. We are assisting through involvement in the planning of campaigns and the use of our facilities, small women's groups engaged in programs against violence against women, and against the discrimination of gays and lesbians.

It is obvious, from the list of activities, that the Women's Media Circle is not merely a production group. We are an activist group, using our professional skills for the
empowerment of the disempowered and the dispossessed. Because we are focused on social issues, choosing to use media and communications as tools for information and as weapons for empowerment, we see where our basic conflicts with the status quo are. And we are not surprised why the Media industry would want to keep us outside of the mainstream. Just as the feminist-activist movement in many developed countries has been made quiet by giving grants for research and academic activities on women, we are being encouraged to keep our programs non-controversial and non-confrontational.

But because we see the potential good that media and communications can bring to the disempowered and the dispossessed, we are determined to use it and are willing to fight for access to it. We are determined to keep women visible and heard; we are determined to make women aware of their choices; and we will fight to help women take hold of their choices, lives and destinies.