

WOMEN, POLITICS, AND POWER

Remarks of Former Senator of the Republic of the Philippines and
Former United Nations Assistant Secretary General Leticia Ramos Shahani
at a Special Program on “Women in Power” at the
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It is a great pleasure and privilege to participate in this special program on the topic of women in power with several distinguished women. I welcome this topic because women have to come to terms with the question of how to wield power in creating conditions for peace. We also have to understand the scope and limitations of power. As a participant in this panel, I am using the term “power” mainly within the scope of politics, that is, legitimate power given to those who win election for public office.

Politics, it is often said, it not a natural arena for women who are more suited to the “softer” activities of life such as motherhood and housework. However, the number of women in politics is increasing, world-wide. This means that more women are beginning to feel more comfortable in public office, that they know how to balance the demanding tasks of family and public life, and that they are contributing their gifts of caring and sharing which the general public is beginning to appreciate. But how do women get introduced into politics? In my case, it took some time before I had the opportunity to enter politics but, fortunately, I was introduced to it early in life.

Family

I grew up acquainted with the rough and tumble of politics because my father, Narciso Ramos, served for five consecutive terms in the Commonwealth National Assembly and in the House of Representatives of the Republic of the Philippines. My brother, sister and I daily witnessed my father and my mother, who was her husband’s most loyal supporter serve unselfishly the people of the 6th congressional district of Pangasinan. Politics, during my father’s time (1932-1947), was an honorable calling; corruption was unheard of – a situation hard to believe these days, but true. My father and his family were proud of his untainted record as an honest and able member of Congress. But we also experienced first hand the financial anxieties and uncertainties of a family whose main breadwinner was an honest politician. When the offer was made to him in 1947, as one of the founders of the Philippine Foreign Service in the legislature, to be the Deputy Chief of Mission in the Philippine Embassy in Washington, my father accepted the offer, apprehensive that as an elected official he would not be able to give his children quality college education. However, that early daily exposure from my father and my mother of politics as service to the people and not as a means to enrich one’s self through ill-gotten wealth and abuse of official power remained a profound influence all my life. My father left politics for good and became a career diplomat. But politics would not leave him. He said something at a 1957 convocation held at the University of the Philippines, for which remarks he was pilloried by some members of Congress to the extent that they withheld for several months his confirmation as Chief of Mission Class I in the Philippine Foreign Service. My father on that

occasion said: "Politics is the main industry of this country; unfortunately, it is a non-productive industry". This statement said fifty years ago, perhaps readily explains why after so much promise and hope, the Philippines remains a disappointing laggard among its neighbors in Southeast Asia.

Education and Professional Background

I call myself a politician by accident because never in my dreams as a girl child nor a young woman did I think that I would ever serve in the Philippine Senate. I wanted to be a teacher and had a long preparation for what I thought would be an academic career. Fortunately, I had a global background for my education – my college years were spent in the United States, interrupted by a teaching stint at the UP and then on to France for a Ph.D. I mention this varied educational background because serving in the Senate requires a broad intellectual orientation – writing, speaking, articulating national problems are musts in a political institution whose main task is to debate and clarify national issues in order to craft appropriate and timely laws for the progress and welfare of our people. It is obvious that a woman Senator has to be more prepared, better read than her male colleagues if she is to be taken seriously by them in what is still, essentially, a male institution.

Without wishing to be self-serving and intellectually arrogant, I sympathize with those Senators who are elected to the Senate on the basis of mere popularity and celebrity status, based on gambling royalties, cinematic glory and the like. Several showbiz people when elected to the Senate must be bored to death by long-winded debates on the fine points of the law or by technical issues relating to global warming and the claims of China in the South China Sea. Am I being elitist when I say this? I don't think so. To be sure, there have been outstanding exceptions in local government, Vilma Santos, being one of them. But my point is, to be an effective Senator, one needs a passion to understand current events and history, plenty of native intelligence and a heart in the right place in order to respond to the needs of the people. Without these qualities, the Philippine Senate becomes stunted. Instead of articulating solutions for national problems, "no talk, no mistake" becomes the accepted wisdom. The Senate for me was some kind of a post-doctoral educational institution. With the likes of Jovito Salonga, Neptali Gonzales and Teofisto Guingona as colleagues in the Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Congresses, the Senate was an exciting and demanding place to be in. Let us not also forget the high standards of public service, nationalism, eloquence and concern for the common "tao" set by Senators like Manuel Quezon, Claro M. Recto, Lorenzo Tañada and Jose Diokno.

May I go back to the qualifications required of an effective Senator. A varied professional experience can be very helpful for a woman Senator. Serving as a career diplomat and ambassador in the Philippine Foreign Service as well as an international civil servant at the United Nations gave me a grasp of where the Philippines could belong in the community of competing nations as well as insights into the fundamentals of good government and the requirements of sustained socio-economic development. I suppose a young woman preparing for a political career at the present time should have some background in information and communications technology if she is to understand the role of our country in a world that is not only globalized but, more important, digitalized and flat.

Revolution

But politics is unpredictable. My entry into politics was unplanned. I returned to Manila in late 1985, while with the United Nations, because our father fell very ill. My brother, Fidel V. Ramos, at that time the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, requested me to look after our dying Father because his own hands were full with the problems spawned by the internal turmoil spreading throughout the country. In between tending to my father's needs, I listened to my oldest son's interpretation of the political upheaval agitating our people. Ranjit, my son, simply put it this way: "Mom, if you are for change, you have to support Cory". Not having met Cory (former Philippine President Corazon Aquino) but having read the New York Times abroad on what was happening in the country, I had a feeling Ranjit, a member of the young generation, was correct. I did not realize then how important it was for our people, imprisoned as they were by official propaganda, to openly hear the views of other Filipinos coming from the outside like me. When I went to our hometown in Asingan, Pangasinan to register to vote for the snap elections, I was anxiously asked by the local YWCA, whom I was supporting for President. I simply and honestly said: "I am for change; I am for Cory who can bring about that change". This direct, short reply reverberated quickly out of our sleepy town to the offices of the national broadsheets and the next day I made the headlines which screamed that a second cousin of President Marcos was for Cory. Without any TV ads, or a campaign machinery, I became nationally known overnight and remained so until Cory was installed President. When she was forming her Senate slate, a few months later, Cory invited me to join it as one of the two candidates – the other one, being Santanina Rasul - she had chosen to represent Filipino women. Somehow without much effort, I had fulfilled the requirements of a senatorial candidate in my country – a personality known nationwide, who was now accepted by an electorate, hungry for change.

Even the conditions for the 1987 senatorial campaign favored a neophyte politician like me. Since the national mood was for Cory who symbolized change, those in her Senatorial slate did not have to fork out big sums of money in order to win because people volunteered to help pay for our sorties wherever we went. Alas, those conditions may never come back again. Yet, they represented Filipino democracy at its most honest and transparent – the people's sovereign will was manifested and it prevailed. I sincerely believe that without those extra-ordinary events which catapulted me into President Aquino's campaign, I would not have been elected, under ordinary circumstances, as Senator, and be given the legitimate power to serve our people. What gives me comfort and self-confidence as a woman, however, is that I was intellectually and spiritually attuned to the events of the times so that when the political challenge presented itself to me; I was able to respond correctly to it.

Priorities in Law-making

Once elected, I asked myself for whom do I legislate and what do I legislate? I had no doubt that I had to legislate for women because I correctly felt that I represented them. Fortunately, my long experience at the United Nations, both as a Philippine delegate and an international civil servant, as well as my life as a widow and single parent for many years prepared me to focus sharply on women's issues. The first bill I authored which was made into law was RA 6725, "Strengthening the Prohibition of Discrimination Against Women in the

Workplace, Amending the Labor Code of the Philippines". But a Senator cannot just be a class legislator. I also wanted to help the youth, the farmers, the men, the people, in general. There is, indeed, a plethora of choices for an incoming Senator. Although I was not just a Senator for women I never forgot that women's issues were my priority. It is important to have priorities because twelve years in the Senate, the period for which I served, may seem a long period but it is short in terms of the time required to pass basic legislation which invites controversy and prolonged debate. For instance, it took nine years to pass the centerpiece of my feminist legislation: the two laws on rape – one (RA 8353) which redefined the crime of rape; the other (RA 8505), which provided assistance to rape victims and their families.

Born in the coastal town of Lingayen, Pangasinan I wanted to legislate for our fishermen, the poorest of the poor, as well as for the preservation and development of our marine resources. Thus I undertook to craft the Fisheries Code (RA 8550) which took ten years to pass into law. Conscious of the elitist orientation of our banking institutions, I sallied into the area of making loans accessible to our small and medium-scale industries and authored RA 6977 or the Magna Carta for Small- and Medium-Scale Industries. I also felt a deep obligation to legislate for the Philippine Foreign Service, being the only career ambassador thus far, to become a Senator. I, therefore, authored the Philippine Foreign Service Act (RA 7157) as well as another major law relating to foreign policy "The Bases Conversion and Development Act" (RA 7227). A law which has had impact on our cultural life is RA 7356 which created the National Commission on Culture and the Arts and of which I was its main author and principal sponsor.

Frustrations

I submitted several bills in the Senate which never saw the light of day but I hope another lawmaker will discover their merits and resurrect them in the future. These pieces of legislation relate to the nature of our country as a compact and strategically-situated archipelago as well as a potential maritime power in Asia. Up to this day, I am convinced that we, Filipinos, cannot achieve our potential as a nation unless we understand and develop the diversified maritime nature of our country. I authored bills relating to: (1) The Creation of a Separate Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources; (2) The Creation of a Department of Maritime Affairs; (3) Drawing the Baselines of the Philippine Archipelago. Although these bills did not directly deal with women's issues, they certainly could have benefited women as concerned citizens of this country. I should like to stress here the critical need to draw the baselines of our archipelago through domestic legislation because by 2009, the International Seabed Authority will be in place to regulate an international maritime system. I am alarmed by the fact that no one in the Executive or Legislative branches of Government at present seems concerned about our partial loss of national sovereignty in the near future. Women should be militant and vigilant on issues dealing with sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity in the same manner that our heroines like Gabriela Silang, Teodora Alonso, the women of Malolos and the suffragettes of 1937 were.

Committee Work

One of the most satisfying tasks of a Senator is committee work, either as Chairman of a committee or as a member. I had the privilege of chairing major Committees such as the: (1)

Foreign Affairs Committee; (2) Education Committee; (3) Agriculture Committee. It was through Committee work that I had some of the most rewarding experiences as a Senator – that is getting to know the NGO's and personalities in our country invited to comment on pending legislation. This is the place where concerned citizens can lobby and press for their particular interests and advocacies. This is an area of vital importance to our political institutions for aside from casting votes, it is in these committees that citizens can freely voice their concerns – on condition that Senators are sympathetic and are patient listeners and if the NGO's know how to present their issues. Politics and lawmaking, after all, is the art of the possible. As citizens, we must learn to dialogue and negotiate with our public officials. And one of the best places to learn these is at some well-conducted Senate committee hearings.

Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF)

The practice of allowing Senators and Congressmen have direct access to the annual budget for development funds, through the Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF), a practice introduced during the Aquino administration, must be re-studied carefully, with a view to instituting controls, if not totally eliminating the practice. Senators and Congressmen certainly have a right to identify projects for their constituents under the Medium-Term Development Plan; in many instances, they, rather than self-satisfied bureaucrats, know best. But to allow lawmakers, who determine the budget, to use funds themselves, amounting in the millions of taxpayers' hard-earned money, is such a big temptation for first-class corruption in the name of national development and the welfare of the people. No wonder there is a proliferation of basketball courts and waiting sheds instead of, for instance, long-term goals in improving the quality of our tropical fruits and vegetables.

One piece of legislation I am particularly proud of, which I introduced during the debate on the national budget in 1994 was the mandatory annual allocation of 5% of the budget of every government department and agency for gender and development; I believe we are the only country in the world at present which has this legislative provision for women's programs through its annual budget. This section in the annual budget must be carefully guarded by all feminists and their friends as it could easily be wiped out by agents of oppression and fear.

Entry into Provincial Politics

With the end of my career in the Senate in sight, I thought of continuing my service to the people through politics – this time, in provincial politics. I ran in 1998 for provincial governor in our province of Pangasinan, a big province which consists of 49 towns and 4 cities, one of the biggest provinces in the Republic. In my innocence about the nature of provincial politics, I thought I could easily win election in a single province, having won twice in national elections. I underestimated the kind of micro-campaigning that was required in 1,355 barangays of Pangasinan where people were not interested in grand visions for the province but rather in being gifted with mono-block chairs and toilet bowls and having their pictures taken with candidates with instamatic cameras. I thought I could motivate my province-mates into a grand vision of being the gateway to China, increasing trade and exchange with China and the East Asian tigers, with our big province of Pangasinan facing the South China Sea. But I was defeated by a candidate who belonged to a family which had been entrenched in provincial politics for two

generations. Success in provincial politics, however, should be a separate theme for women politicians.

Life after politics

Now in retirement from the Senate for nearly a decade, I have realized the truth of the words of my late father uttered nearly fifty years ago, which I shall quote again: "Politics is the main industry in the Philippines; unfortunately, it is a non-productive industry". In our obsession with naked political power and the pseudo-glamour of political high-visibility, we have neglected the development of science and technology, stunted agricultural research, discouraged our artists and inventors, sacrificed our academic standards, cheapened quality sports and corrupted media. All of these could have been nurtured and developed, despite overwhelming problems, if we, like Thailand and India, had a more balanced view of politics as a public good rather than as personal, exclusive monopoly.

Tragically, politics as we have shaped it the Philippines is the selfish use of political power, which in the words of Henry Kissinger becomes the "ultimate aphrodisiac". Bluntly speaking, politics has become a profession, a business for many to make fast money from the people's tax payments with impunity. Certainly, politics in a democratic setting should not exist as a means to perpetuate the selfish interests of individuals, families and oligarchs but rather to widen citizen's participation to create a just, participatory and genderized society.

Women are equipped to undertake a two-pronged approach to achieve political reform and change in our country by participating: (1) directly in the political institutions of our country as elected officials at the barangay, municipal, provincial and national levels; and (2) by working for political reform as NGOs, members of think tanks, academic advocates, business people for social progress, members of media; all these individuals and groups who are committed. But the record of women in politics, worldwide, is a mixed one. We still have to prove that women, as women, can make a difference in governance and provide an alternative.

I am grateful for the privilege and honor to have served our people in the Senate. It remains one of the most wonderful and interesting chapters of my life. But I am not permanently attached to this chapter of my life nor do I want to cling to the perks of politics. I remain committed to strengthening our democratic institutions and basic human rights, including the rights of women but doing that now outside the formal political process, and in a more modest way. As an NGO, I spend part of my time at present in my province of Pangasinan, helping in rural development, particularly in the production and consumption of local carabao milk and milk products. What has enabled me to continue to serve beyond the self and beyond the pursuit of power, as a senior citizen, is my insight, which grows stronger as I live, that the basis of human life is the spiritual and ethical. My heroes in politics are larger-than-life personalities like Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela who proved that politics can be spiritual, inclusive and non-violent. President Corazon Aquino demonstrated the power of the spirit in her ascendancy to political office and even after her term as President of the Philippines.

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A politician's life and career is like a seamless fabric – in its beginning is its middle and its end. In everyday political life, means and ends are closely interrelated; noble ends cannot be achieved through corrupt means. Means, indeed, are ends in themselves. In order to wield power effectively in politics, both for women and men, the personal, political, material, moral and spiritual become rolled into one. It is only when the politician unites and integrates all of these facets into her/his life and political career for a transcendent goal to serve people and not the self, can politics have a lasting impact on the community, the country and the world.