Cordillera Currents

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Cordillera woman leader Petra Macliing, CPA council member, speaks out for genuine Cordillera regional autonomy.

Women's Movement for the Cordillera

In the Central Cordillera, the recent history of resistance against capitalist incursion and government-imposed development and the subsequent militarization of certain areas has some unforgettable anecdotes of how women actively participated in the assertion of the people's rights.

In 1978, Kalinga mothers in Tinglayan, Kalinga-Apayao literally pulled out their youthful sons from a detachment of the Philippine Constabulary where they were detained following a counter-insurgency drive in the village. Earlier, the Bontok women of Mainit successfully resisted the entry of the Benguet Corporation, one of the country's top mining concerns.

The active participation of women in the defense of the ancestral land, however, has not conferred Igorot women with a status equal to the men. The women of Suyo in Sagada, Mountain Province are, therefore, ahead of their time in demanding direct participation in the ator, which is the council of elders in Bontok society. But throughout the region, this case is rather the exception than the rule.

The situation in the Cordillera remains much like elsewhere in the country where women can justly claim to be victims of national, class and gender oppression. A review of the situation of some women sectors in the region indicates the nature of women's problems that needs to be addressed.

The Situation of Cordillera Women

Traditional women. There are indications from historical sources that precolonial women held a position that was equal to that of men. Unfortunately, the Cordillera, which has resisted colonization and where the people have retained many of their socio-political institutions, is by no means a living example of such an ideal state of affairs.

What is true is that Cordillera women are ascendant in the ritual life of the community. The *manjajawak* (healer) of Kalinga is a woman. In agriculture, women, too, are called upon to perform the necessary rituals before the planting season can commence.

On the whole, however, men dominate indigenous political structures like the *bodong* (peace pact) and the *ator* (council of elders). While certain means exist to allow women to have their say in considered deliberations in the ator, direct women's participation in community decision-making is not institutionalized. In fact it is taboo for women to set foot on the ator which is also the structure where the meetings are held.

Women in agriculture. Traditionally, Cordillera societies were warrior societies. The present system in agricultural production is then a carry-over of the division of labor that was required under such a set-up. As the men went to war and defended the territorial boundaries of their villages, women were left with the major role in food production and in the care of the children.

To this day, food production remains primarily a women's domain. In paddy rice production, the men are charged

Igorot women: against national oppression.

with field preparation; thereafter, farm activities rest on women. Where there are swidden farms, it is the women who trek to the mountains to maintain the gardens and to collect the produce. At the same time, it is also their duty to augment meager farm production with other livelihood activities like swine-and poultry-raising.

In areas where feudal structures have set in like in the vegetable industry in Benguet, gender and class oppression become evident when women and child laborers are paid lower wages than men. While both men and women are given similar work, the male oblante or worker is paid P40.00 a day while female workers get only P25 (1987 rates).

In the big landholdings of lowland Kalinga and Ifugao, the oppresive tenancy conditions weigh on the women more heavily than it does on the men. As a salve to chronic indebtedness to the landlord, the females in the household take on menial jobs like washing and cleaning and doing odd jobs in exchange for food and sometimes for used clothing.

Women workers. The women in the labor force should be better off, but the growth of the industrial sector with the presence of an Export Processing Zone (EPZ) in Baguio shows once again that workers everywhere share similar conditions. The Baguio EPZ employs about 4,500 people, 86 per cent of whom are women. Here, the classic methods of exploitation of female workers are all in use. Union-busting, sexual harrassment, absence of security of tenure, poor working conditions that are detrimental to the health and to the reproductive functions of women, prevail.

Wheras many unemployed and underemployed residents and migrants see the EPZ as bringing in jobs to the city, statistics show the real beneficiaries in the past years to be the 10 companies at the Baguio EPZ which garnered the highest production among the EPZs topping even that of Bataan's over 40 firms. In 1986, however, the workers' share of profits as percentage of their output was only 0.3 percent of production compared to the 15 per cent in Bataan.

With the absence of industries in the countryside, women are forced to migrate to the urban centers in search of jobs with the multinational companies or lucrative export-oriented enterprises. For example, Bontoc, Kankanaey and Ifugao weavers become piece-workers for those with the capital. In this system, the women workers are overworked, underpaid, and do not enjoy any of the legal benefits of employment, while the capitalist earns a lot of dollors from their produce.

Urban poor. The urban poor community has swelled to an estimated 60 per cent of the population of Baguio City, the only urban center in the Cordillera. This is an indication of the absence of opportunities and increasing pressures in the migrants' highland communities of origin.

Expectant but unable to find better living conditions in the city, urban poor women display coping mechanisms appropriating for themselves the jobs that nobody would take – buying and selling used bottles and old newspapers, fetching water, sidewalk vending, etc. And because they live in what are considered squatter areas, they do not enjoy the full benefits of available city services as they face constant fear of dislocation.

Women professionals. Statistics reveal that more Cordillera women are now able to finish college degrees. This is an important sector for articulating the demands of a women's movement in the Cordillera. However, the conservative educational system has taken its toll so that very few women have taken up politically active lives while others have not been able to liberate themselves from chauvinistic husbands that expect them to manage a career along with home and family with little support from the men.

Militarization and women. Increased militarization in many parts of the Cordillera is certainly one aspect of life that is affecting the situation of women. One aspect of militarization proceeds from the fact that the Cordillera is a resource base for valuable minerals, timber, hydroelectric power, etc. To exploit these resources amidst popular resistance, government has to send in the military.

Now the Cordillera is the scene of worsening human rights conditions and other problems spawned by the intensifying conflict between military troops and the rebel forces. Instead of abating, the situation is expected to intensify with the institution of various types of community-based paramilitary groups in many parts of the region.

In the war in the Cordillera, nobody has suffered more than the hapless civilians, especially those in the countryside. Whole communities have been dislocated due to military operations and under the deteriorating conditions, it is the women who must bear the trauma of having husbands or sons being detained or killed and at the same time face the role of sole family providers.

Advancing the people's democratic struggle

Cordillera Currents

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Tackling Cordillera problems

In many documented instances in the heightened military operations in Kalinga-Apayao, some of the innocent victims of war were civilian women and their children. Crimes against women have also been recorded. In addition, cases of prostitution which were unheard of before in these areas have occurred in heavy concentrations of soldiers.

Women's Response

Interest in women's concerns is a recent phenomenon among the indigenous women of the Cordillera who often have their minds full with the daily problems of survival. While women organizations exist in the region, many are conservative and not liberating; their political orientation then becomes apparent during electoral contests among factions in the ruling elite that only favor the status quo.

On the other hand, the first militant women's organization in the Cordillera emerged in the urban labor sector in 1985. Thus the Kilusan ng mga Manggagawang Kababaihan (KMK), or Women Workers Movement, took root in the Baguio Export Processing Zone.

In 1986, the Cordillera Women's Education and Resource Center was established following a Cordillera-wide consultation of women. The center aims to assist in setting up a women's movement in the Cordillera that is well grounded on the particularities of the women question in the region and the national character of women oppression. Formerly as the Baguio-Benguet Women's Education and Resource Center, it has taken significant strides in organizing women students (Samahan ng mga Magaaral na Kababaihang Nagkakaisa), professionals (WOMB-Baguio Chapter) and urban poor women.

In the view of CWERC, a women's movement for the Cordillera ought to proceed from the need for women to liberate themselves from cultural restrictions that hamper the attainment of their full potentials as individuals. Women's struggle against oppression, however, cannot be dissociated from the nationwide struggle against the exploitative structures in Philippine society. For under present conditions, they always must bear the brunt of hard times and invariably experience male bias. Indeed, the great majority suffer poverty and discrimination, two sides of one coin that is institutionalized violence under an unjust setup.

A painful lesson can be drawn from the actual experience in trying to organize female workers in Tiong San Bazaar, a Chinese-owned department store, the largest in Baguio City. In its organizing work, the Women's Program of the church-based Social Action Center avoided discussions on the theoretical bases of organizing and discouraged the analysis of contradictions in society. Lacking the proper perspective, the union was weak from the start and the attempt resulted in the dismissal of the workers. The Women's Program folded up eventually.

In the pursuit of change, women must understand there is no way that a feminist line can succeed alone. They can not win freedom from the structures of dominance if they do not link themselves up with the entire Filipino nation. It is therefore well to realize that the female population must be mobilized to advance its issues and aspirations within an overall liberationist framework.

Given the situation in the Cordillera and throughout the country today, the side that this half of the population will take will be decisive in shifting the balance of forces towards a more desirable social order where women are the equals of men in a just and democratic society.

Carol Gamiao

Cordillera women and children: the need for support services.

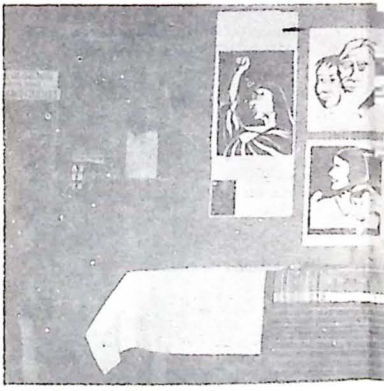
Empowering Co

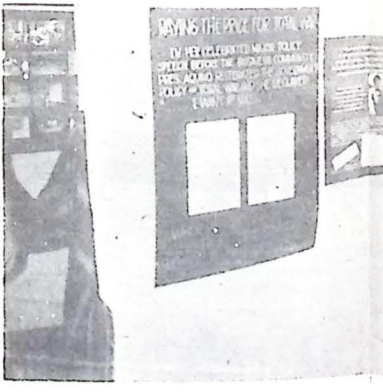
A series of activities, spearheaded by the Cordillera Women's Education and Resource Center (CWERC) and other women organizations in Baguio and Benguet, marked the celebration of International Women's Day. This year's theme was "Empowering the Cordillera Women for Justice, Self-Determination and Liberation."

As part of the preparations, meetings were held during the last week of February among organized and unorganized women's groups, including women in the hotel industry and miners' and migrant workers' wives. Discussions involved basic women's orientation, women organizing and the deepening of commitment to women's work.

The formal celebration opened with a photo exhibit which ran from March 3 to 5 at the Maharlika Livelihood Center and was capped by a special program held March 6 at the University of Baguio Student Center. The program, which started with an ecumenical service, was attended by various groups of women and women advocates in a show of solidarity on this significant occasion for women.

Keynote speaker in this year's celeb-





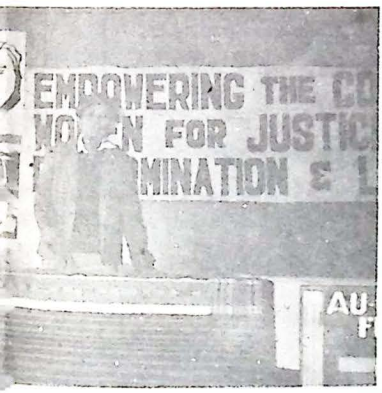
ordillera Women

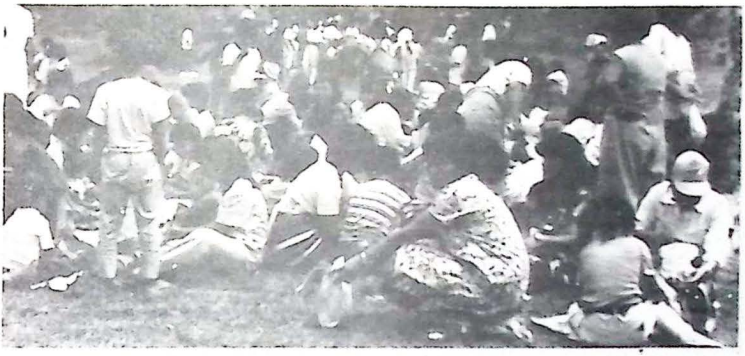
ration was Adul de Leon, chairperson of GABRIELA's Commission on Violence Against Women and also a noted TV, movie and stage actress. In her address, Ms. de Leon underscored the pivotal role of women in effecting social change.

The program ended with a march by the participants through the city's main thoroughfares and picnic and games at the Burnham Park grounds.

From March 14-19, the CWERC received and met with four delegates to the GABRIELA's Women's International Solidarity Affairs in the Philippines (WISAP). The WISAP, an annual activity sponsored by GABRIELA and its member organizations, provides an oportunity for women from different countries to visit and experience first-hand the real situation in the country.

The CWERC prepared an exposure trip for the delegates which entailed a two-day stay in a mining district and ocular visits to the urban poor community at Bontoc Village, the Baguio City Export Processing Zone and the John Hay Air Base. A two-day workshop on "Women and Self-Determination" followed the exposure trip.





Excerpts from Keynote Speech

You should first of all be aware that there is a need for change before you can empower yourselves. Before change can be affected, there are some attitudes we must first recognize. First, we must recognize that something must be changed. Second, we must have the knowledge and proper analysis of what should be changed. Third, we should have an idea of how this should be changed. Finally, there should be people willing to work for change.

* * * * *

The oppression of women is imbedded in systems and institutions. These institutions are imperialism, patriarchy, feudal structures, religion and culture. If we want change, it is the system we should change. The system is a formidable enemy and the work is hard. Systems are old, systems are powerful, and systems have been accepted.

* * * * *

It is not enough to say once an individual woman is liberated, there is change. It is not enough that you are liberated when the rest of your sisters are poor and oppressed.

* * * * *

The missing ingredient to effect change can be women. In the whole struggle of a nation for true freedom and democracy, what is needed is a strong women's movement.

* * * * *

Systems and structures that oppress both a people and women also have devices in them that divide one from the other. It is the objective of these systems to divide and separate us. . . Instead of looking at our differences, we should look at our similarities. We should look at the similiarities of our oppression, our problems and the tasks we should undertake as women to liberate ourselves.

And that should apply to the same struggle of a people. There are systems that exist which divide the Cordillera people. The emphasis on tribe is one. You must get together and try to understand the situation and look for the unity in your similarities instead of dwelling on the tribal differences that divide you.

* * * * *

In the 70's most of our migrant workers went to Saudi Arabia. Most of them were men. The 1980's brought the feminization of migrant labor. Before, four out of five migrant workers were men. Now, 48 percent are women.

A lot of our women-teachers, accountants, nurses-leave to become domestic helpers in Asia and the Middle East. Because they are women, they sometimes suffer sexual exploitation at the hands of their foreign employers.

We now have the problem of sexual trafficking of women. Filipinos are usually trafficked by a white recruiter in collaboration with a Filipino partner and exported to foreign countries to become prostitutes. Before, we were exporting only bananas and pineapples. Now, we are exporting women.

Two Profiles

Kalinga Peasant

Peasant women: burden of house chore, childcare and farmwork

In the interior villages of Kalinga-Apayao young children still play under the care of older brothers or sisters. This is because the parents are both busy doing farm work or house chore. The scenario, however, is fast disappearing in the barrio where Manang Herminia lives. Here the community has set up a day care center with the assistance of two female community organizers from the local Diocesan Center.

Manang Herminia now coordinates the work of the two community organizers. Although only a third grader, the 43 year-old peasant woman is a recognized leader in the village which has unanimously endorsed her for the job. She heads the local women's organization that is also finalizing another community project – "Botica sa Barangay" or village drugstore.

Manang Herminia's past is a typical story of a Kalinga woman burdened with housework, childcare, farming and other ways of augmenting family income. To her, life has been full of hardships and suffering, a continuing struggle to overcome the odds. Her two marriages have only served to lighten or add to this burden.

This first marriage, arranged by her parents when she was barely fourteen years old, was one of extreme difficulties, she recalls. Her husband was a paragon of chauvinism, except for the rare times he helped out with the housework and childcare during her recovery from childbirth. She bore him nine children, but only five survived. As for the deaths of the four others, she declines to give reasons.

After her first husband had passed away, she decided to marry again, this time to a man of her choice. Life with her second husband is a bliss, compared to the first, she observes. He is thoughtful and considerate, he respects her as a person, and he includes her in decision-making. And although they are childless

Bontok Migrant

She dozes off at odd hours of the day beside her basket of fruits at the entrance of the Laperal Building on Session Road. Neither indolence nor the summer heat induces her easy sleep.

Durnuan, a small but hardy Bontok woman, works a daily grind that extends to the late hours of the night. By day, she is a janitor, water-carrier and fruit vendor and in the evenings, she hawks cigarettes and *balut* (duck eggs).

Durnuan has lived in the city for some two decades now. Unlettered, she reckons time through momentous events in her life. She recalls that her first-born, now 19, was about a year old when she and her husband with their son in tow left their village in Belwang, Sadanga and ventured into the city in the hope of finding a better life.

"Life in the *ili* is hard and harsh," she maintains. "Farmers just do not make enough to be able to survive."

Once in the city, Durnuan and her husband found work only highland migrants would take, which used their brawn and skills honed back in their home village. She became a water-carrier and he, a stonewall builder.

With Baguio's water supply increasingly grown scarce and subsequently rationed, water as a commodity has become a brisk business in the city. Migrant women, especially the Bontok, pioneered in the itinerant water trade, carrying water from public sources like fire hydrants or leaking pipes, and selling this by the can to commercial and residential users. Standard water containers are used cans of cooking oil which can hold up to five gallons of the precious liquid. Cans are preferred as these are not only lighter and cheaper but also easier to balance atop one's head, the usual way most rural women ferry water. Then, according to Durnuan, a can of water cost 25 centavos. Today, it fetches a price of P2.50.

Durnuan first plied the water trade in the city market and later moved on to other parts of the business district, ending up as the regular water carrier of the Laperal Building whose owner and lessors found her services indispensable.

One of Baguio's oldest structures, the Laperal Building, once residential, now houses mostly private offices and shops which are waterless most of the time due to weak hydraulic pressure in th area. Durnuan gets water free of charge from the building's main tap and sells this at the going price to the building occupants. Here, she carries her 5-gallon can through three flights of stairs as it is the top floor offices which are usually without running water. At peak demand, she averages some 20 cans in a day.

But one hardly survives in the city on mere water-vending. Durnuan had to take on other odd jobs, and now works as janitor of the building as well as of some offices which have hired for cleaning services. She also invariably runs errands for some office workers for which she sometimes gets paid in kind: cigarettes which she puffs on during her brief rests; a bottle of gin tucked in her fruit basket or a handed-down ruffled shirt which appears incongruous with her mops and washcloths.

In between wielding her broom and fetching water, she sells mangoes, bananas or whatever fruits are in season on the sidewalk fronting the Laperal Building. It is during the times when sales are few and far between that she tries to take a few winks of sleep but not infrequently, her catnaps have resulted in small disasters. A fruit or two is sometimes stolen from her basket. On another occasion, policemen on patrol confiscated her weighing scale as sidewalk vending is illegal. She was able to reclaim her scale but hardly now does she bring it out of the building's premises.

Fruits give way to cigarettes and *balut* in the night. Few pass her strip of the sidewalk at this time since most of Session Road's pubs and restaurants are located along its lower end, but Durnuan persists in her nightly vending. A few

– she had three miscarriages – she says she's a lot happier now.

Like many peasant women, Manang Herminia helps out in the farm after finishing her usual routine housework. Having three planting seasons a year is possible on their farm, she claims, but that doesn't necessarily assure them of higher income. This is because of the high cost of production as against the price of their produce. The costs of fertilizers and insecticides are exhorbitant, she complains, and the irrigation fee eats up 30 per cent of the harvest. Besides, the yield drops if you plant three times a year, and what you get in the end, she concludes, practically gives just enough for home consumption.

Expenses for the children's education and other necessities have to be secured through other means, she explains, stressing the need to go into additional work outside the farm. So, she engages in charcoal-making or she cooks rice cakes and other foodstuff to sell. "There are many ways to augment family income but it is the physical strength that gives up."

Manang Herminia may lack a formal women's orientation, but clearly she has the proper feminist perspective in her status as a woman. She raised the question: Why can only the men become members of the local irrigation authority when women too do farm work? Then, she asks, why have men been joining the women's organization that she heads.

Vehemently she disagrees with the statement that men do more strenuous work than women and assume greater responsibilities. On the contrary, women take on more duties: housework (cooking, cleaning, washing, fetching water), childcare, budgetting the family income, giving a hand in farming and looking for other sources of income. All these definitely call for physical strength and heavy responsibility, she agrees. No wonder she looks much older than her 43 years!

In comparison, the main and sole responsibility of the man in her barrio is farm production, she adds. His task is so defined that once he's through with his work, he can engage in other activities, not necessarily family-related, which gives him opportunity for further development. The woman, on the other hand, faces a variety of responsibilities which virtually have no limits. This string of never-ending tasks preoccupy her time, confine her within the home and the immediate environment, and prevent her from further developing herself. Considering all these, Manang Herminia would rather do the man's job.

Manang Herminia's is a case of a woman who has clearly suffered both class and gender oppression. Her status as a peasant subjects her to an exploitative system characterized by the inadequacy of whatever income she is able to raise. This is because unequal terms of trade prevail where multinational corporations and big traders sell chemical inputs at high prices and buy the farmer's produce at very low values.

Landlords, too, charge exhorbitant land rent. This normally fetchess 33 percent of the yield on the average without any landlord participation at all in the process of rice production. And due to the cash needs for the capital-intensive rice farming, peasant families like Manang Herminia's become victims of usury. At ongoing rates of 5-25 percent monthly, interests come up to 60-300 percent annually.

Because she is also a woman, Manang Herminia is subject to gender oppression. Already she has endured a marriage contracted without her consent, the death of several children, miscarriages, and the burden of a housekeeper and farmer at the same time. These are such experiences only a woman undergoes.

She has also suffered discrimination and oppression in marital and family relations. Poor health, lack of maternal and childcare services, absence of support systems for her children, and little access to safe and effective contraception – all reflect non-recognition and inadequate protection of her reproductive rights. Being a woman has also tied her down to home-making and child-rearing and limited her role in productive activities. It has thus prevented her from joining the local irrigation authority, for example.

In addressing the problems of Manang Herminia and the peasant women as a whole, it may not be enough to confront the structures of foreign domination and elite control of land and capital. One issue that must also be resolved is the system of male domination and female subjection – patriarchy – which an unjust order maintains through undemocratic means.

Evangeline Ram

pesos earned makes a big difference as she is now a single parent to four children. She was heavy with her youngest child, who is turning 10, when her husband abandoned his family.

For the past decade, she has been sole breadwinner but like most of her kind she is tough and resilient. She has lived independently, she says, with barely any support from family or kin for most of her life. Early in her adolescense, she left home because of a cruel stepfather and went to live first with a married sister and later a grandfather. When the latter died, she chose to live alone until her relatives married her off to the man, four years her junior, who fathered her children.

She does not now countenance a return to her *ili*. The little land that she could have inherited was taken away from her by her own kinsmen. Her father's siblings appropriated for themselves the land her father once owned. Her husband, on the other hand, was duped by his own relatives into selling his share of the land. She has gone back on occasion, but mostly to attend burial rites for a dead member of the family or clan.

One among the many urban poor and oppressed, Durnuan continues to survive courageously and to look for that better life she had once envisioned for herself and her family when she moved from village to city.

Itinerant water trade: odd job for migrant women.

Mauling the local chairman of the Commission on Elections.

Women's Power in the Cordillera

Once again, the womenfolk of the Cordillera have proven that they are capable of guarding the rights of the people against those who think they can always impose their will on everyone. Thus did the Bontok peasant women act in the last local elections in literally protecting the sanctity of the ballot. This is not the first case in the Mountain Province, however.

In the early seventies, Benguet Consolidated, Inc. (now Benguet Corporation) attempted to pursue its mining prospects in the small agricultural village of Mainit in the municipality of Bontoc. The villagers then resented the intrusion which would virtually mean the end of their indigenous gold mining activities. They were also aware that the excessive tunneling inside the mountains would cut off irrigation and destroy their rice paddies.

The first time BCI workers entered the village, the women followed them up the mountain and demanded that they leave. When the men refused the women bared their breasts and taunted them. Confused and embarrassed by the encounter, probably their first experience, the men hurriedly left. By the act, the women wanted to tell the intruders they had no respect for them.

On the second try, the bare-breasted again challenged workers and this time grabbed their picks and shovels when they insisted on going about their work. Meanwhile, the village males, armed with spears, waited in ambush along the mountain paths. And so to prevent bloodshed, the women ~~ecorted~~ accompanied the BCI workers to the village boundary with a fair warning: return nevermore.

This forthrightness of the Bontok women in the defense of the people's interests was to be repeated some fifteen years later in another setting. The local elections last January 18 provided the occasion. In Mountain Province as in other parts of the country, traditional politicians and power brokers tried to win through massive vote buying, ballot box snatching, tampering with election returns and other fraudulent means.

In the municipality of Sabangan, such was the influence of a powerful politician as to have boxes brought to his house. Upon learning this, a number of women immediately proceeded to the house and kept vigil outside. That effort might have prevented whatever wrongdoing was intended.

Later at the provincial capitol of Bontoc, the request was put forth to postpone the official canvassing of electoral returns in the absence of the other candidates except the favored administration bet. But the chairman of the local Commission on Elections simply ignored the request and proceeded with the opening of the ballot boxes and the tallying of the summary reports. This prompted about fifteen angry women to maul the chairman scratching his face and pulling at his groins.

The action of the Bontoc women triggered off a series of mass protest against electoral irregularities which have continuing implications up to the present. First, it was a march rally where residents of several municipalities, took turns in denouncing the anomalies. Then came a two-week protest vigil at the provincial capitol.

The Bontok peasant women again took to the forefront in a sequel. At the height of the vigil, a lawyer of the ~~fair haired~~ candidate announced he would ask for the transfer of the stalled canvassing to Baguio City. Soldiers had then linked arms at the capitol entrance as if to prevent any unauthorized entrants. But the women simply tickled the soldiers, and breaking through the human barricade, proceeded upstairs to confront the lawyer who was nowhere found: he escaped through the back door and ran for dear life.

At present, the women take turns in standing guard at the provincial capitol at Bontok to ensure that the ballot boxes are not brought out. The Commission on Elections has ordered the provincial military commander to transport the ballot boxes to Baguio City for canvassing to continue, but up to now, he refuses to follow the order lest he earns the ire of the Bontok women.

Geraldine Fiagoy

Bontoc women in celebration