



Ambitious Promises and Agendas: The Status of Filipino Women in the First Year of the Marcos Jr. Administration

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Women are unquestionably the face of poverty in the Philippines. As a result of the government's endorsement of the neoliberal framework, the majority of women belong to the poorest strata of society. Every administration, from Marcos Sr. to Marcos Jr., believes that the only way for the Philippines to develop and progress is through neoliberalism.

Some people who benefit from neoliberalism become rich, but not women workers, farmers, or the poor in rural and urban areas. Foreign firms continue to amass immense profits in our country thanks to neoliberalism, with the support of the bourgeoisie, landlords, and the bureaucracy.

The challenge for women has grown in recent years. The skyrocketing prices of food and other basic products and services contributes to the loss of income and livelihood. Women will be particularly affected if the global capitalist crisis worsens. Hunger, poverty, and violence are all prevalent. No amount of spreading deception and fake news can conceal the people's crisis and the relentless violation of their rights.

Despite the dire crisis confronting women, Marcos Jr. is busy with senseless and lavish banquets, overseas visits, soliciting foreign investors, looking after cronies, and spreading disinformation and fake news. Despite the country's record-breaking debt of P14 trillion, Marcos Jr.'s priorities include huge infrastructure projects, strengthening the military, and continued economic liberalization.

In his 8-Point Socioeconomic Agenda, and even in the Philippine Development Plan, there is no concrete plan for the uplifting of the lives of women and the people..

Lack of decent work and living wages

One of Marcos Jr.'s campaign promises is "improved job quality" to address underemployment while expanding opportunities to work in the country. However, workers with jobs, living wages, and quality of life continue to be a minority.

According to the Labor Force Survey in May 2023, more than 21.143 million women are "economically insecure" in the country. They are the unemployed (996,000); those who lack work and income or are underemployed (1.899 million); and those who are not in the labor force (18.248 million).

More than a year after Marcos Jr. took office as president, the minimum wage in the National Capital Region was raised to P610. Even if P40 is added on top of the previous P570 minimum wage, it is way below the increase demanded by workers based on the hike in the prices of items, particularly food, electricity bills, services, and other commodities. It did not even compensate for the lost value of

workers' labor. It is also much below the family living wage of P1,161—the amount required for a family of five to live comfortably.

The creation of decent jobs is not included in Marcos Jr.'s 8-Point Economic Agenda. Although, several times in his speeches he mentioned something about creating decent jobs, the solution he sees is continued reliance on foreign investments and labor export policy.

In its bid to suppress the fight for decent work, living wages, and other democratic rights of workers, the enforcement of repressive policies inside and outside the workplace has intensified. The attacks on labor unions and workers' rights to organize continued under the Marcos Jr. administration. This contradicts his expressions of concern about cases of killing and harassment of unionists and labor leaders, as well as his Executive Order establishing an "investigating body" to probe allegations of workers' rights violations.

In June 2023, the International Trade Union Confederation released a Global Rights Index that ranks 149 countries in terms of respect for workers' rights. The Philippines is among the top ten countries with the worst conditions for workers.

Some of the grounds for the inclusion of the Philippines in the list are the lack of guarantees and protection in the matter of violence against workers, arrests in the ranks of labor unions, union busting, or a lack of respect for the right to organize and freedom of association.

Inflation and Rising Cost of Living

Within a year after taking office, Marcos Jr. failed to address the rapid increase in inflation. The Philippines has one of the highest rates of inflation in Southeast Asia. According to data from the International Monetary Fund, it ranks third on the list, trailing Myanmar, which is currently embroiled in a civil war, and Laos, which leads the entire region.

According to the most recent Philippine Statistics Authority report, inflation reached 6.1% in May 2023, with food having the highest rate of inflation.

Women who earn less than the average, or who have no stable work and no set income, find it more difficult to adjust to price increases in products, particularly food. The majority of them work in the informal economy and lack social protection.

Since the privatization of public utilities such as water and electricity, household bills continue to rise. Aside from communities that still lack access to clean water, connection charges are also exceedingly costly. Other expenses and costs such as the construction of new water source facilities, sanitation, and water treatment before reaching the households, other operating costs, and even taxes of water concessionaires are also being passed on to consumers.

Development aggression

Violence intensified in urban and rural poor communities due to the "development projects" of the Marcos Jr. administration. In March, the Marcos government identified 194 Infrastructure Flagship Projects (IFP). These projects are "expedited", meaning that the processing of the necessary paperwork is hastened to get them started and implemented. The cost of infrastructure projects favoring large businesses and foreign investors will reach PhP 9 trillion.

Like his dictator father, Marcos Jr. also loves grandiose infrastructure projects. These projects are lavish, expensive, and extremely destructive to the environment, livelihoods, and communities. To accomplish this, Marcos Jr. ensured the rapid enactment of the National Land Use Act, the National Infrastructure Program, and the Maharlika Investment Fund — some of the laws that will clear "development projects" for foreigners, the bureaucrat-capitalists, and big businesses. The National Infrastructure Program aims to institutionalize the 30-year infrastructure program and ensure that these projects continue regardless of the change in administration. This program includes transport logistics networks, energy infrastructure, and social infrastructure.

More often than not, neoliberal projects like these directly affect rural and urban communities, placing them in dire situations that harm women, their families, and their livelihoods, and violate their rights. Women are the forefront victims of the destructive effects of the aforementioned projects, especially during calamities.

Crisis in the Agriculture Sector

For decades, a neoliberal agriculture policy has been in place. Importation policies (e.g. the Rice Liberalization Law) and modernization programs (AFMA, agricultural liberalization, WTO Agreement on Agriculture) are examples of agricultural liberalization.

With agricultural liberalization, an influx of imported agricultural products is allowed which makes it difficult for small farmers to compete, leading to a fall in crop prices. This is one of the sources of loss and debt for many farming families.

Despite the adverse effects of agricultural liberalization, Marcos Jr. refused to change his policy to safeguard the agricultural sector. As Department Secretary, he continues to adhere to neoliberal policies while preparing the country's economy for full liberalization. This includes concurring to ratify the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) despite opposition from farmers and the agriculture sector due to the impact it will have on their livelihoods, as well as the plan to remove restrictions on sugar importation through the enactment of the "sugar liberalization" law. This will cause the country's sugar sector to completely collapse, and the price setting will be beyond the government's control.

The agricultural sector's faltering production has a significant impact on the food security crisis. The two main factors of this issue, particularly for rural women, are agricultural liberalization and lack of government support for local food production.

Growing debt, increased taxes on the poor

Marcos Jr. stressed the necessity for "sound fiscal management" in his last State of the Nation Address (SONA), which included tax administration reforms (tax collection), expenditure priorities, and guaranteeing efficient spending by government agencies. The need for the country to become an "investment destination" is part of this.

However, Marcos Jr. did not mention any efforts to indicate that the interests of women and the people are given priority in its spending. Instead, women continue to be ignored whilst austerity measures or cuts to public services are implemented to secure revenue for the benefit of local and international businesses and to bankroll militaristic programs.

For example, debt repayment will consume a sizable chunk of the P5.268 trillion budget for 2023, amounting to P1.6 trillion. The allocation of a significant amount of debt repayment would undoubtedly continue, as the country's outstanding debt reached Php14.1 trillion in May 2023. Large funds are also set aside for fascist and corrupt policies, programs, and projects.

Marcos Jr.'s "sound fiscal management" will only make sense if it benefits women and the people. There are several measures to address the lack of government financing without draining people's finances. These include taxing the rich and corporations, prosecuting tax evaders, eliminating various incentives for investors, preventing illicit financial flows, and combating corruption.

Privatization and lack of support for social services

Driven by decades of implementation of neoliberal policies, the government has abdicated its obligation to deliver various services to the people – health, education, housing, and community development. The government allocates an infinitesimal amount for this while allowing private companies to profit from doing business with them.

As societal expectations dictate, women primarily ensure the care of the family. The lack of social services puts a greater burden on women and worsens their situation, especially in times of employment and livelihood crisis. Women, along with all sectors of society, must demand the right to social services – an important step towards a more caring, comfortable, and just society for all.

Violence against women and children

During times of great crisis, various forms of abuse and exploitation experienced by women and children worsen. The inaction or neglect to address women's needs has been glaring which has led to the escalation of abuse. In 2022, there were 24,635 reported cases of women and children being abused. This equates to about 75 victims each day in 2022, or 3 victims per hour. It remained high at 6,231 cases from January to March 2023. This is still a conservative number because many cases of violence and abuse against women go unreported due to fear, shame, and victim-blaming culture.

Women remain at risk of being victims of trafficking and prostitution. Women are forced into prostitution and various forms of body commodification due to the lack of decent work and a living wage. Due to the impact of the pandemic, there have also been various forms of commodification of the body, from "traditional" prostitution to its transition online. In a study on women involved in prostitution in Central Luzon, it was determined that the main reason for this is economic necessity (Duria, 2021). To make ends meet, women are forced to engage in prostitution, cyber prostitution and cybersex shows, selling nude photos, and so on.

With the continued militarization of communities and the addition of US military bases in some provinces in the country, the vulnerability of women and youth to become victims of various forms of abuse has increased.

Continuing intensification of fascism

Contrary to the declaration of Marcos Jr. to the United Nations Resident Coordinator to the Philippines, Gustavo Gonzales, that he will guarantee the protection of human rights, the response of the Marcos Jr. government is to intensify fascism. While women and other sectors of society are standing up and protesting the wanton increase in the price of basic goods, and utilities, and the further worsening of the crisis, various forms of violation of the human rights of the people, including women, continue and intensify. Fascism is its response to women who demand the right to a living wage, agricultural land, decent and safe housing, quality and affordable social services, and other basic rights.

Illegal arrests, detentions, and the filing of trumped-up charges also continue. In the latest record of the human rights group KARAPATAN, as of December 22, 2022, there are 812 political detainees across the country of which 162 are women, and more than half of them or 97 are farmers.

Fascism as its mechanism is deeply entrenched in the Marcos Jr. government to ensure that its economic program that peddles neoliberalism is implemented. Marcos Jr. continues Duterte's terror whole-of-nation approach, with the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) as his machinery for its implementation and the use of the Anti-Terrorism Law to violate human rights.

As long as the crisis continues, women and children will continue to be exposed to various forms of abuse, including state violence. So women have no other option but to join forces with oppressed and abused sectors to reverse their condition. In a society where there is no great economic gap and where true social justice exists, only then will we begin to ensure that women are safe from any form of abuse and violence.

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