



"IT IS ONLY IN
PARTICIPATING IN
THE REVOLUTION THAT
WOMEN CAN WORK
FOR THEIR LIBERATION"

MARCH 2022

AN INTERVIEW WITH CONI LEDESMA OF THE
NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC FRONT OF THE PHILIPPINES

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION FROM KITES

The Philippine revolution has an exemplary record of women's leadership and participation. In 53 years of protracted people's war, the Communist Party of the Philippines and the New People's Army have swam against the tide of semi-feudal social relations to involve women at every level of the revolution and the building of new forms of political power. As part of our responsibility to increase the level of debate and discussion on the oppression of women and communist revolution, and to popularize and learn from the most advanced experiences of our class, kites conducted an interview with Coni Ledesma in March of 2022.

Coni Ledesma is a former Catholic nun and a veteran revolutionary. She is currently the international representative of the revolutionary women's organization Makibaka¹ and a member of the Negotiating Panel of the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP), representing the revolutionary movement in peace negotiations. In her decades of service to the Filipino people and the international proletariat, she has been a sharp spokesperson for the Philippine revolution and the concerns of Filipino women and children. kites is proud to present this interview with comrade Coni Ledesma.

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity, and the pictures and captions have been selected and prepared by kites and reviewed and approved by the NDFP.

INTERVIEW WITH CONI LEDESMA OF THE NDFP

1. kites: First comrade, we'd love to let our readers know a little bit about you, and how you became a revolutionary, particularly the transition from a Catholic nun to a communist revolutionary. Could you tell us a little bit about your life growing up, how you decided to become a nun, and what caused you to leave the church?

¹ Makibaka, an abbreviation of *Makabayang Kilusan ng Bagong Kababaihan*, or the Patriotic Movement of New Women.

Coni Ledesma: I am Coni Ledesma. I was born and grew up in the Philippines. It is also in the Philippines when I became an activist.

Yes, I was a Catholic nun for several years. In the 1970s, there were a lot of mass actions and demonstrations, not only in the Greater Manila area, but throughout the Philippines. This caught my attention. I began to wonder what the issues were that prompted young people to go out on the streets, to risk their lives to fight for the rights of the oppressed.

I started becoming politically conscious when I was assigned to Cebu, where I helped in the Social Action Office there.² The activists there would share their experiences of helping the peasants. I would join the demonstrations in support of peasants fighting for their rights.

I was later assigned to Bacolod where I also worked in the Social Action Office.³ There I became more involved as I met striking sugar workers and settlers whose land was being grabbed by the big landlords. It was inevitable that I became politically aware.

When martial law was declared on September 21, 1972, the activists went underground. Almost everyone in the Social Action Office also went underground. And so did I. It was then that I decided that it was time for me to leave the convent and go full time as an activist in the underground.

2. Comrade, we understand that during the martial law years in addition to being underground you also spent time in the enemy's prisons. What can you tell us about those experiences, and how they forged you as a revolutionary?

My husband, Luis Jalandoni, and I, together with another couple were arrested in September 1973. We were first imprisoned in the Bacolod Stockade. Then we were transferred to Cebu, for about ten days, and later, flown to Manila.

² Cebu is a province of the Philippines, located in the Central Visayas region.

³ Bacolod is the capital of the province of Negros Occidental. The island of Negros is the largest sugar growing region of the Philippines and has been a site of intense class struggle between sugarcane workers and plantation owners.

Luis was imprisoned in the Youth Rehabilitation Center in Fort Bonifacio. I was in Ipil Reception Center, also in Fort Bonifacio. Men and women were in our prison (which the military called detention center). The bigger area was where the men were. And the smaller area was for the women, because there were fewer women political prisoners. A gate separated the men and the women. During the daytime, the gate was open so that there would be free communications between the men and the women. It was only around six in the evening that the gate would be locked.

In Ipil, I met many of the women leaders. Most were from Metro Manila, but there were also several (like myself) who were from the provinces. Some of my closest and dearest friends were those I met and shared time with in Ipil. One of my companions in Ipil was Lorena Barros, the Founding Chairperson of Makibaka. Another one was Maria Louisa Posa, who is disappeared up to this day.

With so many outstanding women in Ipil, it was only natural that I learned a lot and deepened my commitment to the revolutionary struggle.

Coni Ledesma with her husband Luis Jalandoni, a former priest, veteran revolutionary, and member of the NDFP negotiating panel. Image stylized to compensate for low resolution of original photo.



I was living with heroes and heroines.

It was while I was still in Ipil that Amnesty International started to gather information on the cases of torture. It was then that I realized that so many of those I was with had undergone severe torture. But you could never tell this from the way they carried on in their tasks and their lives in prison. Many of the men and women I was with in prison later joined the New People's Army when they were released. Many of them also gave up their lives in the struggle.

3. You're the international representative for the underground revolutionary women's organization Makibaka. What can you tell us about the founding and history of Makibaka, and about its founder Lorena Barros? What about its present activities?

Makibaka came into existence in 1970, two years before martial law was declared by the dictator Marcos. During this time, there were national democratic organizations of youth. Among them were the KM (Kabataang Makabayan) and SDK (Samahan ng mga Demokratikong Kabataan). These organizations were composed of men and women. There was also a women's desk in these organizations.⁴

After a while, the women, led by Lorena Barros, wanted to form a women's organization, separate from KM and SDK. The men were against this. They felt that if the women would form their own organization, it would divide the forces.

However, the women persisted and Makibaka was formed. This was before marital law, so the different organizations were all above ground. One of the first activities of Makibaka was to picket the Miss Universe beauty contest, which was being held in Manila at that time. They protested against the commodification of women. This was so unusual that the picket landed on the front pages of the national dailies.

The men then realized that a women's organization could make

⁴ *Kabataang Makabayan*, or Patriotic Youth, was founded in 1964 by Jose Maria Sison and continues to exist as a member organization of the NDFP representing the youth sector.



specific contributions to the revolutionary movement. And Maki-baka has grown and developed since then.

As I said earlier, I met and was with Lorena Barros in prison. She was a quiet woman, but she radiated strength. She would teach us many things, even preparing us to go to the countryside. I had been released from prison when I heard the news that she, together with two other women and three men, had escaped one rainy night from Ipil. The escape had been planned for a long, long time, and the six of them successfully did it! We all rejoiced when we heard the news.

4. What is your current role in the revolutionary movement, as part of the NDFP negotiating panel and as an overseas representative of the revolutionary movement? How do you overseas comrades stay connected to the revolutionary movement in the Philippines?

Right now, I am a member of the NDFP Negotiating Panel in peace negotiations with the Government of the Republic of the Philippines. I also head the NDFP Monitoring Committee. This Committee (consisting of three people from the GRP and three from the NDFP) monitors the implementation of the Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law (CARHIL). I

also head the Special Office for the Protection of Children. And I am also the International Representative of Makibaka.

With today's advances in the digital world, it is easy to keep in touch with the revolutionary movement. Email, Zoom, and other electronic means help keep us updated with the news. Before the pandemic, my husband and I, and other members of the Negotiating Panel, were able to go to the Philippines where we would meet with the different sectors and travel to the different provinces to meet and consult with the people. We were also able to visit some guerrilla zones. The pandemic has stopped that, as well as the dictatorial decrees of the current president, Rodrigo Duterte.⁵

These trips to the Philippines, as well as the advantages of zoom and social media, have enabled us to keep updated with developments of the struggle.

5. Comrade, turning now to Philippine history: can you give an overview of the position of women in precolonial Philippine society? How did Spanish colonization, the nationwide establishment of feudal agriculture, and the spread of Catholicism deepen the subjugation of women in the Philippines?⁶

Women in the pre-colonial Philippines were respected and looked up to. Historians say society then was matriarchal. Women could inherit leadership positions from their fathers. There are legends of a woman, Princess Urduja, who ruled the Majapahit Empire. Women were equal to the men. They were babaylan or priestesses, a highly respected member of society.

Spanish colonialism put women in the convent and in the kitchen. They imposed the feudal roles on women – subjugation to

5 Since this interview was conducted, Duterte has been succeeded Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr., whose running mate in the May 2022 Philippine presidential elections was the former’s daughter, Sara Duterte, now Vice-President of the Philippines.

6 For an in-depth analysis of Philippine history, as well as an exemplary model of communist historical materialism, see Amado Guerrero, *Philippine Society and Revolution* (1970).

the men, be it the father, husband and later, even the son. Women were to endure and suffer, even if their husbands had mistresses. Happiness was not for this earth. That would be in heaven.

Even today, there are still remnants of this attitude among some women.

6. What was the role of women in the widespread resistance to the Spanish colonizers?

The spirit of independence did not fully die with Spanish colonialism and the imposition of feudal values. That is why, in the more than 200 revolts against the Spanish rulers, there were women who participated in the revolts. Their participation took different forms.

We hear of stories of women pretending to have a party and enjoying themselves, whereas in a room in the house, the revolutionaries were meeting and planning. There is the story of Gabriela Silang, who helped her husband lead an armed struggle against the Spaniards. When he was killed in battle, she took over and commanded the troops.

There are many more stories throughout the Philippines of the role that women played in the struggle for liberation from Spain. And women through the centuries have continued to be involved in the resistance to colonizers – be it Spanish, American or Japanese.

7. The 1898 Treaty of Paris “ceded” the Philippines to the United States (with typical imperial arrogance). Following a genocidal war against the Filipino resistance, “U. S. imperialism took a firm hold of the superstructure correspondent to its control of the material mode of production in Philippine society.”⁷ How did direct and indirect forms of US imperialism affect the status of women in the Philippines?

When the US colonized the Philippines (the Filipinos resisted with a militant struggle but the resistance was quelled by the US), one of the first things they did was to send Filipino scholars to the

7 Amado Guerrero, *Philippine Society and Revolution* (1970).

US to study. This way, they influenced the thinking of the Filipinos. Then the language in the schools was English, another form of influence (I could use the term brain washing). So, in general, Filipinos began to think that the US was the mecca of their dreams. Part of the cultural influence was also to project women as objects. There is the saying that Spain put the women in the convent and the US put women in Hollywood.

One positive development was that more women went to school and into further studies. Women began to go excel in fields that previously belonged to men. They became lawyers, doctors, educators. The first women's movement in the 20th century was the suffrage movement. This was not a national democratic movement. But it mobilized women throughout the Philippines to campaign for their right to vote, which they won. But because of imperialist domination, the economic and political structures of the Philippines did not improve the lives of the majority of women. The majority of them then – and still today – belong to the oppressed and exploited classes.

8. Like other oppressed nations, the Philippines has suffered under new forms of imperialist exploitation and neoliberal forms of globalized capitalism, such as the creation of vast export processing zones, mass migrations to the cities, and the creation of urban slums. How have these changes to the Philippine economy and society affected women? What is the status of women in the Philippines today?

Women will always be affected by changes in society. Mass migrations to the cities resulting in the development of urban poor communities have greatly affected not only women but entire families. The living conditions in urban poor communities is one factor. Another is the constant threat of demolition. Nothing is certain in their lives. The inner strength of women has been evident in the lives and struggles of women in the urban poor areas. They lead the struggles. They join demonstrations and strikes. They are arrested and tortured. But they continue to struggle.

How have Philippine women been affected by the rampant commodification of sexuality promoted by Hollywood and western

media that presents women as sex objects? What forms of human trafficking and prostitution target Philippine women and girls?

Human trafficking is one of the biggest problems in the Philippines. Some say it is the next biggest to the drug problem. When there were open US military bases in the Philippines, the cities nearest the bases were filled with night clubs and prostitution houses. Many “Amerasian” children were born, who did not even know who their fathers were.

Unfortunately, today, human trafficking does not only affect Filipino women. Economic situations have forced children – girls and boys – to be trafficked and abused by pedophiles. There have also been cases when women are recruited to work outside the Philippines. They are offered “good jobs with good pay.” When they arrive in their destination, there are no jobs. They are instead forced into prostitution.

There are also the marriage migrants. They used to be called Mail Order Brides. Women trying to escape lives of poverty offer to marry men from Western countries because they think they will have a better life there. Many have been subject to maltreatment and other forms of exploitation and even death.

9. Up to ten percent of the Philippine population has been forced to migrate outside of the Philippines, including a great deal of workers in traditionally feminized industries like care-taking and nursing. How does this mass migration affect women, both as migrants and those left behind? What forms of exploitation do female migrants face overseas, and what forms of resistance have emerged among migrants?

The social consequences of the feminization of migration are great. Women leave their children and husbands to earn better salaries outside the country. The children are left to the care of their fathers or relatives. They grow up without their mothers. Many of them become used to living comfortable lives, going to elite schools, etc., because of the hard work of their mothers. After they

finish school, they do not work, because they feel their mothers will send money to sustain them. They do not realize the hard work of their mothers.

Oftentimes, their fathers begin other relationships. Their mothers, living in foreign lands, also develop other relationships. It is an accepted practice among migrants and the social fabric is torn.

And in the foreign country, women are often not treated well. There have been many stories of women who have been raped by their employers. Or beaten. There have been cases of suicide among women.

Or they are blamed for crimes they did not commit and they are imprisoned or even sentenced to death even if they are innocent.

A well-known case was the case of Flor Contemplation, who was falsely accused of the death of the child under her care. She was hanged.

Migrante International is a national democratic organization to help Filipino migrants. It has chapters in almost all countries where there are Filipino migrants. It has helped migrants by organizing them and helping them with their problems. Filipinos abroad know that when they have problems, Migrante organizations in their country will help them. Through Migrante, the Filipinos also learn about the problems in Philippine society. Many become activists and help politicize other Filipinos in their area.

10. You have been a longstanding advocate for the dignity of Philippine children. What is life like for the children of the Philippines today, in both the urban and rural areas?

There is a great difference between children living in the cities and those living in rural areas, especially those living in the countryside. Children in the urban areas have greater chances of going to school. But economic conditions force many of them to leave school and work. In Metro Manila, for example, you will see children selling goods along busy roads, taking risks of getting run over, for a few cents.



In the provinces, women and children help the men working in the fields. The salary goes to the man. The women and children help so that they will get a bigger income for the day. In the countrysides, where indigenous people live, there are no social services available to them. The Lumads in the island of Mindanao, for example, were able to set up their own schools. They were able to do this with the help of religious and academic communities from the cities.⁸ The education they received was based on their needs. In the morning, the children were taught agriculture. Then the academic subjects.

Unfortunately, the Duterte government closed and even burned some of these schools. The Lumads are still protesting and calling for the return of their schools.

II. Comrade, we take a tremendous amount of inspiration from the ongoing protracted people's war in the Philippines. We now have a series of questions that we believe will be of great interest to our readers about the role of women in the revolution and the

⁸ The Lumad people, indigenous to the southern Philippine island of Mindanao, have waged decades of struggle against the reactionary Philippine government and foreign corporations in defense of their ancestral homelands.

policies concerning women carried out by the Communist Party of the Philippines, the New People's Army, the National Democratic Front, and the people's governments.

Mao Zedong famously wrote that "Women hold up half the sky!" Prior to the 1976 counter-revolution, socialist China was an exemplary model of women's emancipation. How did the role of women in China's revolution inspire your generation of Filipino revolutionaries?

China under Mao saw the start of the full liberation of women. One of the first things Mao did was to take away the practice of the binding of the feet of Chinese women. Then women became part of production. The care of children was collectivized. There were many other policies that liberated women from the isolation of the home.

Revolutionary women have put into practice some of these practices. In the guerrilla zones, women are organized in Makibaka. They are elected in leadership positions in the organs of political power. There is collective care of the children. Filipino women have learned from the example of China under Mao.

Several years ago, in one province, Makibaka set up a home for NPA women who became pregnant. In the home, they could get the necessary prenatal care. They would stay there until they gave birth and as long as they needed to stay there. Unfortunately, the area became so militarized that the project had to be stopped.

12. From the re-founding of the Communist Party of the Philippines, women have played an integral role in the armed and legal revolutionary movements. What is the political importance of women's participation in the revolution, and what policies have the leading bodies of the revolution put in place to ensure women's participation?

Women joined the revolutionary movement from the very start. They joined as activists and began taking active roles in political activities. It was a natural thing for women. Frankly, I do not know if there were specific policies made to ensure the active par-

ticipation of women. I think it was normal that women also joined the movement.

The Party does not have the quota system, like other political parties have in Europe. That is, there is no policy that, say, 50% of the leadership should be women. Women have developed their leadership abilities through years in the struggle. And their capabilities have placed them in leadership positions.

But women have to exert greater efforts to develop as revolutionaries. Childcare and household work is still the main responsibility of women.

13. The great Filipina revolutionary Lorena Barros wrote that “The new woman, the new Filipina, is first and foremost a militant.”⁹ How does the Communist Party and the New People’s Army lead the process of transformation and remolding among cadre of all genders to create those new women and new people?

As I mentioned above, it is in the active participation in the revolutionary movement that women – and men – develop their abilities and initiatives and creativity to contribute to the revolutionary movement.

14. Comrade, the Communist Party of the Philippines was re-founded following a great rectification movement, and undertook a Second Great Rectification movement in the 1990s. Looking back on more than five decades of the people’s war and revolutionary movement, what mistaken political lines and outlooks on the question of women’s liberation have cropped up the in the ranks of the Filipino revolutionary movement, and how have they been rectified?

I can cite one error that took place during the period before the Second Great Rectification Movement. The leading members of the New People’s Army discouraged women from joining the NPA because they said they had to “park” women when she had her

⁹ Lorena Barros, *Liberated Women II* (1971).



Image above of Lorena Barros in the armed struggle, and image below is Barros remembered on a wall in Manila. Barros once wrote that: "The new woman, the new Filipina, is first and foremost a militant... The new Filipina is one who can stay whole days and nights with striking workers, learning from them the social realities which her bourgeois education has kept from her... She is a woman who has discovered the exalting realm of responsibility, a woman fully engaged in the making of history... No longer is she a woman-for-marriage, but more and more a woman-for-action."



monthly period. They believed that women were weaker during this time of the month. Needless to say, this was quickly rectified when the Second Great Rectification Movement took place. And this was certainly an error, because before the mistakes were made in the movement, there were even squads composed of women among the NPA, thus showing that they were certainly capable of fighting for a new Philippines.

Today, the NPA is made up of men and women. There are women commanders. They take on responsible positions within the NPA and in the areas where they are.

15. While the Philippine revolution, unfortunately, does not hold state power yet, there are areas of the Philippines where the Communist Party and New People's Army have built people's democratic governments and other organs of political power. Within these areas what transformations have taken place regarding the social relations between men and women? How does the Party combat backwards and feudal ideas and social relations among the masses in the areas where it wields influence?

Constant study, criticism, and self-criticism are tools that help overcome backward and feudal ideas. There are also documents like the "Orientation on the Relation of the Sexes," which all groups study and practice. Women also continue to assert themselves and strive for equality with the men. It does not come easy, but the educational studies within the revolutionary movement have made this easier for the women.

16. Two of the most vile and widespread forms of patriarchal domination in the world today are sexual assault and domestic violence. What are the policies and practices for dealing with sexual assault within the New People's Army, the Communist Party of the Philippines, and in areas where organs of political power have been built? How have the Party, revolutionary governments, and mass movements struggled against domestic violence?

Yes, there are also instances of domestic violence among the masses in the revolutionary areas, and sometimes among comrades. Discussions on the issue and disciplinary actions for comrades are methods used to correct this. Of course, in the discussion, getting to the root cause of the violence is discussed and solutions to the problems are made.

17. The Philippine revolutionary movement has an exemplary record in upholding the equality of LGBTQ comrades and fighting for their full participation in society. From our understanding, the CPP was one of the earliest institutions anywhere in the world to recognize same-sex marriages. How was that decision arrived at, and how have LGBTQ militants contributed to the revolution?

Today, it is called LGBTQ. Before that, in the early days of the movement, the men were known as gays and the women as lesbians. While there is, in general, in Philippine society still the bias against LGBTQ people, in the revolutionary movement, they became outstanding comrades. Many achievements were made because of their creativity and daringness. There have been several films that focused on gay NPA members. The films show they are part of the group. There is no discrimination because they are gay. After all, they all face the same life and death struggle. During tactical offensives, the bullets do not make a distinction between the sexes or the LGBTQ.

What an NPA combatant once told me was they appreciated lesbians in the NPA because they were strong and daring. It was the women's movement that recognized same-sex marriage.

18. Moving now to the final set of questions comrade, pertaining to some larger questions facing revolutionaries in the world today:

Comrade, the imperialists have occasionally whipped up support for their wars of aggression by claiming that their bombs and drones are liberating women in places such as Afghanistan and Libya.



While the reactionary government of the Philippines does not allow gay marriage, the revolutionary people's democratic government does. Here two female NPA members are married in Mindanao.

Related, apologists for capitalism-imperialism have claimed that women in the oppressed countries can gain some degree of liberation through setting up small-scale economic enterprises, or doing piece work. By contrast you have stated that “Imperialism is the biggest enemy to women’s liberation.” In light of that simple, yet profound, statement, what are the biggest ideological and political obstacles to bringing forward women militants and powerful movements for women’s liberation internationally?

The challenge is always to politicize women in their numbers. As we say, to arouse, organize, and mobilize the largest number of women to participate in the revolution. It is only in participating in the revolution that women can work for their liberation.

The economic and political situation in the Philippines, the human rights violations, joblessness, economic hardships, bombing in the barrios, makes the task “easier.” I mean, in the sense that it is easier to explain to women the cause of their exploitation and that they must participate in the actions that fight for change.

19. Comrade, as a veteran communist revolutionary and fighter for women’s liberation, we want to ask you your position on

three views that have arisen in the imperialist citadels, and how you think revolutionary forces should respond: The first is the view, promoted by bourgeois feminists, that women's equality is mainly achieved by celebrating "women in high places," meaning the celebration of women as CEOs, politicians, judges, and other high-ranking positions in the bourgeoisie.

The Philippines has had two women presidents. The first one drew the sword of war against the revolutionary movement. The second was known for so many violations of human rights, the killing and disappearances of many comrades and activists.

What is important is that a woman takes the side of the oppressed and exploited. That she works for the interests of the broad masses of the people – not for the elite.

20. The second is the view that various expressions of sexuality, especially pornography and prostitution, can contribute towards women's emancipation. This is often expressed by the view that performing in pornography can be a liberating act for women, and that "sex work is work."

We should never forget the unequal power relations of men and women. What forces women to go into prostitution in the Philippines? It is poverty and the need to provide for their families.

I have talked to child prostitutes. They told me that selling their bodies was better than stealing. At least, they said, they were selling something that belonged to them. In prostitution, the bodies of women – and men – and children, both girls and boys – are the commodities for sale. To think of prostitution as sex work is to reduce women as mere machines for sex.

The experience of the comfort women during the Japanese time tells us how the women were abducted and forced into being sex slaves. Is this sex work?

21. The third is a view among some radical-minded people that women are not really an oppressed group in society, because

some women (especially white or heterosexual women) participate in the oppression of other people.

Imperialist oppression is class based – not gender based. There is the gender oppression of patriarchy, but the bigger oppression is the one perpetrated by imperialism. The women in government positions are part of the oppressive class.

22. Comrade, what advice do you have for revolutionary organizations that want to develop women's leadership and ensure their full participation?

The only advice I can give is: to become politically active. Organize women in their numbers to become politically active. That is the only way that leadership can be developed.

23. Last two questions comrade:

What revolutionary figures throughout history continue to give you inspiration? What revolutionary texts have you continued to return to?

Mao's writings continue to educate me. Also the writings of Joma Sison.

Figures in history? Andres Bonifacio. Lorena Barros. Our martyrs, especially those whom I knew personally.

24. Finally comrade, what sustains you as a revolutionary?

The masses struggling for their rights. Their bravery, their determination. Their perseverance even in the face of death. The comrades who have given up their lives. The political prisoners who are imprisoned on trumped up charges. They are my inspiration.