

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

February 17, 2010 at 9:39am

Challenging globalization head-on

by Beverly Bell



A meeting of the National Coalition of Rural Women in the Philippines. Mary Ann Manahan is in the front row, third from left.

Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope. Part 11 of 12

Mary Ann Manahan helps rural women in the Philippines build their knowledge, strength and political voice. Here she speaks of how women are creating alternatives to violence and poverty in their lives. They use strategies for change that start at the household and community, and then connect to the global level.

Mary Ann Manahan

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It's inspiring for many young feminists and young activists like me to see how, in the midst of globalization, the most vulnerable women are using collective action to build their strength. These are people who are considered victims, who've faced decades of being battered by wrong agricultural policies and by their husbands, of not being taken seriously.

Women are called 'shock absorbers' because they are the first to feel the crises caused by the economic and social insecurity of globalization, and right now specifically by the financial crisis.

In my many interactions and dialogues with women in the rural and informal sectors -- not only in the Philippines but around the world -- I see women bonded by the same ideals and vision: They need to get out of poverty and they can do that through concerted political action. While these women are strengthening their economies at a local level, they are also trying to claim their stake in the government.

Many of the women that I work with are trying to link what's happening at the local level with the national and global levels. Since globalization has made the issues global, so are their strategies and solutions -- but always emphasizing the importance of the local economy. What they do is try to understand the bigger picture, locate themselves in it.

Trying to grapple with very complex processes and how they traverse household and community levels, you would be surprised that the women actually get it right away. They say, for instance, 'When the global food crisis struck last year, it was really difficult for us to get cheaper rice. So what we did as a coping mechanism, we moved the schedule of eating to have a brunch and no snacks anymore and then dinner.'

One strategy that the women have used is information and education campaigns. They go house to house and talk to the women in the communities. They normally open up the topics that are very dear to the hearts of the women, or issues that plague the communities.

Another important piece is confidence-building. Having been battered so much, they don't normally have the confidence to present themselves as women of knowledge or women who can actually insist on their rights.

Once they have enough knowledge and confidence, another strategy is doing trainings to improve their skills in light of the policies of the government. They are now ready for a much bigger arena of engagement: collectively going to the mayors to insist, for example, that we have a policy where 5 percent of the budget goes to gender and development projects. They also want to be recognized formally as stakeholders who should be consulted when it comes to the development projects and policies that will affect them and the whole community.

But they don't stop at local engagement. Many of the women leaders also go to the national level, engaging with congress in passing pro-women and pro-reproductive policies. Rural women have also pushed for recognition as agrarian reform beneficiaries and as farmers.

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I think another strategy, which is equally important, is networking or at least coalition-building. In 2001, recognizing the need for an all-women network, they built a national coalition of rural women. That coalition is actually making a lot of dents in getting support services for themselves as farmers and producers, at the local, national and even global levels.

These women are carving out a space to survive collectively in this very tumultuous time. It's a very beautiful experience.

About the "Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope" series

Among income inequality, seemingly endless wars, and debilitating climate change, it is difficult for many to imagine a path to a better way. In fact, throughout the industrialized North and the global South, solutions to these great challenges are in various stages of construction -- and much of the lifting is being done by women. Grass-roots women's movements -- progressing often almost without money or access or institutional power -- are emerging and offering alternative and empowering visions.

*The above is part of a series, titled "Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope," which will appear in NCR by writer and organizer Beverly Bell, coordinator of **Other Worlds**. She features empowered women who offer alternative visions as they birth a new and more just world order.*

Seven of the articles in this series are available in a 2010 Lenten booklet, *Cry Justice! Cry Hope!* with additional reflections by Sister Joan Chittister. Click here to order.

All the stories from the "Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope" series

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