



## Empowering Education

By Kalayaan Pulido Constantino

**M**ARILYN Soriano and Nena Umenga live along the train tracks of Manila City. Graduating from high school was out of their reach, and for both, studying at the Institute for Women's Studies has transformed their world. In 2002, the Institute for Women's Studies (IWS) launched an education program for grassroots women. It offered a series of three-to five-day courses on gender, leadership and ecology for free. So far, about 300 women from different communities in Metro Manila – including Marilyn and Nena – have finished all the offered courses within a year.

Marilyn chairs the Nagkakaisang Mga Dukha ng Riles, an organization fighting for the right of poor families to have a home. She is small and slender, but her voice is strong and clear. Learning about women's rights—particularly about their right to be free from violence—resonated deep within her. Her mother was a battered woman, and she and her four siblings were also abused. It is a wound that has never healed, and she cries when she talks about it. She never married because of those memories. The IWS courses have had an immense impact on her life. "Malaking bagay ito para sa akin. Natutunan ko na nararapat pantay ang babae at lalaki. Kung alam ko lang nun, baka natigil ang karahasan [This is important to me. I learned that man and woman have equal rights. If I knew then what I know now, I might have stopped the vio-

lence]," she sighs.

Her IWS education has empowered her. "Mas malakas ang loob mo pag may alam ka. Pag wala kang alam, wala kang tapang labanan ang karahasan [You are stronger when you have knowledge. When you know nothing, you don't have the courage to fight violence]," she says. She remembers her mother's and her siblings experience at the hands of their father, and she is driven to help women in the same situation. Using her knowledge of the law and the legal system as taught in the IWS courses, she has helped battered women in her community find safety and shelter and get child support. It has strengthened her voice. "Ngayon, mas malakas ang loob ko humarap kahit kanino, makipag-usap sa mga malalaking tao, pati kay Mayor [Now, I can face anyone, talk even to powerful people, even the mayor]," she smilingly adds.

Nena is 55 and looks a decade younger. She has a beautiful smile, and kindness shines in her eyes. She has always had a great desire to study, but never had the opportunity. She graduated from elementary with second honors and wanted very much to finish high school, too. But they were poor, and her parents needed her help in raising the younger children. She was not able to attend her elementary graduation because they did not have the money to buy the required white dress and

black shoes. Besides, her father explained to her that as a woman all she needed to know was to read and write.

A widow, Nena is proud to have worked hard and succeeded in having her three children graduate from high school. Her eldest has just finished a two-year computer programming course. Now she has time for herself, and she is very happy with the opportunity given by IWS to study. "Tumaas ang pagtingin ko sa sarili ko [My self-esteem has risen]," she says quietly.

Her experience at the Institute has given her the courage to do things she has never done before. She confesses to be a shy and retiring person who found it hard to speak in front of other people. "Dati di ako kumikibo, Nahihya akong magsalita sa harap ng mga kasama ko. Pero ngayon, nahanap ko ang boses ko [I used to be very quiet. I couldn't speak even in front of my

friends. But now, I have found my voice]," she says with a smile.

Together, Marilyn and Nena have formed an organization called Women and Equality for Leadership Development (WELD) in their community. According to Marilyn, "Interasadong mag-aral ang mga nasa komunidad, walang nagbibigay ng panahon sa kanila [People in the community want to study, but no one is helping them]." They want to reach out to more women and share what they have learned from IWS. They hope that by coming together, women can discuss their concerns and deepen their understanding of the women's situation in the community. For them, fighting for their home and their rights as women is indivisible. As Nena puts it, "Pag maayos ang tirahan, mas maayos din and sitwasyon ng mga kababaihan [When all's well with the home, the situation and well-being of women is also positive]."

## Sewing The Life of a Woman

By Cynthia Esquillo

It is late Sunday afternoon. Merlie is outside the house, sewing a costume patterned after a cartoon character. Her husband arrives home from a week-long contractual construction work, his skin darkened by the sun and the bulging veins in his arms showing years of physical hard work. His "pasalubong" for his family consists of cut mixed vegetables (the traditional ingredients for pinakbet) which can be bought for P20. A half hour later, one of the sons would be grating coconut for the "ginataang gulay" (vegetables cooked with coconut milk) which they would share for dinner.

A mother of 10, a grandmother of 15, and a teacher of 21 children. Sum them up and that is the age of Merlie. Sum them up and that totals her life experiences as a woman in constant struggle with the day-to-day challenge of poverty.

She got married at the tender age of 15, so young that she thought marriage was the way to register her discontent with her parents' failure to support her education. For other parents who give priority to the education of male children, this sadly "validates" the "correctness" of their fear—that female children are homebodies and would marry anyway. Merlie would later prove them wrong.

Her family lives in a rough concrete dwelling she and her husband built with the help of a few neighbors. The scorching summer heat penetrates

the thin GI sheet roofing, but two or three trees provide perfect shade and breeze, as well as fuel, when they run out of Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG), which now costs a staggering P380.00.

Merlie is soft-spoken, her calm voice telling of a character where the water runs deep. When she talks, she looks far, her mind traveling quickly and steadily, organizing the words in the best way she could. No wonder she seldom hurts. She does not nag. She would rather take specific actions than complain. When her husband suffered a stroke and was unable to work for three years, she carried the burden of sustaining the family's needs all by herself and did not complain.

She is skilled in making various forms of handicraft. She worked as a sewer in a garment factory for two years. At home, she accepted sewing jobs, toiling over an old sewing machine. After working in the factory, she did subcontracting jobs in making stuffed toys for exports in the early 90's. She had a group of women working on every piece of the stuffed toy, but she did the most intricate and finishing part.

When the contracting company slowly went out of business, she worked for the handicraft projects initiated and supervised by the nuns near her home. She did embroidery work of all forms, from cards glued with embroidered designs to