

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, Nahihiya 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

**I**t 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



ramie, soft threads and vines. She worked at home and this gave her time to look after her children as well. On the average, she would then earn P230 per day, which she would budget tightly with priorities for food and other basic necessities.

Of that meager income, she was able to send most of her children to high school. At a time when she simultaneously had two high school children, one elementary and one college child studying, she needed P200 for their daily expenses. Though the older children had alternately obtained contractual jobs and were contributing to the family income, they still had to make ends meet by cutting down on food costs. But at least, the children completed secondary education.

Now, 21 years after marrying, Merlie would not contemplate retiring. If she stops working, she feels she will stop breathing. She uses all her skills to earn a living, yet life remains difficult for them. She has in fact developed poor lungs and her arched back is proof of long hours of handicraft work.

Meanwhile, they continue to make do with what they have. They seldom go to the market and simply buy cheap cooked food with lots of broth or sauce, enough to give rice a little taste. They survive on coffee and pandesal (bun) in the morning, sardines mixed with vegetables during other meals. They get to eat meat only once or twice a month. Thankfully, the backyard vegetable garden is a source of green leafy vegetables and often relieves them of spending hard-earned money.

With priority given to food, they often sacrifice weeks of disconnected electricity. The youngest son

had to stop going to high school because of the demand for baon (in money or food) and pamasaha (fare), not to mention the school projects and occasional fees to pay even in public schools. Most of her children dream of continuing their education after high school, but only one has made it to college — thanks to a scholarship program in the state university.

When she's sick, Merlie goes to the nuns and NGO friends to get free medicines and check-up. Imagine, then, the majority who are not part of any organized group and have no access to whatever agency: They would simply die.

Merlie, meanwhile, will not simply give up and let poverty conquer her hopes. Never mind if the government has not been true to its promise of improving her life and those of millions of other Filipinos. She will move on. She has found the strength of organization in pushing for their welfare and rights. Their unified action has brought them success in accessing resources for the good of the community. And for as long as she lives, she knows she must not stop working. The patience and the sharpness of the eyes will continue to insert the thread of persistence into the small hole of the needle. With the same skill, she will continue to sew her life and connect it to the web of the whole even if it takes, what seems to be, several lifetimes.

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