

4.25.2023

Event: Global Conference of Parliamentarians on Population and Development
Toward the 2023 G7 Horishima Summit

Theme: Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

A pleasant afternoon to everyone! It is truly an honor to be here, meeting fellow parliamentarians I admire and with whom I look forward to working closely.

It is also quite special for me to be here in Japan, because many moons ago, in college, I spent a summer semester here as a scholar of the Japan Airlines Summer Scholarship Program. It was one of those formative experiences that contributed to how I viewed the world and my place in it. So to all who made this Global Conference of Parliamentarians on Population and Development happen, thank you very much for having me.

I know that until now it's still not so straightforward to stage events like this, especially with COVID-19 still looming large in our daily lives. In fact, in the Philippines, COVID remains an active and present threat, but perhaps not as terrifying or paralyzing as in the early years of the pandemic.

Those early years were a nightmare for every nation on our planet. To say that we were unprepared is an understatement. Globally, the World Health Organization estimates that over 6 million people have died since the outbreak of COVID-19. Back home, in the Philippines, we mourn the over 60,000 Filipinos who passed away due to the pandemic.

The systemic failures of our governments were laid bare, revealing the deep-seated gender inequalities that we had not meaningfully addressed. Indeed, we have seen how women's issues were relegated to the sidelines as soon as lockdowns were imposed. And the government's response to this was certainly wanting.

Our country was known to have the longest and strictest lockdown in the world, as the previous administration employed a militaristic method instead of a health-centric approach to our COVID-19 response. The consequences of this were most felt by the most vulnerable among us, especially our women and children.

Circumstances are even more dire for our most disenfranchised women and girls: the abused, the L-B-T, the elderly, young mothers, solo mothers, indigenous women, and the unemployed, among many others.

Our news cycles were replete with stories painting the picture of how deplorable situations had become. In May 2020, just a few months after the lockdowns were strictly imposed in the Philippines, some policemen manning checkpoints had a 'sex-for-pass' modus. It was reported that a young woman, alias Marivic, was trying to get past a checkpoint, but an officer would not allow her unless he got what he wanted. Marivic was raped. After the incident, a policeman just handed her 150 pesos and a loaf of bread, as if it were a common routine.

Alarming, there have also been reports of women being coerced into exchanging sexual favors for food, relief, and other essential goods. Humanitarian portal Relief Web also said that these incidents were particularly seen in Southeast Asian communities, reflecting the vastly unequal power relations between vulnerable communities and duty-bearers such as public officials, uniformed personnel, and even relief workers.

From March to May 2020, at the height of the strict quarantines, our government recorded an average of eight victim-survivors of sexual assault every day. This number doesn't even reflect the reality, as the reporting of cases was also made difficult due to mobility restrictions.

And unfortunately, gender-based violence became even more prevalent in the home. According to the United Nations Population Fund, by the end of 2020, there were an estimated 839,000 women in the Philippines who would experience gender-based violence during the pandemic.

To fight the surge of COVID-19, health campaigns all over the world revolved around the battle cry, "stay at home." But for domestic abuse victim-survivors, this quickly became a source of trauma and anxiety rather than an assurance of safety and security.

Gender-based violence also extends even to digital spaces. In our country, where about 82.4% of the population use social media, the internet has become a breeding ground for predators and cybercriminals to prey on children, especially young women. The online sexual abuse and exploitation of children, or OSAEC as

we call it, has become so prevalent in the Philippines that we have been tagged as the global hotspot of OSAEC.

In a desperate attempt to provide for their families, it is deeply regrettable that parents themselves produce exploitative material of their own children and sell them online to pedophiles abroad. In fact, even as lockdowns have eased and economic activities have relatively gone back to normal, this practice still persists in some of the poorest regions in the Philippines.

Students from low-income families, trying in despair to cover the costs of online classes, would also sell personal sexual videos on social media platforms such as Facebook. What's worse is even when they do choose to stop doing this, predators stalk and threaten them, compelling them to provide more videos.

Aside from OSAEC, we fear that the economic hardship brought by the pandemic also leads families from some communities to force their daughters to marry into families that can help them financially. Even before the pandemic, child marriage was already rampant in communities in conflict zones, as it is wrongly seen as a way out of poverty.

As the Chairperson of the Senate Committee on Women, Children, Family Relations, and Gender Equality in the Philippines, I have authored laws such as the Safe Spaces Act, the Anti-Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children Law, and the Prohibition of Child Marriage Law to address these worrying issues that affect our women and girls.

All three laws have very clear provisions that provide for the punishment of perpetrators of abuse, harassment, and exploitation, as well as provisions that mandates the State to offer holistic, psychosocial support for victim-survivors.

While the cases of gender-based violence I just shared demonstrate the effects of gender inequality that are overt and obvious, there are also invisible, seemingly innocuous ways that the pandemic has disproportionately impacted women, such as the absence of ample support for the specific needs of women working in and outside the home.

We don't talk enough about how women comprise the majority of the essential industries that kept our countries going, from retail and hospitality to health care

and education. On top of this, women performed a humongous amount of domestic labor, facing multiple burdens in and outside of the home.

The plight of our Overseas Filipino Workers brought about by the pandemic is also a conversation that we need to continually put forward, especially since most of our migrant workers are women. In June of 2020, I filed Senate Resolution No. 445 that seeks a Senate probe into the government's return and reintegration plans for our OFWs.

In the resolution, we stipulated how the government must be ready to provide sufficient livelihood assistance to OFWs, particularly female workers, who are likely to suffer more from the loss of jobs and livelihood brought by the pandemic. In an academic paper entitled "Women, Migration and Reintegration" by Estrella Dizon-Añonueva and Augustus Añonuevo, it shows that a majority of Filipina migrants do not have any substantial savings, and have more difficulty in adjusting to the lack of economic opportunities in the Philippines.

Considering all the layers of vulnerabilities of our women, I filed the Gender Responsive and Inclusive Emergency Management Act, which seeks to address the gender-differentiated needs of women and girls as we are disproportionately affected in times of emergencies.

In this bill, relevant agencies are mandated to devise programs and protocols that address the unique needs of women during disasters and public health emergencies. This also includes involving women in the planning of our national strategies, bolstering gender-based preparedness and response systems to ensure that gender-based violence services remain accessible and unimpeded, guaranteeing the availability of sexual and reproductive health goods and services, as well as institutionalizing protections for women migrant workers and their children, rural and indigenous women, and locally stranded women, among many others.

This measure was crafted with every kind of Filipino woman in mind, strengthened by our consultations with various women, groups, and civil society organizations that dream of a more equal Philippines.

But we shouldn't just stop at passing laws for our women, we should make it our responsibility to ensure that more women are also in leadership positions, more

women who intimately know the lived experiences of being a woman. When we have the different perspectives of different kinds of women in decision-making spaces and in all levels of governance, we would be more able to live out true gender equality and empowerment for all.

As representatives of our respective countries, we must consciously embed women's needs in our programs, not just in times of national emergencies and disasters, but in our day to day work as servants of the people.

My dear fellow parliamentarians, even as we come from very widely different cultures, communities, and contexts, COVID-19 has taught us that we are more in need of each other than we would like to admit, more connected than we think, more similar than we are different.

And I hope as we work towards creating societies that are freer, healthier, and happier for our women and girls, we always remember to work together, look out for each other, and stay united in our shared humanity.

Thank you so much for listening, and I'm looking forward to learning from all of you.