

Aida Santos has been a women's activist in the Philippines for many years. When she visited South Africa, she told *Thoraya Pandy* about the achievements of Filipino women



Photo by Mono Badela

A force that can't be ignored

Many hundreds of years ago, a woman Filipino general fought against the Spanish who had come to take control of her country. Her name was Gabriela.

Even though the Filipino people lost to the Spanish, the courage of Gabriela lived on. Today, in her honour, there is a women's organisation called Gabriela. Its aim is to unite all Filipino women and arm them with the education and power to

improve their lives.

Aida Santos, a Filipino women's activist, came to South Africa recently. She talked about the lives of women in the Philippines and about the work of Gabriela.

"Filipino women are the poorest of the poor and lead the hardest lives," she said. "Like most South African women, they are landless and cannot read and write. Many have to leave the farms to find work in

the factories where they are badly paid and have few maternity rights. Jobs are scarce, so many women sell their bodies for money. Some even sell themselves as brides to foreign men they have never met.

"Until recently, our men didn't see women as important, even though 51 percent of the population is female. There is a lot of violence in the home, and women have few legal rights," she continued.

"So when we started Gabriela in 1984, we decided that the best way to unite women was to focus on four main issues: violence in the home, reproductive rights (for example, maternity leave), women and development and changing the laws."

At the time the women's movement was forming, the Philippines was a country in change. For over 20 years, it had been ruled by the dictator Ferdinand Marcos who was overthrown by the people in 1986. Elections were held and a woman, Corazon Aquino, was elected president.

Santos said that Filipino women made a mistake when they believed that national liberation would mean freedom for women because women were active in the struggle for democracy. In fact, the lives of women did not change. When women tried to raise their needs and demands, they were told there were other more "important" things to do.

"That was when we realised that we had to unite and organise.



"It was not an easy task. We were called radical feminists and accused of dividing the oppressed and exploited masses. Everyone turned against us for putting all our energy into campaigning around women's issues. It was tough trying to explain to political organisations why the women's struggle was so important."

But things changed and the women's movement became a force in the Philippines that could not be ignored. In the elections last year all the different women's organisations and coalitions came together to draw up a Women's Electoral Agenda. Women from all walks of life - peasants, workers, the urban poor and professionals - took

part. The Agenda looked at issues like domestic violence and reproductive rights.

"Politicians began to realise how important the women's vote was and they begged us to allow them to be the ones to introduce laws on violence and rape," Santos said.

She explained that the women's movement won support through hard work, research and asking women what they wanted to change in their lives.

"Women are now setting the framework for debate in this country. This is very positive. Women are saying: Our agenda for change is as important as anyone else's!"

Santos said it took a long time for the word "feminism" to be accepted in the Philippines. She added: "Now some men have started to call themselves feminists, but we call them pro-feminist."

She believes that South African women can learn a lot from the Filipino experience by uniting around common issues - even if they have different political views. "It is the best way to achieve your goals as women."

Aida Santos visited South Africa as a guest of the Theology Exchange Project. ★

