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People First in the Philippines

by Criselda Yabes

A specialist in rural sociology, Filipino social scientist Gelia Castillo was an early pioneer in the concept of participatory development. Her ideas have influenced thinkers, policy makers and decision makers in government, international development circles and academe.

"What's very very significant in my life is the fact that we were poor", says Gelia Castillo, recalling her early childhood. At 66, she is retired from academic life and has left an impressive body of work, but it is her early years which left the most indelible imprint on her. "I come from a poor family but life has been good to me, and I shall return it somehow. That is my philosophy. I join projects and causes which have a direct bearing on people's lives."

Her parents were a strong early influence, especially her father, Antonio Tagumpay, who convinced her that academic achievement would be key to her future. He was a government clerk, while her mother was a cook who sold prepared meals door-to-door and sometimes worked in the kitchens of wealthy families.

Castillo began her academic training with a Bachelor of Arts in psychology from the University of the Philippines. Later she went on to earn a Master's degree in rural sociology from Pennsylvania State University and her Doctorate from Cornell University. For many years Castillo served as a professor of rural sociology at the College of Agriculture, University of the Philippines.

Throughout her career, Castillo published extensively on subjects encompassing women's roles, the sex roles of Filipino adolescents, agricultural school administration, the team approach in community development, rice and potato farming, the changing social images in a developing society, and the protein gap.

Beyond Manila was her most famous book. It was the first comprehensive research work on income distribution, employment, labour, education and migration in the rural Philippines. She underscored the definition of a household, observing that the role of women and children contributes greatly to the dynamics of society.

"One person can only do so much, especially if it is performed in an outstanding manner", says Priscilla Juliano, an associate professor at the College of Agriculture in Los Baos. "She's a nagger of sorts. She pushes people to do competent work. She has academic and intellectual independence, and a consistent ability to do exceptional academic pieces. Probably, this is helped by the fact that she is supported by her husband."

Gelia met her future husband, Leopoldo Castillo, at the university in Los Baos shortly after graduating from the university. One year later they were married. Pol, as Castillo calls her husband, is an animal nutritionist and now professor emeritus of the Institute of Animal Science. The couple has two daughters and one son.

"My husband has always been very supportive and has never had any insecurities about my career. I never felt as a woman that I was at a disadvantage." For six years, Gelia Castillo was the only female member of the board of the Peru-based International Potato Center. She has also served on the boards of IDRC, the International Service for National Agriculture Research, and the International Council for Research in Agroforestry.

Yet Castillo does not regard her experience as universal. "Affirmative action is necessary because in many countries women are really at a disadvantage. Sometimes I think the feminist movement has only been good to the female professionals, but has it helped the poor women or are we just using the poor women to advance our own case? I know this is unpopular thinking and I notice that each time I say these things I'm no longer invited to speak to that group again."

Recently retired, Gelia has no intentions of spending her remaining years in a rocking chair. "I never really worry about my age. I don't feel old, intellectually and emotionally. It's important for me to stay intellectually alive."

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