

Gender Equity

A Bridge across Time, Space and Mindsets

Vicky Makay, now 54, married when she was 19 years old to another Ibaloi. It was a union that her parents and her husband's aunt had arranged and, under Ibaloi rules, could not be broken. Vicky, for example, wanted to continue her studies but her parents were already impatient. "Backing out would have been the bigger shame. My family would never have taken me back," she said.

Leaving the marriage was not an option either. "Separation was unthinkable," Vicky said while shaking her head.

For Vicky, who is now based in Loakan district, Baguio City, the three-day gender sensitivity training she attended, however, confirmed for her the twin imperatives of choice and action that should be available to all women. Organized by Igorota Foundation, the training is Igorota's partnership with the Baguio City local government in a project called "Localizing Gender and Development Mainstreaming." The project is a recipient of CIDA's support under the agency's Gender Equity Fund (*see page 74 for information on the GEF*) and includes capacity-building activities such as the training



Vicky Makay: "In the past, an Ibaloi couldn't back out of a fixed marriage or get out of a bad one. Your family would have disowned you."

that local government representatives and community leaders like Vicky have attended. The inputs gathered from these are envisioned to help articulate the city's Gender and Development agenda, and identify projects and services for women in response to their issues.

Vicky has four children and is a proud grandmother to two toddlers. Contrary to the socialization of Ibaloi women, she assures that marriage will be a choice for all her children and that they are free to choose whom they want to marry.

"I also realized from the training that we women can do what men can. If the opportunities are not there for the men to be good providers, you get out there and look for ways to fend for your family, and you can," Vicky said. "We were always at war before. You know how it is with us women, especially when there's little money and there are children to feed. But after some time, you have to just let go."

These women have become more creative and enterprising. The children will have to take turns in attending school, for example, or a child may have to stop for a semester as the parents buy time to save for the next. Vicky and her friends have mastered the art of coping. "Happily, we're not tight with the budget all at the same time, or else we'd be dead," one of Vicky's friends said.

In Lucnab, another district of Baguio City, the facilitator's differentiation between gender and sex during the gender sensitivity training struck barangay secretary Cris Perez. The distinction between biological and gendered roles illuminated to him the preconceptions he had of men and women in general, and his wife in particular.

Cris has become a more understanding partner to wife Jerlyn and a more approachable father to his five children, he said. "I now more willingly share in

Vicky Makay's grandchildren and neighbours. The two other Ibaloi women point out the areas in their own homes reserved for the traditional cañao ritual.



A portion of the majestic Cordillera panorama, which is dotted with numerous indigenous communities collectively called "Igorot"

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A training session of the Igorota Foundation

the housework. I help her with the laundry, and I'm proud of it. On purpose I stand out there in the yard so that the other men will see me doing the laundry, sometimes with her, sometimes just by myself, and hopefully they realize it's not something to be ashamed of."

There should be more gender sensitivity training and gender advocacy projects for men, Cris added, not only to reduce the incidence of violence against women but more important, to change the mindsets of men.

"The facilitator also reminded us of the toll of childbirth on a woman's body," Cris said, "which is why men should shoulder even more of the housework after a woman delivers." He recalls a tradition among the Kalanguya of the in-laws' performing the housework for a household where the woman had just delivered a newborn. "Not even the woman's' family

members, but her in-laws," he said. "Unfortunately it's also a tradition that many seem to have forgotten and must be revived."

The series of gender training, according to Igorota's program coordinator Marge Balay-as, has also reduced drinking among the men and idle talk among the women.

As a member of an indigenous community, the Kankana-ey, while being a gender advocate, Marge is too familiar with the "debate" surrounding gender equity and ethnic studies, the contention of some being that gender equality is an imported concept that conflicts with indigenous norms and customs, and therefore should not be imposed on indigenous communities.

But Marge, before joining Igorota, was a volunteer for an International Labour Organization study called "Management



Gérard Bélanger, CIDA Head of Aid, with IP members in their traditional wear, when he visited Sagada, Mountain Province in May 2003. In the background is a portion of the world-renowned rice terraces, proof of the indigenous communities' engineering and agricultural skills.

of Ancestral Domains,” an experience when she saw for herself the “streaks of gender inequality even though both men and women are seen as nurturers and providers.”

In one community, she said, she asked a woman and a man belonging to the council of elders to step up and join her in front. Then she asked the discussion participants, “If you had a problem, would you approach the male elder or the female elder?” Everyone chose the man, this appeared perfectly all right even with the woman elder, as if this was the natural and only correct choice.”

Advocacy for indigenous communities' rights, it has been argued, should focus on the communities' collective survival and welfare, because to focus on the subjective rights of individual members will be distracting, divisive, even dilatory.

But as a gender advocate and Kankanaey, Marge sees no dilemma.

“For me, it's really here [she brings her right palm to her breast to refer to the heart]. It is really, really difficult to bridge [indigenous] culture with a gender perspective. You can't enter a community and just drop your gender framework on them. It is an excruciatingly slow process where you must first learn their culture, their systems and processes, their ways of naming so that you neither anger nor insult them. Only then can you, little by little, start suggesting changes in the not so desirable parts of their culture.”

The most important lesson is that the decision and desire to change has to come from the community. “Honestly, I'm not at all pained. I am happy. My gender perspective has deepened my worldview and identity as an indigenous person.”

Barangay secretary Cris Perez; the community leaders of barangay Lucnab; and staff members of the Igorota Foundation including Marge Balay-as (right) . Multiple roles: Not be deterred by their domestic tasks, three women across generations tend to their wards while participating in a focus group discussion. Note the indigenous Cordillera baby carrier made from a locally woven blanket wrapped around the infant and then slung around the mother's neck

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