



A Passion for Radio
Radio Waves and Community
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Chapter 21

Radyo Womanwatch

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In the six years of its existence, Radyo Womanwatch has moved to four different radio stations. Moving has been one of the consequences of insisting on maintaining a public service and women's advocacy programme in a highly competitive commercial broadcast environment. Since the programme came to life in 1985 – as a women's programme, an advocacy programme and a public service programme rolled into one hour of talk, poetry, news and music – we have found it difficult to find a permanent home station or time slot. Inevitably, the format had to change according to the image and audience of each station and the schedule the programme was assigned to.

The first six months of Radyo Womanwatch were also the last six months of the regime of Ferdinand Marcos. The programme was broadcast over a government-run AM station in Metro Manila, DZFM-AM. (The FM in the station's call letters stood for Ferdinand Marcos. Another Manila station, DWIM-FM, had the initials of both Imelda and Ferdinand Marcos). Because the entire broadcast media industry was beholden to the Marcos government from the time Martial Law was declared in 1972 up to the twilight of the Marcos years in February 1986, it didn't seem to matter much whether a talk show was aired on a private station or a government station. In fact, using the official propaganda arm provided a good "cover," since DZFM was controlled media and therefore not as closely watched by the military as private stations were. The other advantage was that it cost us nothing to air the programme. The entire Bureau of Broadcasts, which ran DZFM, was amply provided for by the National Budget, and needed no advertising or extra income from "blocktimers" like us. As with many government run agencies in the Philippines, knowing someone "up there" helped. The station manager was my cousin, and that helped when we presented our case.

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Imelda Marcos had been professing official concern for women's issues ever since 1975, when she headed the Philippine delegation to the World Conference on Women in Mexico. But it was not until after the assassination of Marcos' arch rival Ninoy Aquino in 1983 that middle class and grassroots women organised and that hundreds of new women's groups began to assert themselves as a potent political force and insisted that women's issues be put onto the agenda. The print media had noticed this growing force, especially since it was women journalists and columnists that first dared to openly criticise the Marcos authority in print. The broadcast media, however, recognised only Imelda Marcos, her daughter, and women officials of the government, as the nation's female political leaders.

It was in this situation that Radyo Womanwatch, the first women's advocacy programme in the country, took its first tentative steps. We were allowed to go on the air, but under the following conditions: that we did not criticise the First Family and the favourite government officials, and that we did not promote anti-government sentiments. We could discuss rape and violence against women in general terms, but we could not discuss military rape or human rights violations. We could denounce the spread of sexually-transmitted diseases in areas around the US military bases, but we could not talk about the sex tour promotions of the Department of Tourism. We could criticise the movie industry for promoting soft core pornography, but we could not address "first daughter" Mie Marcos, use of public funds to promote so-called "art films."

Nevertheless, we felt that there was enough room to move. Sexism in the workplace, women's health, creativity, religious and cultural prejudice, migrant workers, teenage pregnancy – there was a lot to talk about.

We were fascinated with our new found forum. For the first time, the three organizations which founded the programme – the Women's Desk of the Concerned Artists of the Philippines, the Progressive Women's Spiritual Association, and Filipino – were addressing audiences we did not see, did not know, and could not count. We were using "high-tech" facilities that we always thought would be beyond our reach. And we were getting the cooperation of women professionals on a volunteer basis. Even within a government station, Womanwatch was able to participate in the anti-Marcos movement. The great urge to change the system was manifest in the number of people and the manner through which they came together in those days to work, to protest and to invent alternative expressions. In our own group, only the anchor woman was paid a transportation allowance, because it was the only thing she did for a living. The rest of us made do as we could and devoted whatever free time we had to the programme.

Gertie Tirona, a historian who joined the Women's Media Circle some years later, has studied the period of our organisation's birth. She wrote:

To go back in time, 1985 was the worst and the best of years for the Philippine women's movement. Political repression took its toll of lives and limbs only to fuel patriotic fervour to fever pitch. It led to the birth of rainbow coalitions and a broad spectrum of organizations of concerned women. Though many of the game activists who went live on radio in a spontaneous outpouring of enthusiasm are relatively young, already memories begin to dim when asked to recount their salad days on Radyo Womanwatch.

The casual air, the happenstance posture, the healthy exuberance, the penniless past, the anonymity – ingredients that do not make a show in the fiercely competitive and star-studded Philippine broadcast and television industry – are among their noteworthy recollections. Even they can now reflect in amazement that a programme can be so informally hatched...

Seen in retrospect, it seems uncanny that this (first day of broadcast. October 27, 1985) was also the eve of what is now celebrated by the Filipino women's movement as their Day of Protest, when a united front of thousands of women from all classes, sectors and regions converged... to stage an indignation rally against the Marcos regime in 1983.

But it was not without difficulties that Radyo Womanwatch, and the Women's Media Circle, managed to survive. We existed on the generosity of family and friends, who were willing to donate some money for the purchase of tapes, or bake a few loaves of sweet bread for post-recording snacks. We raised taxi fare for guest poets among ourselves, and guests who could afford to, contributed financially and morally.

Ironically, the onset of the Aquino government made us realise our vulnerability. With the fall of Marcos, the management of almost all major broadcasting networks in Manila changed hands. The Bureau of Broadcast (BB), as well as the entire Department of Public Information, was abandoned, for all intents and purposes, by everyone from the top directors to the technicians. It took two weeks for the People Power take-over of the BB and GTV-4, the Government Television Channel, to settle down. In the chaos, however, we had to speak to half a dozen people, hoping that, with the lack of producers and programmes to transmit, the new managers would give us the opportunity to continue Radyo Womanwatch. They did. Through the transition period, and for another year, the programme went on – first, under the newly organised Radyo ng Bayan (Peoples' Radio), and then back to DZFM, rehabilitated as Sports Radio.

Funding the programme was becoming a problem though, because all the volunteers had to earn a living. In our sixth month of broadcast, a nun working with migrant workers, who we interviewed on the programme, taught us how to write out project proposals for funding grants. With this new-found knowledge, we proceeded to write to several funding agencies. Two responded positively: the Asia Foundation, which had an office in Manila, and the Spanish organisation, Manos Unidas. Twelve months after we recorded the first programme, Radyo Womanwatch finally became financially viable. We were able to purchase a field microphone, a tape recorder, some cassettes and open reel tapes, and to give ourselves, the guests, and the technicians, a small allowance.

But the perils of producing a radio programme on the basis of other people's kindness soon were manifest. Kindness is a limited resource in such a highly competitive industry as media, and when this resource is demanded by persons and agencies more powerful than ours (government forums or sports events), projects like Radyo Womanwatch must be pushed aside – in broadcast terms, must be "pre-empted." By 1988 the Aquino government was becoming less generous with its airtime for "outsiders" like us, no matter that we were among the activists who helped recover the facilities from the Marcos minions during the People's Revolt. How could we build an audience if our programme had no regularity?

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At the time we were sharing precious resources with other women's groups, offering them portions of our weekly hour for their own features and interviews. Our contributions, however, did not go unnoticed, and in 1989 we were able to secure support from the Asian Partnership for Human Development (APHD), a Catholic organisation based in Hong Kong. Through a grant from them, we were able to move out of the Bureau of Broadcasts and buy airtime from a better rated "sequestered" (i.e. formerly Marcos controlled but now Aquino monitored) commercial AM station, DWAN.

In our tradition of participatory production, we invited six women's organizations to take turns producing Radyo Womanwatch with us. Thus we had Professor Tirona of the Women's Studies Consortium, poet Marra Lanot of the Concerned Artists of the Philippines, Petite Peredo of Gabriela, counsellor Reena Marcelo of the Institute for Social Studies and Action, Princess Nemenzo of the Women's Health Coalition, and rural women organiser Trining Domingo of the KaBaPa (Movement of Progressive Women). We met with them every two months to plan themes and topics together with the main anchor, Sonia Capiro, an experienced broadcaster who spent much time during the Marcos era interviewing opposition leaders in a political talk show that finally had to close down due to lack of funds. For all of us, the challenge was how best to make use of each broadcast hour to reach out to women – we went on the air in the mornings of Monday, Wednesday and Friday. During these meetings, we shared learning experiences, discussed interaction with guests and audiences, and assessed the successes or failures of our format.

By the time our one year contract with DWAN ended, in 1990, Radyo Womanwatch had been cited as "Best Informational Program" by the Catholic Mass Media Awards. This award was the first any programme of DWAN had won, and encouraged the station managers to renew our contract at a discounted rate for another six months. It also gave us the temerity to find another grant for the programme before the APHD money ran out. Before the contract ended, however, the station was taken over by an Aquino associate, who changed the station from one with a political and public service image into a 100% entertainment, gossip and "good news" format. Since none of us were stars or tabloid columnists, Radyo Womanwatch had to go.

Our next, and current home is at a newly reprogrammed station, DWIZ, which is aggressively pursuing a public affairs profile, and moving to the top five in Metro Manila a.m. ratings. Radyo Womanwatch now goes on the air every evening for half an hour (7:00 to 7:30 p.m.). From Monday to Thursday, Sonia Capiro handles *Womanwatch Action Line* which focuses on political leadership, environment, art and culture, labour and other related topics. When we launched the new Radyo Womanwatch last November, we also began airing *Womanwatch Healthline* which aims at a young adult audience and focuses on health, relationships and the prevention of teenage pregnancy. Research, planning and part-time staffing for this programme are provided by the Institute for Social Studies and Action and the Women's Health Care Foundation.

So far, it is the most successful format we have produced for radio, but it is also the most expensive. We have funding in place to cover the basics for the next year, provided by three foundations. We are also trying to generate some additional revenue from advertising, and a few companies have responded with interest, if not signed

contracts. However, money is a constant worry and we still have to raise some from a variety of sources to cover a portion of our production costs.

Of course, we will not give up hope of one day setting up our own radio cooperative outside of Metro Manila, in a province where women can make use of the airwaves to empower themselves. Recent changes in National Telecommunication Commission policy may make it easier to get a license, and make it possible for us to finally set up our dream home base, Radyo ag Kababaihan (Women's Radio). In the meantime, we take each opportunity as it comes, and use the airwaves so that women may somehow be uplifted.

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