

## How I Blundered Into the Women and Development Program

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Feminists are supposed to be purposeful women. After all, we are filled with rhetoric about the "personal being political". This means that we understand that societal structures determine what goes on in our lives including the most intimate aspects of our beings. Thus, we work for social change as the only real way to change personal circumstances. But the personal is also political in the sense that we understand that what we do individually (at work and in the family, in production and reproduction) either reinforces or assaults systems of inequity. It is a basic proposition therefore, that we never take lifestyle decisions lightly. We are supposed to approach decisions such as the choice of jobs, the choice of sexual partner, family arrangements and even the kind of language we use, with studied deliberation. That is not what happened to me when I joined the Women and Development Program (WDP). I did it almost on a whim--- at the behest of friends and former teachers in the program. There is a term which applies so well to how I acted then: *kaladkarin*.

The first time I ever applied for a job was about two and a half years ago when I was interviewed to become a lecturer for the Women and Development Program. I really didn't understand the academic hierarchy in UP. I had no idea about lecturers and items. A friend in the WDP faculty had

told me to apply and I always do what she says. (In fact, when she told me to join the nationalist movement and dedicate my life to the people, I did just that for about half of my life. Not that I could really claim that I truly, truly, truly SERVED the MASSES. But I did think that was what I was doing.)

On the other hand, other friends told me to ask about items and whether I would get one. Foolish advise, really. Everyone should know, as my experience has shown, that items in UP are like unicorns. That is, they were quite abundant in a mythological past but are now quite rare. In fact they are only seen and possessed by those who somehow have a special place in the heart of unknown powers that run the academic universe. Like other things of the past, only genuine heroes and heroines are ever likely to be in a unicorn hunt.

It goes without saying that you should be filled with nobility (as in "I am willing to stick it out with UP even if this private university will pay me three times more,") and skills ("I have advanced academic credentials!") before you are even considered to be in the running. But many worthy souls, possessing all these heroic qualities, have spent years in the quest without ever having seen a unicorn.

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But I digress. I went for this interview, complete with *curriculum vitae*. I was told there were no items. Also at that interview was another close friend, who really needed the job of lecturer more than I. At that time, she was my favourite sort of woman---a loose woman at loose ends. So, I decided right there and then to recommend her instead of me. In short, my job interview turned out to be a job recommendation for the friend who is also now (still) a faculty member of the WDP.

I went back to the salt mines of dissertation-writing with the promise to them that I would re-apply once I finished my dissertation. (Can you imagine my gall! Promising them to re-apply as if they needed me! Promising to finish my dissertation in a semester!)

I did finish my dissertation that semester, though. And, backed now by a few more friends, I was asked to re-apply. This time around, I do not recall if I was even interviewed. I do remember that the WDP coordinator was very nice to me. She would call me up, remind me of deadlines and wait for my documents.

"These people are idiots," I thought. "Can you imagine continuing to take me seriously after I practically told them during my first interview that my desire to join the faculty wasn't all that overpowering?" Yet, I felt that it was nice to be wanted. Perhaps I should not have felt that way because I would later find out what it was they wanted me for. But that is getting ahead of the story.

The thing is, when I got a doctorate to add to my doctor's degree, there was really only one obvious set of

choices: TEACH or jump off a cliff as atonement for the stupidity of spending so much time in deadening classrooms. So, I decided that I should teach until I found a convenient cliff and a convenient space in my friends' social calendars where they could attend my funeral without being too harassed. I became a member of the WDP faculty for the second semester of the school year 1996-1997.

Talk about lack of purpose. I had been proud of the fact that I had spent my entire life only within the alternative system of non-governmental organisations and revolutionary parties. Before I knew it, I was in the academe. What is more, because UP is a state university it was eventually made clear to me that I had become the most dreaded of incarnations---a civil servant. A few awful realities:

1. Having to be told about the things I should wear to work. The Civil Service Commission told my numerous bosses, who then told me, that there is such a thing as a dress code for government employees. The guidelines are obviously sexist because they talk about women's dressing in a way that attempts to moralise about women's sexuality. But I also have to deal with the irritation that some nameless bureaucrats actually have the nerve to remind me not to be tacky. Excuse me please, but I do NOT wear heavy gold jewellery to work. It goes against my idea of revolutionary chic. It goes against my idea of bourgeois chic. It goes against all my ideas.

2. Having to perform the task of swearing upon my honour that I have rendered my full hours to the University in my service record form.

Except that after my first semester, I was hooked on teaching. I love it. (Which is not to say that teaching loves me, of course.) I love the fact that most of my students are women who are striving to label themselves "feminist". I am proud that most WDP students I have met are truly intelligent, genuinely articulate and often quite passionate about the feminism they are living and learning. I enjoy articulate and kind students because I value both intelligence and kindness. I also enjoy those brainy students that are always putting the teacher to the test. I like this kind of testing because it is also a way of learning together. I am truly privileged that feminist pedagogy allows me to learn about the realities, thoughts and dreams of students.

I also enjoy being expected to read and think as "part of my job". In my perfect world, this should be part of everyone's job. In my perfect feminist world, women should be given space from housework and child-rearing to be able to sit and theorise. I am also one of those old fashioned feminists who believe that we should all study real well in order to have a successful revolution.

*Furthermore, because I have been allowed to understand feminism as theory, I have been able to enjoy my practice of it even more. The reverse is also true. My theorising is ultimately enjoyable because I do work with the Philippine women's movement. Coming into the WDP helped to integrate parts of me that sometimes seemed incompatible. The activist and the nerd are both happy now and working together.*

I believe that what is true for me is also true for the program. The WDP can continue to be on the cutting edge of the academe if it moors itself in the larger women's movement. Apart from theorising, we must also look at our own practice in the academe and ensure that it is politically feminist and part of societal transformation.

Lastly, I have had the very real pleasure of getting to know the pioneering women who have been with the WDP much longer than I have. It has been a real blessing to have a whole new set of friends in mid-life. The proof of the feminism, in this case, is in the sisterhood. They laugh because of my jokes, laugh with me when I make mistakes and, laugh at me when I am being wrong-headed. They have advised me of my rights within the University and advocated for my well-being. In short, they have given me the best parts of themselves, without much fuss and with no demands.

As a feminist, I have long felt that much of my life and the world which I live in is my responsibility. It seems to me that I have taken pains to ensure that the paths I travelled were of my own choosing. But every so often in my life, things not of my own making get thrown in my way (or throw me on to another way). Others might want to call this the workings of the Goddess. Whatever. I am glad that I somehow blundered upon the path of the women of the Women and Development Program.