

Philippines: Organizing Widows in Negros and Repression

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Delia Aguilar interviews Vicvic Justiniani.

Presentation

I FIRST MET Victoria (Vicvic) Justiniani eight years ago when she had just emerged from the Philippine underground, where she was immersed in the revolutionary struggle for twenty years beginning at age 16. Vicvic attracted international media attention in 1986 when she represented the women's organization, MAKIBAKA, at the ceasefire talks called by the then newly elected president, Corazon Aquino. At the collapse of these talks, Vicvic resumed her clandestine work until her arrest and release in 1992.

My interview with her then (printed in *Monthly Review*, September 1993) centered on her life in the underground as a woman organizer and guerrilla in the peasant movement, and the unparalleled fulfillment as well as acute tensions produced in her by being a revolutionary, a wife, and a mother who opted to relinquish the care of her offspring.

A few years later I learned that Vicvic was now heading a non-governmental organization (NGO) of widows in her hometown, Canlaon, on the island of Negros. A radical change from her former existence, I thought, and one which would pose her no peril. How wrong I was. This past summer I again had the opportunity to talk to Vicvic in Manila, where she was seeking safe haven. The innocent association of widows she had formed in the early 90s had been transformed into a political organization that attracted disenfranchised sectors of the town population of 40,000. These sectors, now politicized and assembled under the banner of CPRM (Canlaon People's Rights Movement, of which Vicvic is president), have suffered physical assault, harassment, murder and militarization. This in response to CPRM's charges of graft, landgrabbing, human rights violations, and environmental destruction. What came to light from my conversations with Vicvic and with other people is the revitalization and resurgence of the progressive movement in the Philippines. The story that Vicvic narrates is one that is replicated throughout the country: On the one hand has been the reinstallation into power by President Joseph Estrada (just deposed) of the old cronies of dictator Ferdinand Marcos; on the other, the demands of increasing globalization have intensified the suffering of the Filipino people. One-tenth of the population of 79 million constitute an unprecedented diaspora of contract workers, about 65% of whom are female, large numbers serving as domestic helpers in different parts of the globe. It is widely acknowledged in the country that without the annual remittances

totalling \$7 billion sent by these "new heroines" (a designation given by two former presidents, Aquino and Ramos), the government would be hampered from servicing its foreign debt to the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. This furnishes the backdrop for the following interview with Vicvic. --

----- {{Q: Tell me how you got WAC (Widows' Association of Canlaon) set up. Vicvic:}} In 1993, the year after the presidential elections, fundraising activities were going on. Someone close to a Congressman with porkbarrel funds designated for people's organizations (women being the specific target) got access to some money. This person had gotten some women together, but then decided to drop the project to turn to something else more profitable. I happened to be around at the time, so this project got passed on to me. It involves poor, old widows—you know, "grassroots" women. In the beginning we just talked and shared our common experiences. These are women of peasant background with little education.

Most of them got married after WWII. They are older women without pensions who need to work. I assumed that they were supported by their children, but it was the other way around. I thought they'd have graduated from their reproductive roles, but that was not true. I discovered that for these women there's no end to reproductive and productive work. {{Q: How did you get the group going? Vicvic:}} We just talked. I had no set ideas because all I wanted was to facilitate whatever it was they wanted to do. My approach was to organize them collectively in a way that would enable them to sort out their problems, then to raise their consciousness about these personal problems, their community, and the larger society. I had no specific agenda beyond that. I did believe, however, that if I could facilitate discussions among them, they could themselves come up with a program. At first we just identified problems. We did a "needs assessment"—that's what I learned from NGO work. [Laughs] We talked about their needs in the households, in the community, their economic and health problems, and so on. Then we decided to prioritize these needs and to think of collective solutions. We asked, who are the people who can help us? In the process, we built our organization and identified our objectives. The main issue that turned up was economic, one of livelihood. The women had different ways of eking out a living; some were farmers, some cooked food to sell, some were vendors, still others raised chickens or pigs. We decided that our project should be that of getting credit to augment the widows' incomes. We began to conceptualize a credit program for elderly widows, then we talked about what policies would work for them. (By this time they'd identified who among them would take leadership.) I had no idea what these might be since my only experience was in the countryside. So we studied existing credit programs with the view of shaping one that suited these women's particular situations and capacities. The next step was to seek assistance. It was a favorable time because the going thing then was microfinancing by the World Bank. [Laughs] {{Q: Are these projects group- or individual-oriented? Vicvic:}} Individual. I would prefer collective, but I think if I suggested that, there would have been a return to individual. The women meet for training and for seminars.

Beginning in 1994 until today they've had monthly meetings to discuss their activities. It's good that we quickly got initial funds for them to start with. Q: From CIDA (Canadian International Development Assistance)? Vicvic: Yes. Some have {sari-sari} [variety] stores in their homes because they're old and have to stay home. Some have farms, so funding pays for their

children to work in the farm. The credits are small; the maximum loan is P3000 [about \$75; P1=2.5c] per person. Later on we moved from credit to savings, savings of P2 a day for each. A collector (she's a younger, able-bodied widow of 44) would go around soliciting and recording these savings. We have a structure now, we also have a budget officer. Ours is actually a joint undertaking between WAC and UBAN (an organization for the elderly).

There are three in the credit committee of WAC who read project applications. I am always there to assist, and we have a staff for the bookkeeping part. The office is my house. My mother is a member, too. My house serves as the headquarters of the widows. [Laughs] I am a native of Canlaon, I was born there. I am "Inday [female term of endearment] Vicvic" to them. [Laughs] {{Q: So they all know your history, and they don't mind that you were a rebel in the underground? Vicvic: }} Not at all. My family is known in the community. Even when I was in the hinterlands hiding, I was always "Inday Vicvic" to them because of course I am a part of the community. {{Dubious Government Help}} {{Q: Did you seek government help for the organization? Vicvic:}} Yes, from a congressman, who's now our enemy. We went to CDA (Cooperative Development Association); all co-ops in the Philippines belong to it. It's a political base for congressmen because of its funding, and one needs to go through CDA to access funds and be a registered member. That's where problems began. We said, don't force us to be a co-op, because we're not; we're only an association, a simple people's association with a project. I didn't like that status to be imposed on us when these old widows were only starting to experiment. On the other hand CIDA, because it funnelled assistance through DIWATA (a consortium of women's organizations formed to disburse funds), had a gender dimension. So our proposal was quickly approved by them. We got P80,000 for management (this enabled us to hire organizers) and P120,000 for credit. That was our funding for one year; and yes, we are checked on and evaluated every year. Then sometime in between, Bread for the World (a German-based Protestant fund source) entered the picture, initially with eyebrows somewhat raised. This funding agency was just experimenting, too, and it just so happened that Visayas was its priority area, so we got a grant. We got P120,000 in the beginning and after that, because we were considered successful, we were awarded a P300,000 revolving fund. The test was the first year. The old women had to prove that they could handle the project effectively, that they could manage the conflict between sustainability in microfinance at one end, and empowerment at the other. My own emphasis is on empowering people, but in microfinance the guidelines are collection and repayment. By this time you must attain at the very least a 95% repayment rate in order to be sustainable. You can just imagine that the first two years were a struggle. What if someone got sick and couldn't repay? What if there was a calamity?

So you'll abandon us then? You'll stop supporting us if these things happen? If so, go to the rich peasants and the middle class! But poor old women can't be sustainable for the simple reason that no one provides for them in their old age. Who will give pensions to women whose work has been confined to the home? In the Philippines a farmworker gets SSS (social security), but if a woman takes a break her SSS stops, too. So we made a study of the situation of older women which made clear that we should not expect older women to be sustainable. This is where we've had this debate with other NGOs that comply with funding agencies' demand for sustainability.

The World Bank has such a package. {{Q: What does "sustainable" mean? Vicvic:}} It means that after three years you won't need funding anymore. In our case, the microlending should by that time have profit enough to fund our operational needs and to expand. That has a lot of problems in real life, especially with older women. The poor also are left out with such a policy; what has been considered successful microlending for the so-called poor does not, in truth, involve the truly poor. There are too many requirements. For example, the Grameen Bank concept [which originated in Bangladesh] . . . they said that women are very good at paying back. But it turned out that the women were actually being coerced by their husbands to pay. There are stories behind this presumed "successful repayment." Now they're using the Grameen Bank as a model for credit-lending for the poor elsewhere. In our view, success is equated with empowerment. {{Q: And how do you measure empowerment in these older women? Vicvic: }} As individuals they've gained self-confidence because they now have support. In the past they've had to beg usurers, the rich, to lend them money. Now they have access to funds of their own and no longer have to go begging. They have economic undertakings that they can now sustain. They don't have to run to their children or to others to say, "Please give me rice or give me medicine because now I'm old and helpless." Now they don't have to use their old age to evoke pity from others. In spite of their age, they can still be productive and can carry on. They have an organization not only to address their economic problems but also for interpersonal support. They have developed a social and political awareness from sharing each other's personal problems. That's why eventually they were fighting not on their own behalf, but over the plight of OCWs (overseas contract workers) and of Flor Contemplacion (domestic helper executed in Singapore in 1995), or over the environmental degradation of Canlaon and other broader community concerns. In this way they're developing a critical consciousness of societal issues and can speak about these with confidence. {{Q: What did you have to do in order to raise their consciousness, in order, let's say, to bring them to a point when they could rally around domestic workers overseas and Flor Contemplacion? Vicvic:}} We have lots of activities—we did studies in gender awareness, women's orientation, Philippine history, {PSR} ({Philippine Society and Revolution} by Amado Guerrero, a basic text for the National Democratic Front). They even role-play using PSR. [Laughs] {{Q: So there's indoctrination! [Both laugh] When you read {PSR}, were they not put off or frightened by it? Vicvic:}} Oh no, we didn't read PSR. We used popular education methods. We just told stories about what happened in the past based on {PSR}. It was so much fun, the role-plays we conducted. We'd break out laughing; it's far from boring, this kind of education with older women who, by the way, are "no read, no write." We talk about what life was like during the Spanish occupation. What was life like for women? For farmers? Okay, here's a group of women. I tell them they're Group A, they're to discuss the lives and problems of Filipinos during this period, and to come back in an hour and role-play. Another is Group B; they're to do the U.S. colonial period. It's amazing what they come up with. They'll act out how the Spanish stole our lands, imposed Christianity [laughs]; they act out the collective way of life at the time, the more equitable position of women, the babaylanes [healers, mostly women]. These women know because they have babaylanes in their ancestry. It's also fun because these women use plants and other items in my

house as props. Then they ask, when shall we do this again? [Laughs] At human rights rallies these old women joined in chanting, in holding up placards. They'd make you nervous, these older women clambering up trucks! I really enjoyed those first few years because it was relaxing, a process that just flowed—there were no strict targets as to what we were to accomplish at such and such a time. {{ {Fiefdom and Repression} Q: And what about the problem with the Mayor? Vicvic: }} Well, that's the current hard reality.

[Laughs] In spite of the fact that we're only a small community of widows in Canlaon, we're caught in a fiefdom, a feudal system. The Mayor controls the whole town. Even when you consciously avoid political confrontation, you can't. So even small projects are affected. The old women were asked to move their livelihood projects kilometers away from where they reside. That would destroy their projects. So as we kept on, the human rights issue became prominent. In our interaction with other sectors, we learned that others also experienced forms of repression. Our small office that was previously just a fun place became a refuge for people to bring their complaints. For example, one of our members, Nanay Lumen, complained that her son wasn't given barangay [village] clearance because the Barangay Captain said he was in the opposition. We found out that it was a pattern in other barangays.

Once they found out that you were in the opposition, they'd give you a difficult time. So what I did, myself and the officers of WAC, was to go to the Barangay Captain and complain. The Barangay Captain was taken aback; he was apparently being confronted for the first time. At the same time community members were impressed that there was this group that wasn't afraid to confront the untouchable officers. That's when they started coming to the office and bringing in their problems. One would say to me, "Inday, I wasn't given medicine because I was tagged as opposition. " The word spread that WAC people fight back if you push their members around. Soon people came to us to ask how they could form their own organizations. They'd say, "We're not women, we're not widows, but we need to organize on the basis of human rights." They witnessed how WAC can fight back, participate in rallies, celebrate Women's Day, raise placards, and they wanted to learn from us—such a departure from the beginning when all these old women could draw was their amusement. Later when they saw WAC join in the protest against logging activities, their interest was piqued and they wanted to do something similar. {{Q: And WAC then became an example? Vicvic:}}

Yes, to such an extent that they'd come to us and complain about their problems. We'd tell them, "Go and organize yourselves." Soon there were over twenty people's organizations all over Canlaon. Then we formed the Canlaon People's Rights Movement that serves as the multisectoral alliance of different people's organizations. Of course, they came mainly to me because I had been identified as the organizer who fights back. Once I stopped at one barangay.

According to the farmers, the Mayor wanted to grab their land. Do you have an organization? I asked. Yes, they said. Okay, so how will you fight? We just need support, they replied. That's it? Yes! Would you like the media's help? Yes! And that's how they pushed their issue in the media. I facilitated their contact with progressive journalists in Bacolod, and Canlaon broke into the news. At first, what appeared was just an innocent little article, which the Mayor responded to with a libel suit. Then another organization saw that there were options other than purely court battles; so they'd come to the office for seminars on what to do. We became a center

where people aired their concerns. Then there were the vendors who were ejected from their place of work, who were refused business permits; they, too, came to our office and asked what to do. Okay, form your organization and let's expose your problem to the public, I advised them. So there was formed a vendors' organization, then one of farmers, until more and more . . .

Almost all sectors of Canlaon are now organized: youth, motorcycle drivers, all come to our office. The office of WAC and UBAN has become the main office of these organizations. The problem in Canlaon is how to form a mass movement that can attract island-wide attention. If not, we're very vulnerable, even now, because of Canlaon's remoteness. But our enemies need to think a little bit, since now we've gotten nationwide attention. {{Q: How did you elicit this attention? Vicvic:}} Through a Congressional inquiry of human rights violations. We approached Congress for this. In the beginning nobody really cared since Canlaon is so small. But it just happened that Noynoy Aquino (son of murdered former senator Benigno Aquino, husband of President Corazon Aquino) was appointed Chair of the Committee and he went to Canlaon to investigate. Because he's a personality—he hadn't even left Canlaon when one complainant was killed—the murder created a stir, and that was followed by more violence. This was picked up by the media, and when this reached Congress, the Canlaon situation became somewhat sensational, even though comments are that this is normal in most parts of the country. This only happened this past April. The Committee recommendations have not yet been implemented; these serve as mere propaganda for now. Now the Congressional inquiry is another story. We now have CPRM. Human rights issues in Canlaon have gradually received media exposure, and there is a developing people's movement based on human rights and the democratization of Canlaon. And there's Vicvic Justiniani who has become a media personality.

[Laughs] Canlaon's is a story of one place that was once asleep, that no one paid attention to, until people's struggles broke into the news. Media attention was sustained by the mass movement. Usually what happens is that something breaks into the papers and then it's forgotten. But the conscious leadership and organization of the mass movement kept it in public view. We wanted to find out how to sustain the struggle by using legal means. Then someone suggested requesting an investigation of the matter by CHR (Commission on Human Rights) and by DILG (Department of Interior and Local Government). We approached both. That's when I learned that requesting an investigation is such a headache! Investigators were sent to Canlaon without our knowledge, calling for certain people to talk to; then they filed a report on the information they got. When we found out about this, we went to the people the investigators interviewed; we mobilized many people to do this. We discovered that they wanted a hush-hush investigation in order to whitewash the whole thing! That's what government investigations are like in general; you know, they make token gestures. But they couldn't do that to us because we came, so many of us, and launched our complaints. The Committee was shocked with what they unearthed and the Mayor was livid because he got exposed. We said, if you want to investigate, it can't be clandestine. Talk to the complainants. So they said, collect your affidavits and evidence, which we did. Finally, I sensed something fishy in this so we made a lot of noise and got the media's attention. We gave our report documenting human rights abuses. When we gave this partial report to their investigator, we found that this fellow spent his nights drinking in the company of the Mayor

and his men. Out of forty-one complainants, he only reported stories of four! His intent was to clear the Mayor and dismiss the case. After the investigation, he returned to Dumaguete and called for a conference to dismiss the case. I was in Manila when this happened. They tried to call CPRM communists, and made up stories about us. DNR (Department of Natural Resources) joined in, too, in the whitewashing. And then there's the buying of people. That's how bad it was. You know, recounting this to you now doesn't quite capture the obscenity of this whitewashing practice. It's a trap you just fall into when you ask for an investigation—they try to make fools out of you. Then the Mayor sends his armed goons to harass you and you can't yell "Help" anymore because they've been cleared. {{Q: These goons, are they private? Vicvic:}} Yes, they're hired by the government as employees.

Those of us who have the courage to fight back are the basic masses and journalists from the outside. The journalists are from Bacolod; they're progressive and they're organized—veterans of martial law, not your run-of-the-mill journalists. They are honed in the struggle so they've been really supportive of us in exposing the Canlaon case. It was all chamba [a matter of chance], not at all that the government has a system of checks and balances. It was just happenstance that the Congressional Committee was chaired by Noynoy Aquino who has no political interest in Negros, as he's from Tarlac.

But because he had his own experience with martial law—it was only chamba, Had it been somebody else. . . . It's also a system where you have to find yourself a godfather among the higher-ups. You can't survive without this patronage. It's a good experience for me because it's been very concrete. We have a winning chance because of Noynoy Aquino, son of the assassinated ex-Senator, who has a heart for this martial-law-type case. Some comment that the Canlaon case is shocking. Others wonder, does this still happen? Still others say that this is commonplace. It turns out that government employees who do not agree with those in power get terminated by City Hall. Now that's common practice, and it's got to be opposed so it doesn't become accepted as a way of life. The life of government employees is that of being perpetual casuals; that's how employees are politically controlled. In small towns, there are no alternative employers, unemployment is horrible, and the government is the number one employer. This is more critical in small places like Canlaon where the government is the biggest employer—the rest falls within the feudal economy where you work in the camp and cut and carry sugarcane. The Committee Report only came out this June. The Committee put out their findings that indeed human rights violations occurred and made recommendations, but there's still a fight over this. {{Q: What is the role of the widows at the present time? Vicvic:}} They're now only part of the larger human rights umbrella organization. {{Q: Do they all support the fight? Vicvic:}} The majority do. Some are afraid because the pressure has been terrific. Few have withdrawn totally because of their loyalty to the Mayor. You see, some have children employed by him. There are about 250 members; over 100 are active. When the political situation became hot, some distanced themselves. {{Q: Was the credit association affected? Vicvic:}} In my view, yes, because Cardenas (political kingpin of Canlaon) wants to embarrass me; there are threats to the organization and efforts to destroy it by various means. Some credit members have not paid up, so it's been affected. {{Q: But attention now has shifted from WAC to the human rights organization? Vicvic:}} Yes, it's CPRM that's the focus now. People say

there's Vicvic again, who's "forever Canlaon." I've been put in a place where I'm made to appear as the only one with a political consciousness. I've been identified as a mass leader of a very young organization that's right now dependent on me, and I don't have what might be considered a political party to take over some of the responsibility. It's just the masses and myself; it's a very heavy situation and my role is quite decisive. The biggest challenge for me is to develop leaders from the ranks of the masses, and that takes time to develop, along with vision and commitment. At the same time, because of the immediacy of the conflict, you have to fight the enemy. You can't say, wait a minute, let's hold off the offensive, because I have to organize and educate the masses first. [Laughs] {{Q: You mentioned threats on your life. Vicvic:}} Yes, because if they can shoot ordinary people, how much more me? I'm their biggest enemy. Everyday it's my name that they curse; they believe I've stirred up trouble in Canlaon. -----
{{Afterword}} It has now been a year and a half since I recorded the above. Vicvic is still stranded in Manila, still unable to return to Canlaon.

Reading my 1992 interview with her, I note her words: {"If only we could change things through peaceful means, no one would have to go through what I did. But in the Third World I think we are forced to fight back, especially when you begin to identify with the masses." Eight years later, in spite of a drastic alteration in her lifestyle, a return to normalcy, Vicvic sends me the following message via e-mail: ". . . We are continuing to actively protest growing militarization. These are the 'natural' events transpiring here. The same story seems to get repeated over and over. The course of armed revolution also seems only natural' under these conditions. What other options are there for the masses?"

The human rights investigation that CPRM sought from Congress turned out to be a travesty. Legal venues of struggle have been foreclosed in Canlaon by force of arms. A major encounter in August, 1999 between the official military and the NPA ended in casualties, causing the local government to retaliate against the people through a number of measures that include divestment of property, strafing of homes, and food blockades.

One thing is clear: The struggle continues.

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* From Against the Current (ATC) 91, March-April 2001 "Philippines Organizing and Repression").

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