

Philippines: [New School] Challenge to Robredo: Take up real feminist causes

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'How much good can we do by empowering women with words and the color pink? What about the women who need a safe abortion, or the women who need to get out of a bad marriage?'

Gender has become a key aspect of Leni Robredo's campaign and public personality. In news articles, "lone female presidential candidate" is often tagged to Robredo's name. It is not difficult to find Robredo's supporters within the online space declaring that the last man standing will be a woman, or lamenting how Robredo would supposedly be much more well-received if she were a man instead of a woman.

Her supporters' focus on gender is not unfounded; Robredo herself has made gender, especially her gender, an important part of her campaign. "Laging sinasabi ng iba, 'ay mahina 'yan kasi babae 'yan," Robredo said to her supporters in Zamboanga City last January 24. Gender, specifically womanhood, has become something closely associated with Robredo's campaign. It seems that Robredo's biggest obstacle, aside from Marcos, is misogyny.

Robredo has every right to talk about gender. Women in government, as it is in many other fields, endure struggles and expectations not experienced by their straight male counterparts. However, the gender focus in Robredo's campaign begs the question: is the Robredo campaign feminist?

Robredo has shown some questionable stances on relevant issues regarding gender and feminism. Robredo has stated herself to be "anti-abortion," though at the same time giving the generic politician's answer of being "open" to discussion, which does not promise much. Abortion and reproductive health are important topics in the realm of women's rights. Because abortion is illegal in the Philippines, many women resort to unregulated backstreet abortion clinics, where many women suffer painful and even botched procedures. In 2020, there were 56,428 recorded live births from teenage pregnancies.

Robredo has stated her faith to be the main reason for her opposition to legalizing abortion. But legalizing abortion only allows women to have that option in a safe manner; it does not force the procedure upon unwilling individuals. Regardless of people's religious faith, abortion procedures continue to be conducted in the Philippines, often in an unsafe manner due to abortion's illegal status. Feminist activists have long struggled for the decriminalization of abortion in the Philippines, arguing this would reduce a number of deaths brought about dangerous backroom abortion procedures. It has been stated to be a "medical, not moral" issue.

Robredo is also against legalizing divorce. Instead of divorce, Robredo has stated that she would like to focus on the accessibility of annulment. Though both are in regards to the separation of a married couple, annulment and divorce are different procedures. Getting an annulment requires "heavier" reasoning than a divorce; infidelity, physical abuse, or abandonment, for example, are not

acceptable grounds for annulment. Aside from the Vatican, the Philippines remains to be the only country in the world where divorce is not legal.

Robredo has stated economic empowerment to be a greater factor in helping women escape unwanted marriages, citing wives' financial reliance on their husbands as a primary factor in women being stuck in unwanted marriages. But annulment remains to be exorbitantly expensive, and out of the financial reach of even most financially stable individuals. Only the extremely wealthy can afford an annulment that won't drag on for years and drain both finances and energy.

Beyond abortion and divorce, Robredo's platform in regards to gender still appears to be inadequate. Women's issues should not be treated as wholly separate or distinct from other issues, such as labor. On top of gender discrimination and abuse, working women endure hardships in the workplace. Robredo herself has inadvertently acknowledged this by noting how financial hardships can bar women from breaking free of abusive or negligible spouses.

How does Robredo aim to answer these problems? Robredo has not spoken about raising the minimum wage, or the discrepancy of wages among regions. Robredo has mentioned ending contractualization, but it is not a key part of her platform, nor has she outlined a plan for it. How does Robredo plan to address the plight of working women, who also suffer under measly wages and contractualization?

Women in the LGBTQ+ community are also slighted. Regarding same-sex marriage, Robredo is against its legalization; her support only goes as far as civil unions. Advocates in the LGBT community have spoken about how a distinction between marriage and civil unions feeds further division. As Filipinos equal to their fellow citizens, LGBTQ+ individuals should have the same rights. The primary argument in barring same-sex couples from marriage is to supposedly preserve the sanctity of marriage, per religious grounds. In a country where our Constitution declares the separation of Church and State, should we allow religious reasons to dictate laws and hamper civil rights? Robredo's stance that same-sex couples must settle for civil unions reveals that her support for the LGBTQ+ community only goes as far as conservative sensibilities can endure.

Women's rights and gender issues should be considered holistically. How much good can we do by empowering women with words and the color pink? What about the women who need a safe abortion, or the women who need to get out of a bad marriage, or the women who barely survive on the minimum wage? Which women are empowered by Robredo's campaign, and which women are left behind?

This is a challenge to Leni Robredo: please consider the inclusivity of your platform. There is still until May 9 to correct the platform and make it more inclusive. If women and gender are really a key part of Robredo's platform, then all women should be considered and protected, regardless of class, sexuality, and other distinctions. Real feminism should stand up for all women, not just women of the middle class and wealthier.

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