

Moving Towards an Inclusive Philippine Politics: First Transgender Lawmaker Geraldine Roman

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Despite being a highly Catholic country, the Philippines is one of the countries accepting of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. Reports and researches conducted in the Philippines show that Filipinos have the notion of acceptance towards homosexuals as long as they fall into stereotypical roles the society has. In particular, acceptance means to “invariably have in mind effeminate, cross-dressing men (*bakla*) swishing down streets and squealing on television programme with flaring impunity. To equate Philippine society’s tolerance for public displays of transvestism with wholesale approval of homosexual behavior is naïve, if not downright foolish.” (Garcia 2004; UNDP and USAID 2014:25).

LGBT-related crimes in the country, on the contrary, are gradually becoming worse. In the first half of 2011 alone, there were documented 28 LGBT-related killings (UNDP and USAID 2014). In 2014, the killing of Jennifer Laude, a transgender sex worker, by an American soldier triggered LGBT and human rights activists all over the country to protect people from discrimination based on their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE). This pushed for the attention of Philippine legislators to finally consider the Anti-Discrimination Bill (ADB) that aims to protect and empower people based on their SOGIE, which has been in limbo for almost the last two decades.

In the current Philippine legislation session, Honorable Representative Geraldine Roman has been evidently pushing and advocating for the passage of the ADB in the Lower House. Hon. Roman is known as the ‘Equality Champ’, being a representative of the LGBT community in the Congress. She is the first-ever transgender politician elected in the Philippine legislative history.

Rep. Roman is a daughter of the former Bataan 1st District Representatives Antonio and Herminia Roman. 49-year-old Roman studied from grade school until high school in a prestigious, all-boys, Jesuit-led school in Manila, and pursued her bachelor’s degree at the University of the Philippines. Later on, she flew to Spain and acquired her two master’s degrees at the University of Basque Country.

She worked abroad as a journalist and editor of a Spanish news agency and became fluent in Spanish, French, and Italian (FlorCruz 2016). In 2012, she decided to go back to the Philippines and take care of her ill father (who later on died) and decided to continue her parents’ political legacy in the province of Bataan.

In the recent 2016 Philippine National and Local Elections, Roman ran for public office as Bataan City’s 1st District Representative and fought against Hermosa Mayor Danilo Malana. She experienced a lot of taunting, backlashes, and discrimination due to her sexuality (born as a man, but has undergone a sex change to become a woman). Despite these backlashes against her, she gained overwhelming support from her constituents obtaining 62% of the votes, which led to her victory.

Since she took public office, she has been active authoring and co-sponsoring almost 100 bills revolving around issues on health, labour and employment, veterans affairs and welfare, electoral reforms, energy, natural resources, tourism, and human rights. More importantly, she authored House Bill No. 00267, also known as the Anti SOGI Discrimination Act on 30 June 2016. The Bill seeks to uphold the fundamental human rights of people who are discriminated based on their sexual orientation and gender identity.

Roman played a crucial role in fighting for the rights of LGBTs in the Philippine Congress through her bill. As the first transgender lawmaker, her stand on the issue is based on human rights perspective. She has been treated as an equal by her *macho* colleagues in Congress, despite her sexuality. SOGIE should not be a basis as to why certain groups of people should be deprived of rights and opportunities, particularly in running for public office to serve the people. Geraldine Roman set an example to public servant aspirants to serve without hesitation.



Representative Geraldine Roman during the electoral campaign

Source: Reuters: Romeo Ranoco,

<<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-05-10/the-philippines-elects-its-first-out-transgender-congressperson/7400354>>

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