

## Background Information on the Philippines

### Geography:

The *Republika ng Pilipinas* is a sovereign island country in Southeast Asia, situated in the western Pacific Ocean. It consists of 7,107 islands. The three main islands are Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. The islands, located on the Pacific Ring of Fire and close to the equator, are prone to earthquakes and typhoons; on average twenty typhoons a year. The last decade has seen an increase in severe typhoons.

The wildlife of the Philippines includes a significant number of endemic plant and animal species. The country's surrounding waters reportedly have the highest level of marine biodiversity in the world.

The climate is either tropical rainforest, tropical savanna, tropical monsoon, or humid subtropical (in higher-altitude areas) characterised by relatively high temperature, oppressive humidity and plenty of rainfall. There are two seasons, the wet season and the dry season. The seven warmest months of the year are March to October; the winter monsoon brings cooler air from November to February. May is the warmest month, and January is the coolest.

### Brief historical review:

The history of the Philippines began with the arrival of the first humans on rafts/primitive boats, at least 67,000 years ago. Negrito tribes inhabited the

isles, which were subsequently joined and largely supplanted by migrating groups of Austronesians.

The first recorded visit from the West was Ferdinand Magellan on March 16, 1521, a Portuguese explorer. Spanish colonisation/settlement began with the arrival of Miguel López de Legazpi on February 13, 1565.

Spanish colonisation lasted for more than three centuries. Spanish rule achieved the political unification of almost the whole archipelago that had been composed of independent kingdoms, pushing back south the advancing Islamic population. The Spaniards founded schools, university, and hospitals in Manila. Universal education became free in 1863 and remained so until the end of the Spanish colonial era. The Philippine Revolution against Spain began in August 1896. The Treaty of Paris transferred control of the Philippines to the United States. Commonwealth status was granted in 1935, preparatory to a planned full independence from the United States in 1946 which was interrupted by the Japanese occupation during World War II. After the war, the Treaty of Manila established the Philippine Republic as an independent nation.

### Form of Government:

The Philippines has a democratic government in the form of a constitutional republic with a presidential system. The Philippines is governed as a unitary state with the exception of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. Over the last fifty years, migration has been encouraged by the national government. For centuries the Island of Mindanao has been prevalently Muslim. However, the rich agricultural island has remained backward in terms of infrastructure, education and living conditions. Rebel groups have been nurtured in these conditions. The government has been negotiating with these groups for a just and lasting peace. Emotional debates are ongoing in congress.

### Economy:

The economy of the Philippines is currently one of Asia's fastest growing economies. The Philippines is considered a newly industrialised country, which has been transitioning from an economy based on agriculture to services and manufacturing. The Philippines is among the largest migrant countries of origin in the world. In the last four decades, labour migration became a major contributing economic force impacting, in many ways, the social fabric of the country. While the government creates policies to facilitate the work abroad for the lack of economic opportunity at home, and enacts laws to protect the migrant workers, they remain vulnerable to exploitation, violence and discrimination. The beaches, mountains, rainforests, and islands are among the country's most popular tourist destinations. However, there are reports about the presence of the sex tourism industry, including child sex tourism, even though prostitution is illegal.

### Society:

The Philippines has a population growth rate of 2.04%, one of the highest in Asia. As of July 27, 2014, the population reached more than 100 million. The Philippine population is very young. About 31% are minors. There are between 120 and 170 languages spoken in the country. Most of them have several dialects, totaling over 300 across the archipelago. Since the 1930s, the government has promoted the use of the national language, Filipino, based on Tagalog. English is considered an official language for purposes of communication and instruction. It is widely spoken and understood.

### Education:

Education in the Philippines is based on both Western and Eastern ideology and philosophy influenced by the United States, Spain, and its neighbouring Asian countries. Literacy in the country is very high. Philippine students enter public school at about age four, and complete the education with college. Public education is sponsored by the government, but there are also private schools. Elementary public school is free, although the burgeoning population challenges the capacity of government school infrastructures.

### **Culture:**

Today the Philippine economy is still agrarian, export-oriented and import-dependent, struggling to become an industrialised economy. Despite having had two women presidents, the majority of Filipino women remain poor, and are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. The Philippine Constitution provides for equal rights, yet Filipino women in practice are discriminated against and treated as subordinates in the home, in church and in society.

### **Religion:**

The Philippine islands were greatly influenced by Hindu religions, literature and philosophy from India in the early centuries of the Christian era. As a result of Spanish colonisation, Christianity is the major religion. However, the Philippine state is secular; there is separation between church and state. As of 2012, Muslims are a minority in the population. Philippine traditional religions are still practiced by an estimated 2% of the population, made up of many aboriginal and tribal groups. Animism, folk religion, and shamanism remain present as undercurrents of mainstream religion. Buddhism is practiced by 1% of the population. Taoism and Chinese folk religion is dominant in the Chinese communities. There are smaller number of followers of Hinduism, Sikhism, and Judaism and Baha'i. Less than one percent of the population is non-religious. In the Philippines, women study theology and can be ordained in several protestant churches. Women also serve as bishops, church presidents, deaconess, theologians, and Christian educators. There is some collaboration between the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant Churches calling for the repeal of the Environment and Mining Act. They argued that the alleged economic benefits promised by the transnational corporations would result in displacement of communities, mainly indigenous peoples, along with an increase of health risks and environmental damage.

### **Situation of Women:**

Before the Spanish colonisation began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, women in the Philippines occupied a relatively high status in the community. Women assumed an important role in the traditional religion. The Spanish colonisers introduced feudalism which led to the subordination of women to men in the whole archipelago. Women were conditioned through religion to become sweet, docile, obedient and self-sacrificing. The indigenous woman became a sheltered, over-protected, timid maiden who received an education confined to church, kitchen and children. Her most basic right, the control over her own body with its reproductive choices, has not been regained up to this time. Nevertheless, there were women who resisted Spanish colonisation. During the 1896 Philippine revolution for independence against Spain, they served as informants, were involved in revolutionary propaganda and also as keepers of documents. Filipino women are brave and resourceful. In this day and age, women take on the role of breadwinner as they go abroad as service crews, domestic helpers, or skilled professionals in the medical field. Filipino women in their particular socio-cultural locations, experience various forms of oppression. Poverty aggravates the vulnerability of women to violence and exploitation, and makes it even more difficult for victims of abuse to find redress. According to the National Statistics Office and the Philippine Commission on Women, 1 in 5 women aged 15-49 have experienced physical violence. However there is also sexual, psychological and economic violence, and human trafficking. In February 2015, more than 3,000 students, teachers and nuns from a school in Manila, joined the One Billion Rising campaign, dancing in the streets for the end of violence against women and girls.

### **History of the WDP in the Philippines:**

Protestant Christianity arrived in the Philippines during the late 19th century and the early 20th century. These Christian denominations were introduced by North-American missionaries during the American occupation. Wives of these missionaries introduced the World Day of Prayer in the Philippines. The WDP celebrations brought together the church women leaders of the different Protestant denominations. In 1947, the United Evangelical Council of Church Women, today known as the Church Women United of the Philippines (CWUP), was organised. Its main activity was the observance of the World Day of Prayer. For the past 70 years, the CWUP coordinates the celebration of the World Day of Prayer in the Philippines through its WDP National Committee.

Members of the WDP National Committee of the Philippines are composed of women representatives from nine (9) women organisations of member churches of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines. These are: Episcopal Church Women, Federation of Baptist Women's Missionary Unions, Inc., Kalipunan ng kababaihang UNIDA Ekyumenikal, Philippine Lutheran Women's League, Salvation Army Women's Ministries, National Christian Women's Association of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, Kapisanan ng mga Kababaihan ng IEMELIF, Women of the Philippine Independent Church, and United Methodist Women's Society of Christian Service.

WDP has participated in church assemblies together with the Fellowship of the Least Coin to promote ecumenism. We have helped the survivors of natural and human made calamities through pastoral visits and financial support, like the victims and survivors of the oil spill in Guimaras Island in 2004 or from the typhoon Milenio and Frank that swept through Visayas in 2007. In Mindoro, a women's group used the rehabilitation money to buy seeds for their farms. It is a revolving fund for women.

Church Women United Philippines supports younger women for ecumenical leadership. They are concerned about HIV and AIDS, Violence against Women and Children, and Human Trafficking. These are the best avenues for nurturing interest and ecumenical cooperation wherever the name of the Creator is proclaimed.