

Professor Leonor Magtolis Briones (68)

Date & Place of birth

October 16th 1940, Philippines,

Family

Married and mother of two sons (painter, writer)

Education

Leonor Briones finished her undergraduate degree in Business Administration at Silliman University, magna cum laude. She obtained her masters degree in Public Administration at the University of the Philippines, as a consistent dean's lister. She went to Leeds University in England for advanced studies in Public Enterprises and completed her studies with distinction. Prof. Briones went twice to Harvard University for special programs.

Short biographical sketch

Briones is presently co-convenor of Social Watch Philippines, co-coordinator of Social Watch Asia, and member of the International Coordinating Committee of the Global network of Social Watch.

At present, she teaches public fiscal administration courses in the graduate level of the National College of Public Administration and Governance, University of the Philippines. She is also the current Chair of the Silliman University Board of Trustees.

She writes a weekly column, the Business of Governance, for ABS-CBN interactive news Monday edition. She also writes for Business Mirror, Opinion section. She is also spokeswoman on TV and radio about governance, and financing for health and education. She is well known to the public in the Philippines.

Prof. Briones has likewise devoted her life to research, teaching and advocacy on development issues such as debt, structural adjustment programs and their impact, social development and globalization. Her work combines unwavering advocacy work, backed by research, writing and teaching experience, and practical experience in the real world of governance.

Was there any personal reason why you decided to campaign for health / education?

"I am fighting for a better world, with access to health and education for everybody. It's difficult, but it's something I fully believe in. I'm more fortunate than others, that's why I have to help others."

Briones tries to exchange her knowledge in her daily work, her family, church and choir. "In the Philippines are so many problems around, knowledge has to be used and shared." She gets inspired by the concrete results in her work.

Tell us about the coalition 'Social Watch Philippines' you are leading?

"Social Watch Philippines monitors social and economic developments in the Philippines and its annual assessment is included in the Social Watch report presented to the UN Commission on Social Development. Social Watch Philippines played an active role in the national consultations on financing for development (FfD), as well as the preparatory committees and the actual summit in Monterrey, Mexico. As Co-Convenor I helped initiate the nationwide consultation process on the six agenda items scheduled for discussion in the FfD conference." Briones also actively participated in the first, second and fourth Preparatory Commissions where, she was designated as Adviser to the Philippines delegation.

What are the main aims concerning health and education of your coalition?

“Social Watch is a national network of citizens groups. Our main aim is to protect the poor from the economic slowdown. Millions of Filipinos are in grave danger of being hit by the economic storm.

Civil society groups urge Congress to adopt people’s alternative budget proposal. The alternative budget proposal puts social services at top priority and eliminates unreasonably big and vague budgetary allotment. Otherwise the progress to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015 is too slow.

Social Watch is telling the government to reorganize the national budget. The budget belongs to the people. You have to know how to read the national budget to be able to influence the decision makers. So we are campaigning for alternative budgets and more money, for better health and education. We monitor progress and shortfall, evaluate policies and recommend programs. We check the spending, we learn from every step.

The alternative budget proposal for the 2009 national budget includes P43 billion increases in the allocations for basic and higher education, health, agriculture and environment.”

Can you describe how health / education in your country is experienced by ordinary people on a day-to-day basis?

“We have high levels of poverty, we suffer from climate crisis and economic crisis. Malnutrition is a big problem. Education is free but for a lot of families it’s almost impossible to let the children go to school because other things (work) have to be done and often the schools are too far away. The Philippines have to deal with a lot of drop outs from school. Education is a right but it takes more than free access to make it possible for all children to get it. What if you don’t have shoes and you have to walk 10 km to reach school?

For those who go to school, there is a severe lack of school buildings, books, materials and equipment. There are not enough teachers. It is also recognized that the quality of education is going down as well. Performance in English and Math compare very poorly with other countries.

Education is the key to development. In order to have a great productive life you need to be educated. In order to get real access to education there need to be better roads and more schools. The government reacts now on the economical crises, while this is the time to invest in education.

Health/education services for the ordinary people in my country is characterized by deterioration both in quantity and quality. As far as health is concerned we have among the highest infant and maternal mortality rates in Asia. There has to be a midwife in every village. Not all villages have doctors in their clinics. Some don’t even have nurses and midwives. They only have health attendants. I just came from a public health centre near my university for my Oxfam photo shoot. This is considered a fairly good centre but a doctor goes there only once a week. The staff in the health centre we visited complained they don’t have enough medicine for even the most simple of illnesses.”

What are the specific issues that women and girls face regarding health / education in your country?

“For women and girls, specific issues on health and education are worse. One reason why maternal mortality is high is because services for mothers are inadequate. They don’t get pre-natal services, appropriate medicines, etc. This is why Social Watch is campaigning for a midwife in every village in its alternative budget campaign.

In certain communities, girls are not encouraged to have higher education. The practice of arranged marriages, and even child brides still prevails in some cultures. In terms of facilities,

the simple matter of toilets are not always available. Thus, girls are exposed to greater dangers when they have to attend to their needs.”

If people in your country had access to health / education, what difference would this make?

“It’s important to link education to poverty and health, it all influences each other. If people in the Philippines have greater access to health and education, the development of the country will accelerate. If most Filipinos are healthy, the country does not have to spend much for curing the sick and burying those who die before their time. If more Filipinos are educated, they will get better jobs, earn more and contribute to the economic well being of the people.”

Have you ever been to a developed / rich country and seen how health / education works there? What were your impressions, what was the thing that you noticed most?

“I have seen how health and educational services work in developed countries. Once I got very ill in Canada and had to have a gallstone removed. I was very impressed with the quality of health care, the excellence of their public hospitals, the speed with which laboratories conducted tests, etc. I also noticed that the costs were not as high as in the Philippines.”

What do you want your own government to do first concerning Essential Services?

“I want my government to spend more of its budget for essential services. If they reorganize their national budget, there’s more money available for teachers, nurses, working toilets, clinics, schools, midwives, medicines etc. Actual delivery of services has to be monitored and continually improved.”

The W8

Why do you want to join the W8?

“I want to bring the message to the G8 that they should look wider than their own countries. Besides only healing themselves they should help development countries to heal as well because the situation there is far more difficult. I want women to have the same opportunities as men.”

What is the importance of the W8?

“Share knowledge and inspire each other. As a group of strong women we can create a strong voice together.”

What do you want to learn / get from the W8 ?

“Inspiration and success.”

What do you expect of the W8?

“Inspiration, a place to share knowledge, advocating, working together.”

What do you want to ask the G8?

“The impact of the financial crisis is huge. 10% of the Filipinos is already jobless, 900,000 students will graduate from high school but won’t have the opportunity to get a job. The G8 must listen and look at us.”

Are you hopeful about the future? And if so what makes you hopeful?

“Hope is the driving force. The minute you loose hope things collapse. Every day I see more reasons to work harder. I often get disappointed, but every day I find the way to keep on going. Strong belief is necessary and I get inspired by the successes of my organisation and teaching.”