

Philippines Women's Movements and Social Movements. Conjunctures and Divergences

Friday 15 November 2024, by [ESTRADA-CLAUDIO Sylvia](#), [SANTOS Aida](#) (Date first published: 26 May 2005).

This article provides a comprehensive historical overview of the women's liberation movement in the Philippines, tracing its roots from the 19th century revolutionary struggles against Spanish colonialism to its evolution and diversification in the 20th century. Since publication in 2005, it has been one of the most popular articles on our website.

The article highlights the emergence of various feminist and women's rights organizations, such as the Asociacion Feminista Filipina, MAKIBAKA, GABRIELA, and KALAYAAN, that sought to address gender issues within the broader national democratic and socialist movements. It explores the tensions and debates around the relationship between women's liberation and class struggle.

It delves into the "socialist feminist" perspective, which calls for a general theory of sexuality and reproduction as integral to the struggle against all forms of exploitation and oppression. It emphasizes the need to transform not just the productive sphere, but also the reproductive and intimate spheres of social relations.

The authors outline a new left political ethics rooted in feminist principles, which emphasize individual moral agency, the continuum between state violence and domestic violence, and the importance of addressing a diversity of issues beyond just class struggle.

This comprehensive historical analysis provides valuable insights into the evolution of feminist politics in the Philippines and its critical role in the broader social transformation agenda. It is a must-read for those interested in understanding the complex interplay between gender, class, and national liberation.

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I. The Women's (Liberation) Movement(s): Roots, Beginnings, Ideological Premises; Political Agenda

This year is the Feminist Centennial. It commemorates 100 years of women's activism. The women of the 1800s which included the likes of Melchora Aquino, Gregoria de Jesus and others, provided support to the anti-Spanish revolutionary movement. It is clear from the historical accounts that they were moved not by "pro-women sentiments or raw feminism... but [by] their deep sense of patriotism or love of country." (Angeles, 1989)

Examining the historical context of the women of the 1800s and early 1900s, a scholar writes:

These women could not be faulted for their lack of concrete agenda for women's liberation at that time when the call for nationalism was most urgent to end Spanish rule. Their very success, however, in transcending the social role limitations imposed upon them as women was proof enough that they had sharply perceived not only the economic and political evils of colonialism but also the sex inequalities engendered by the social order. Despite the lack of historical materials to validate this claim, it is still plausible to suggest that the social liberation of our women would have taken great strides in a political context where Filipinos enjoy their collective right to self-determination as a people, free from any subsequent super-power subjugation. (Angeles, 1989) (1)

History however, has its nuances. The seeming lack of a specific feminist agenda by the Katipuneras is a judgment made from a historical standpoint that has seen the evolution of feminist theories and autonomous movements. As early as 1905, Concepcion Felix de Calderon founded the Asociacion Feminista Filipina. Concepcion Felix was from the working class although she was joined by women from the elite including Trinidad Rizal, Librada Avelino, Maria Paz Guazon, Maria Francisco, the Almeda sisters and Luisa de Silyar. A year later, the Asociacion Feminista Ilonga was founded headed by the elite woman Pura Villanueva Kalaw.

Of further interest is that the worker-headed Asociacion Feminista Filipina's (AFF) first efforts were in the area of what we would now call reproductive health, even as the elite-led Asociacion Feminista Ilonga would soon engage in a 30 year battle for women's right to vote. The AFF founded the La Protection de la Infancia, Inc. that later ran the Gota de Leche which concerned itself with the health of women and their children. These efforts were based on the recognition of high maternal and infant mortality rates noted especially among the poor. Significantly, the Gota de Leche has been dubbed the "first ever non-religious, non-government social welfare initiative in the country." (2)

Thus, if the mere act of naming is of some historical significance, the later avoidance of the term "feminista" by national democratic activists represents a patriarchal historical revisionism that trumps knee-jerk patriotic romantization of the Katipuneros that is so common in the Philippine left. Even more disturbing is the dismissiveness by which latter day activists would treat reproductive rights advocacies under the same rubric of being "western" and/or middle class.

Apparently the rediscovery of revolutionary history by the national democratic movement from the narrow lens of class analysis, failed to recognize the denial of women's efforts in the area of reproduction and sexuality and the reinscription of gendered meanings into Philippine society. This is no more evident in the failure to grasp the erasure of the anti-clerical impulse so evident in the Philippine revolution of 1898: that anti-clerical sentiment had both a class and gendered basis. One can glean the protest against the violations of women's and children's welfare in the depictions of Maria Clara and Sisa and her children in the novels of Rizal. American colonial rule not only reconstructed feudalism and inscribed capitalist relations it also stabilized gender roles, notions of

family and sexual morality within a patriarchal/colonial framework.

All national democratic activists of the authors' generation were told that the American colonialism quickly entered into a devilish alliance with the Catholic Church by allowing it to retain its landholdings and thereby, retaining the pattern of feudalism in the country. That alliance also allowed the Church to continue to dictate gendered male-female-family relations that allowed capitalist reconstructions. In addition, the Church was allowed to capture the education of the elite, particularly its women, who would then be imbued with the most conservative forms of sexual morality. (3) The tragedy of this failure to change the situation of Philippine women, finds its height in the regimes of Presidents Aquino and Arroyo, both educated by the Church, who have carried out moral and economic regimes marked by almost complete surrender to patriarchal and capitalist dictates. (4)

But to continue with the historical tale. The birth of the suffragist movement during the American period is fraught with controversies. Some scholars claim that the push for the suffragist movement came from the American authorities to deflect the continuing anti-American struggles. Many of the prominent women of this movement came from the middle and upper classes and were clearly pro-American. Pura Villanueva Kalaw, one of its leaders, praised the United States, as "the great land of feminism [which] has brought us, with her flag, her principles of democracy and equality which place women on a level with men, not only as regards her rights but also her duties toward the nation." (Angeles, 1989) It was noted that "working-class women in the Philippines lent marginal support to the elite-dominated movement." (Ibid.) Nonetheless, the suffragette movement in the country struggled with a decision as to whether female suffrage would be reserved for the educated elite. The Communist Party of the Philippines pushed for universal suffrage and got what they demanded. (5)

II. The Anti-Dictatorship Period

Given the herstory of women's organizing in the 1800s and the 1900s, and the relative quiet of the 1950s, women activists of the 1960s felt the need to continue the struggle for their own agenda. If there was a claim to the unfinished revolution of the 1800s, women activists also felt that the agenda for women's liberation is an unfinished business, despite the patina of modernization and sexual liberalism. One of the first efforts of having a focus on women within the social movements was the formation of the Abating Makabayan (KM) Women's Bureau. There is very little account on the Bureau, although there are members who are still around.

If there is one women's group that inspired a number of feminists and women's organizations of the national democratic movement to continue the struggle for and by women, it would be MAKIBAKA or the Malayang Kilusan ng Kababaihan. Established in July 1969, the women of MAKIBAKA unknowingly became an inspiration for feminists of the 1980s, although the word itself was never used by its formators. In an interview with its original members of the (May 21, 2005), MAKIBAKA women shied away from the word "feminist" because of the propaganda against it. It was associated with being Western, bourgeois, bra-burning, lesbians, anti-male. (One MAKIBAKA member recounted that she and her female best friend used to bathe together, but was admonished and told that it was improper. Truth was they were not lesbians at all. But the admonition was strong enough for them to stop bathing together.) Most of its members were either members of the Samahang Demokratikong Kabataan or progressive women who were not affiliated with any social movements or organized groups. These women felt the need to address women's concerns, particularly women workers, within the context of the class struggle. One key example of their organizing efforts was the setting up of a daycare for women workers in Manila. They also organized the predominantly

women workers in the service sector, particularly shop workers in the former Carriedo area. Despite the lack of feminist language, they recognized the reproductive burdens of women. Yet, the language used was not in the norm of feminist discourse since it was a taboo word and embellished with negative connotations.

Sometime in the 1970s, prior to the declaration of martial rule in 1972, some CPP cadres were instructed to form a party group within MAKIBAKA. According to the respondents interviewed in May 2005, a number of the original formators rejected this attempt. Sometime in the late 1970s, MAKIBAKA was reorganized at the underground level, with the Malaya changed to Makabayan. This change signaled the re-orientation of the original autonomously-formed MAKIBAKA into a national democratic arm and wing of the NDF. In the late 1980s to early 1990s, the new Makabayang Kilusan ng Kababaihan developed a constitution that clearly articulated the issue of sexual orientation when it penned as one of its membership criteria the acceptance into its ranks women of different sexual orientation(s). One can assume that this referred to lesbians.

But feminist ferment occurred in other political formations as well. The Katipunan ng Bagong Pilipina (KABAPA) was founded in 1975 by women who were active in the HUKBALAHAP and in subsequent peasant-based formations. KABAPA's constitution has the flavor of Third World feminism in that it addresses national, class, and gender issues under its goals of equality, development, peace, freedom, and the happiness of children. KABAPA has put special emphasis on the peace issue, campaigning strongly for the removal of US bases in the Philippines, for nuclear disarmament, and for measures combating colonialism, neocolonialism, foreign intervention, and discrimination based on race, religion or region. (6)

PILIPINA, founded in 1981 by social development workers from all over the country, envisions a "Philippine society where women possess dignity, autonomy, and equity." The emphasis on autonomy stems from its insistence that "dictates from leftist male leaders had debilitating effects on women and women's movements." It defines women's liberation in many ways: liberation from sexual and domestic violence, "liberation from the dominance of global capitalism, which relegates Third World countries to the status of wage labor, and Third World women to the lowest end of this labor: piece work, sexual services"; liberation from unemployment; liberation from the prospect of environmental disaster. Leaders of PILIPINA have been instrumental in founding the Women's Action Network for Development (WAND) and Abanse Pinay, the first women's political party able to seat sectoral representatives in the Philippine Congress. (7)

In 1983, the Katipunan ng Kababaihan para sa Kalayaan or KALAYAAN was born. KALAYAAN's major call was summed up in the slogan "Kalayaan ng Bayan, Kalayaan ng Kababaihan, sabay nating ipaglaban!" This call openly signaled the birthing of a feminist perspective in the national democratic stream. It was to a large degree a turning away from the primacy of class struggle, and a broadening and deepening of the Marxist/socialist perspective that had imbued the national democratic struggle. The founders of KALAYAAN were all activists and cadres of the national democratic movement. KALAYAAN further called for the establishment of an autonomous women's movement within the national democratic agenda, and labeled itself "feminist."

In an effort to diffuse the possible barrage of criticisms from the national democratic activists and organizations that the founders of KALAYAAN expected, it sought the "blessings" if you will from no less than Jose Ma. Sison who gladly sent a message to the KALAYAAN launching. Excerpts from his message read:

The importance and necessity of the women's movement in the national democratic struggle cannot be underestimated. The conscious and militant participation of the female half of the people accelerates the growth in

strength of the national democratic movement and guarantees its total victory.

It is also through the national democratic struggle that the women can best assert and exercise their rights pertaining to them, overcome the age-old current obstacles and prejudices against them, develop and demonstrate their strength and capabilities, and attain the basic conditions for women's liberation and equality of the sexes.

In the national democratic struggle, women can perform all major functions - political, economic, and cultural - men are capable of. The women's movement is needed to pay special attention to arousing, organizing and mobilizing the women because in addition to the same exploitation and oppression that they suffer with the men in the present society, they suffer injustices and disadvantages due to male authority bred by various exploiting societies in thousands of years.

The struggle for women's liberation is a protracted one. The new democratic revolution gives you the opportunity for achieving the basic conditions for your liberation and equality with men. But even in the socialist society of the future, you will still have a lot of work to do in order to expand your freedom and achieve full equality with men.

As the crisis of the semicolonial and semifeudal society rapidly worsens, KALAYAAN and other women's organizations must hurry up to strengthen themselves. In the Philippine history there has never been a better time than now for advancing the cause of women's liberation. In fact, women in urban and rural areas are already rising up so heroically together with men.

To build the strength of the women's movement, you must work for the fullest participation of women in the working class, peasantry, urban petty bourgeoisie and the middle bourgeoisie in the national democratic struggle against U.S. imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism. (— Jose Ma. Sison Political Prisoner, 21 December 1983)

It can be said that KALAYAAN was an experiment at broad coalition building. It accepted members from various political streams (socdem, natdem, socialists) and women who had come from neutral political positions. There were three main criteria for being accepted as a full pledge member: one she has to be anti-bases; two, she has to be pro-choice; and, three, she has to be non-homophobic. There was also an acceptance that to be able to meet those criteria, sustained education sessions had to be conducted. Freewheeling exchange of ideas characterized especially the formative years of KALAYAAN. Those who had come from the national democratic movement shared their feelings, experiences and observations of other women comrades of being treated as secondary comrades in the movement-of being treated as mere appendages of their husbands particularly of those in position of power. KALAYAAN in particular took note of the lack in the movement's understanding of what it initially called The Woman Question, which fundamentally translated into a sense of emptiness as women despite their revolutionary commitments. Despite the broad political spectrum of its members, there was a delightful tension of politics that eventually converged in its strong feminist stance.

KALAYAAN also drew up a set of what it called feminist politics that could be best summed up as "the personal is political." Essentially this means that the personal experiences of its members could constitute a body of political understanding of discrimination against women, women's oppression and sexism-political problems that feminism has to address.

Expectedly, the criticisms from both male and female comrades started to come in, e.g., that feminism is a mere middle class, bourgeois affectation and politics, that is it Western and not rooted in the local national democratic movement, that the call for autonomy would digress from the fundamental goal of class struggle, that it is anti-men and therefore would create divisiveness within

the movement. The most hurtful accusation that trivialized KALAYAAN's effort was that we were merely unhappy wives and comrades.

There was an emissary sent with the following "request": set up a political collective/core group within it to ensure the "correct" political line and explain autonomy and why it was necessary. KALAYAAN refused to set up a political collective within, as all of its founding members had already their tasks within the national democratic movement, and that would ensure in itself the continuance of their political commitment to the movement. It also explained autonomy, but the explanation was rejected. The natdem emissary also tried to convince KALAYAAN to use women's emancipation rather than women's liberation. After that, members were practically left alone, which allowed KALAYAAN to begin its own agenda setting and conduct its feminist education.

GABRIELA was founded in 1984, as a broad united front against the Marcos dictatorship. Its complete name was General Assembly of Women Binding Together (now it is referred to as GABRIELA Women's Network with a legislative arm called GABRIELA Women's Party). Initially, organizing within the women "sector" was an agenda for broadening the anti-dictatorship movement and building alliances with the middle class, as it was a platform for organizing women from the basic sectors.

GABRIELA was to face the challenge of articulating feminist issues as expected by its member-organizations that initially formed the coalition during its formative years. Its articulation needed sharpening and deepening, as opposed to merely integrating women's issues into its dominant class-oriented political perspective. Its membership also begun to dwindle when some organizational processes were questioned by members who did not agree with the way the coalition was managed. Some felt that its utilitarian politics was getting in the way of real coalition politics. From its original membership of 41 organizations, GABRIELA spared down to include only the basic sectoral organizations of workers, peasants and urban poor, mostly belonging to the national democratic sphere.

Several other women's groups were established as broad united front formations against the Marcos dictatorship. One such example was WOMB or Women for the Ouster of Marcos and Boycott.

By around late 1980s, other women's groups began to emerge, mostly independently initiated from any social blocs or movements. Most of these groups took an issue-focus mandate. Three general observations can be forwarded to understand why women-only women's groups decided to focus on these issues: 1) there was a need to translate feminist theoretical understanding into concrete programmatic actions; 2) the issue-focus approach was a necessity since there was a felt need to put emphasis on feminist issues, e.g., sexual violence/rape, reproductive rights, sexuality, legislative reforms for women—issues that social movements would usually consider as being outside of the broad national concerns; and 3) interest of donors to address gender issues also propelled a number of women's groups to set up programs addressing these issues, propelled and inspired by the declaration of UN Decade of Women in 1975, and with the massively attended Beijing Conference in 1985.

Women's institutions were also started that addressed sector-focused concerns: women in the rural areas, urban poor communities, migrant women that attempt to address economic issues together with feminist concerns; the practical dilemma is the question of priority and emphasis particularly in the light of scarce resources

III. As The Left Splintered

The diversification of the women's movement proceeded apace during the period of the splintering within the Philippine left. Driven by the forces mentioned above, the diversity of forms of POs and NGOs working on various issues was fueled further by mass activists who gave up party affiliations.

To a large degree, the women's liberation movement has taken the form of NGOs often with their own community-based group or POs to which direct programs and services were directed. As some put it, there has been an NGO-ization of the women's liberation movement. This is not to say, however, that feminists left the broad social movements. But anecdotal experiences show that by and large, feminist issues took the backburner in mixed social movements which continue to address the so-called broad national issues and mainly from a class perspective.

Strategies employed to "mainstream" feminist issues into social movements included the formation of women's committees or desks. Women's issues were generally considered special issues, the Community organizing with special focus on women and/or youth/children. By early 1990s, women's studies were established in some colleges and universities and gender mainstreaming as a strategy within the bureaucracy became the foundation for making the government gender responsive. A number of academic-based feminists and women's rights advocates became consultants to government's gender mainstreaming programs.

As opposed however to the NGOization, women associated with political blocs continued the establishment of organizations that while autonomous, remained tied to the blocs. The Democratic Socialist Women of the Philippines (DSWP) was founded in 1987, which popularized the slogan "There is no true socialism without feminism, there is no true feminism without socialism". DSWP in recent years has engaged in electoral politics and has been very vocal against neoliberal globalization particularly as it affects women workers. The year 1994 saw the emergence of SARILAYA, composed of activists and NGO workers who used to be in the national democratic movement but chose the path of autonomy. SARILAYA has also expanded its socialist feminist perspective with an ecofeminist one, partnering with European and other groups on issues of food security and sustainable development as a response to the maldevelopment wrought by globalization. (8) Another important coalition is SIBOL or the Sama-Samang Insiyatiba ng Batas at Lipunan. By its name, it was clear to its formators that SIBOL's role was not simply to do advocacy in the legal sphere but for laws to actually change or transform society for the people particularly women. SIBOL was instrumental in the drafting and passage of the anti-rape and anti-violence against women and their children laws, together with the massive support of other women's groups and civil society organizations that did not formally belong to the network.

In the Philippines, by the late 1990s, the various left parties, begun turning their attention to women's issues. The dialogue of unaffiliated women activists and those working from within political blocs and left parties started in the 1980s was beginning to bear fruit in terms of a mainstreaming of feminist analysis within these blocs. The story of this convergence is best illustrated by the Freedom from Debt Coalition. In the late 1980s, its women's committee which was composed of various left-affiliated and autonomous women's groups began a gendered analysis of the debt problem and structural adjustment programs. By the late 1990s the entire FDC adapted a socialist feminist analysis of the economy and called for deeper studies and popularization of feminist economics in its program of action.

The dialogue among feminists and the social movements dealing with issues of class and imperialism has been facilitated because there have been actors in the women's movements who have maintained that the liberation of women from patriarchal oppression cannot occur without liberation

of the entire people from imperialist oppression and vice versa.

In this regard, there is a genuine difference in the approach taken by the Sison-led CPP and the political blocs that have begun to look at the issues of women. Gabriela, as a case in point has repeatedly rejected socialist feminist analysis and has maintained the position that class oppression remains the primary enemy of the people even as it has taken on feminist issues like violence against women.

Yet even with the recognition by other political blocs that the reproductive sphere is just as important as the productive sphere in determining social conditions, much is yet to be done. Class remains the most dominant discourse and women's issues are still generally considered "soft" issues. Production remains the fulcrum on which the discourse on the need for social transformation revolves. Sexuality, a core issue interrogated by feminists, remains to be a marginalized concern, if not altogether misunderstood as a political arena for social transformation. Even left parties that have accepted the need for an agenda around reproductive rights, abortion and divorce are forced to deal with the conservative moralism of its mass members who have inherited the legacy of the left's neglect on these issues.

What cannot be denied is that the women's movement remained vibrant even during the worst years of the Philippine left. Gabriela and its affiliate organizations continued to grow even during the time when other mass organizations of the national democrats were shrinking. While old organizations were dying or experiencing their splits in the legal front, women were putting up new feminist organizations. The flourishing of independent organizations working on various issues pre-figured the social movements' paradigm of the anti-globalization movements and the world social forum processes. Feminists began decades ago to build coalitions on various issues from legal reform, health and reproductive rights, prostitution and trafficking, migration, etc.

While not dismissing the parallel growth of other social movements like the environmental movement or that of indigenous peoples, the feminist movements' diversity and scope was and remains remarkably noticeable. A decade before Seattle, Philippine women activists had joined with a broad international women's movement that engaged population control agendas in the United Nations and pushed women's rights and welfare in conference after conference in and out of the UN system. Today, the power of this global alliance is evident as the Bush government has faced isolation and defeat in its repeated attempts to roll back women's rights, particularly women's sexual and reproductive rights, in UN conferences and other international and regional fora.

But the vibrancy of the women's movements is but one proof of the correctness of feminist analysis. The other proof lies in its capacity to problematize and reveal new horizons for areas that are beyond the scope of class analysis but which nonetheless have proved fundamental in the struggle to achieve socialism.

IV. The Socialist Feminist Agenda: A General Theory of Sexuality and Reproduction

Philippine socialist feminists start with certain assumptions. First, that the material base of society is composed of the sphere of production and reproduction. Second if class theory guides our descriptions of and prescriptions for the productive sphere, then a general theory for sexuality is necessary to describe the reality of reproduction and guide our visions of what it would be like to liberate relations of reproduction. Third, that while we can speak of reproduction and production as if they were separate areas, thus giving rise to the unfortunate term, "dual systems theory", there is

in truth only one system which has two facets. Fourth, if reproduction serves as one “leg” of the current social system, then the call for reproductive rights and freedoms is not a call that remains a task for the “smaller” social movement called the women’s movement or sector. It is a task central to any effort to end all forms of exploitation and oppression.

From this framework of analysis the call for a new theory and practice was made as early as 1988 from within the Sison-led communist party itself.:

What is important is the insight that the exploitation of women, the construction of gender, is fundamental to the survival of the semi-colonial and semi-feudal system. All class societies are also gendered societies. The socialist conception of complete freedom through the absolute democratization of the means of production is incompatible with continuing exploitation in the area of reproduction.

Thus as we ensure our praxis, our revolutionary ethics, our very lifestyles are a rejection of capitalist hegemony---so we must ensure that this same praxis is a rejection of patriarchy. To allow the continuation of patriarchal attitudes and practices among our ranks, is to oppose imperialism and feudalism with our right hand only to caress it with our left.

We must realize that the areas of childrearing, childbearing and sexuality----the whole question of biology---are social constructs like everything else that is human. As part of the material base of society, these activities which are part of reproduction , are subject to historical changes that are brought about by a constant struggle of one group to establish dominance over the other. The material conditions of reproduction in any society, including the technologies that are pertinent to its activities, as well as the social relations which structure these, are just as surely characteristic of a given society at a particular historical period as the mode of production is. (9)

The essay quoted above then covered a wide range of practical problems including a re-examination of family life:

Norms of heterosexuality within the bonds of state and religious sanctions have contributed to the subjugation of women and children in Filipino families as well as the subjugation of the Filipino family itself to the demands of colonial expansion. It has ensured a passive and long-suffering Filipino family based on women’s ability for self-sacrifice; it has ensured the reproduction of this subservient and gendered ideology. It has assured that women’s (and men’s) reproductive labor power is tied to a system easily exploitable by feudal, colonial and neocolonial interests. (10)

The essay further criticizes other policies and practices regarding sexual relations among comrades, reproductive rights and the integration of a whole range of women’s rights. In particular the handling of the issue of violence against women was criticized because the issue was only dealt with as it occurred within the framework of the violation of the political rights of comrades in detention. The essay also called for stricter rules and effective mechanisms for handling sexual harassment among the ranks of the party. It also called for conscious revolutionary action towards reconstructing the patriarchal family.

From a broader view today, we have the benefit of looking back at more than a century of socialist theory and practice. We have seen the rise and fall of the Soviet Union, the return of capitalism to China, and the cooptation and disintegration of communist parties all over the world. The libraries and journals are full of scholarly works about the retreat of socialism, the triumph of capitalism and the end of history. There are analyses and studies about the socialist retreat stating the peculiarities and historical moments for each party, each socialist regime that has fallen. One of the central questions that must be asked is: what internal factors led to the re-establishment of capitalism?

Having seized state power and begun the process of ending class exploitation, what was the material base behind the reversals and defeat?

We have no argument with writing the particular and contextualized histories necessary to understanding the socialist defeat. We also have no doubt that imperialist sabotage was crucial to the downfall. But surely we need to look also at certain similarities in the internal dynamics of socialist states. In party after party and regime after regime the attempts to abolish class could only go so far. It did not end inequities, oppression and exploitation in the daily lives of women, children, the elderly, and even some men. Ethnic and racial fault lines continued to simmer under socialist regimes. The attempt to eradicate class distinctions did not result in the human equality it promised.

Social relations in the public and productive spheres changed in China and the Soviet Union. Because production and reproduction are dialectically linked, the status of women in socialist states improved tremendously. But without a general theory on intimate human relations that progress could only go so far. All the class reconstructions could not eliminate rape, wife-beating, incest and the sexual division of labor in the family and other arenas of nurturance. In the intimate relations within the family, lay the foundations for the graft, pettiness, personal privilege and violence that mark unequal class relations. Without a conscious attempt to end all forms of discrimination and exploitation in that part of the material base (i.e. reproduction) that lay outside productive relations the radical equality and freedom promised by socialism could not be achieved.

To the surprise of left feminists from the West who were looking to their Russian sisters for inspiration, Russian women had reinscribed their sexuality as protest in a form their Western sisters could not understand. Russian women wanted to be feminine, to invest in cosmetics and fashionable clothes, to become stay-at-home wives and to undertake all the sorts of consumerist activities that have made the beauty industry one of the most vibrant pillars of capitalism. It was a revolt against the stultifying state-imposed caveat that women had to go out into the farms and factories in equality with men, even as they had to go home and work the long hours in their home afterwards. In the light of increasing regimentation and fascism, Eastern block men and women escaped into silly romances and pornography---a thriving black market existed long before the downfall and emerged full force after the collapse of the Soviet Union. (11)

The lesson seems clear enough: if we are to end all forms of oppression then it must be ended in both the family as well as in the factory.

Consider the nuclear heterosexual family as we know it today. Can capitalism survive without it? Think of the TVs, microwaves, radios, washing machines, electric fans, rice cookers, bars of soap, bottles of lotion, sticks of lipsticks, shirts, dressers, trousers, eggs, meats, vegetables, etc. and etc. that are consumed in the confines of our homes. Much of capitalist consumption occurs because women labor in the home to make even the most basic of necessities, food, consumable.

Men, women and children produce and consume within a framework of inscribed gender ideologies of care and nurturing, desire and sexuality? Does the ideology of women's domesticity not constitute the very basis under which women are paid so poorly in sweatshops in our new globalized economy? And, without resorting to a theory of sexuality, can anyone explain the political economy of the worldwide prostitution industry---yet another mainstay of the capitalist system? When we plan our socialist economy will we make the crucial error of forgetting that labor itself is an input produced in the reproductive work that is done daily by the world's women? When the international bogeymen threaten our economy with collapse should we not pay our debts or abide by their endless economic caveats, do we tremble because we have failed to understand how capitalist ideology hides the fact that our survival does not depend solely on the productive arena measured by GDPs and GNPs, but also on the economic activity that goes on in the homes and the informal economy?

Much has been said about the resiliency of capitalism. Oft cited is the creation of new arenas of capitalist expansion brought about by the advent of digital technologies. Yet that has not been the source of capitalist salvation in the neocolonies. Client states like the Philippines have been saved by the deepening of exploitation of gendered bodies in the form of migration, trafficking, prostitution and cheap female labor in the throw-away jobs of sweatshops and service chains.

For those of us who have not given up on the grand narrative that is the socialist project, it is clear that the initial frameworks cannot simply be reaffirmed. Feminism offers a reformulation that makes sense of people's daily experience in the intimacy of their lives within the complex hegemonic structures of global oppression.

A New Left Political Ethics

We quote:

A sense of individual moral agency distinguishes our revolutionary movement as socialist, as fundamentally addresses to the liberation of the human from exploitation and alienation. The development of this individual responsibility cannot happen if, in the most intimate reaches of a comrade's life, we live whether as man or woman, in blissful ignorance or willful acceptance of the inequalities of gender oppression.

...In this sense patriarchal practices and attitudes are the material basis for so much of our moral weakness. Weaknesses that find their most disturbing manifestation in the increasing number of human rights violations that our comrades have perpetrated among the people or even on other comrades. (12)

Feminists who have seen the glamorization of violence in macho culture and its destructive effects in their personal lives also bring new frameworks of ethical conduct to forces within socialist movements. Feminism also posits that there is a continuum between state violence and the violence in our homes. This positioning brings a balance to the use of violence in the sense that feminist require a very strict criteria for its use, especially in situations that require the sacrifice of life and bodily integrity.

Similarly, feminists have expanded the idea of peace so that the question of peace in families and communities where women are universally at threat, is on the agenda in a way that ties up intrinsically to broader questions of ending imperialist war and civil conflict.

Because feminists have posited the deeply intimate as an area for political action they bring new cogency to an evaluation of personal/individual failures. Contrary to hegemonic sexual morality, feminist refuse the policing of sexual behavior that is consensual and brings no harm to other intimate relations. Instead, they bring greater attention to behavior that feeds systems of capitalist and patriarchal oppression--elitist and sexist language, hooliganism, financial opportunism all forms of human rights violations. (13)

Feminist theory in political coalitions takes cognizance of the experience of many left women who were marginalized despite repeated attempts to include women's issues theory and practice. Thus feminist politics calls for the moral recognition of issues outside class (environmental issues, the rights of indigenous people and other racially prejudiced people, LGBT rights) as important to social transformation.

Long accused of being "divisive" feminists invest in a politics of diversity that does not require strict

faithfulness to ideological lines and a central command structure to achieve mutually agreed upon and discrete political ends.

As we write, the gendering of human beings comes in the form of social hegemonies that are being strongly reinscribed in the resurgence of moral fundamentalisms in religious and nationalist guises. This further argues for a more inclusive view of what constitutes transformative practice. Another interpretation of the “personal is political” is that we must revalue individual practice when done in contestation of hegemonic power. The converse proposition is that large numbers and unified organizational structures do not necessarily ensure the validity of a particular organization or activity. Socialist feminism views the capacity to break away from secular/sectoral concerns as a starting point for revolutionary engagement.

In this regard, socialist feminists firmly believe in the need to end capitalist and neoliberal exploitation as a necessary but not sufficient condition to the liberation of women. It is up to the social movements, political blocs and other socialist parties to understand that the liberation of women is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for the liberation of humanity.

Notes

(1) Angeles, Leonora....

(2) Rina Jimenez David. http://news.inq7.net/opinion/index.php?index=2&story_id=3385.

(3) Estrada-Claudio, S. “On Earth as it is in Heaven: The Philippine Catholic Church Hierarchy’s Gendered Worldview of Society and Salvation in the 1940s and 1950s” in *Gender Culture and Society: Selected Readings in Women’s Studies in the Philippines*. Carolyn Sobritchea (ed.) Asian Center for Women’s Studies and Ewha Women’s University Press, 2004.

(4) A speech by Jose Maria Sison to Filipino Catholic priests in the Netherlands last May 7, 2005 entitled *Ideology and Religion in the Philippines* again criticizes the Church’s historical role as feudal lord but makes not a single mention of its oppression of women.

(5) Private conversation. Aida Lava Dizon and Sylvia Estrada Claudio in the year 1987.

(6) Pineda-Ofreneo, R. “The Philippine Women’s Movement in the Context of Globalization.” 2003

(7) Pineda-Ofreneo. *Ibid.*

(8) Pineda-Ofreneo. *Ibid.*

(9) Sylvia Estrada-Claudio writing as Sunny Lansang, “Gender Issues in Revolutionary Praxis” in *Debate: Philippine Left Review*, September 1991, p.46. The essay however was written and presented to the CPP through channels in 1988.

(10) *Ibid.* p. 48.

(11) Post colonialism and the body politic.

(12) Estrada-Claudio (1991) *Ibid.* p. 51.

(13) When talking about ethics it is always good to point out that being a feminist does not serve as a “vaccine” against unethical behavior. Our ranks are replete with bad examples and failures. As materialist we are acutely aware that these practices have a social as well as a personal basis. Until

the social bases for violence and oppression are obliterated there can be no assurance that individual ideology would be sufficient to overcome personal failings.