

**Building Women's Studies Curriculum in Asia: Proposed Framework and Themes for the Philippine National Workshop\***

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*Filipino women's feminist consciousness is deeply rooted in the history of the country. It weaves through centuries of struggle waged by the Filipino people to fend off foreign incursions on their land and lives. (Labayan, 1998).*

### Introduction

The Philippines has made significant headway in improving the status and promoting the rights of women. There are more Filipino women now who have access to jobs, careers and other opportunities that were traditionally open only to men. The United Nations Human Development Report of 1996 ranked the Philippines 70<sup>th</sup> (out of 104 member-countries) in the gender and development index (GDI). But in terms of gender empowerment measure, the country ranked 39<sup>th</sup>, higher than most Asian countries, except China and Japan (Ilo, 1997).

*The impressive strides taken to achieve gender equality in access to opportunities and be able to challenge the systematic roots of patriarchy, have been made possible by many factors, notably the presence of a vibrant women's movement and active participation of government and non-government organizations in policy/legal reforms as well as capability-building building along the areas of Gender and Development (GAD).*

*The women's movement in the Philippines has been likened to a "large, colorful tapestry whose design, texture and colors speak of a myriad of styles and paths to women's liberation, being*

*created by the variety of women's organizations, each trying to sew and work on its space while at the same time conscious of the contributions of other groups" (Angeles, 1989:207). It emerged in the late seventies from within the left political tradition. Many of its early leaders were political activists who needed more space than the nationalist movement could provide then, to bring the struggle down to the personal level, and to articulate women's issues and concerns.*

*The leftist origins of the women's movement has largely determined the contours of the discourse on the roots of women's subordination and manifestations of patriarchy.*

In the late eighties, militant women's groups addressed women's issues and concerns within the context of nationalist agenda for genuine agrarian reform, nationalist industrialization, peace with justice and others. Organizing of women followed class and sector lines; it focused on the role placed by class and ethnicity in intensifying gender oppression.

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Analysis linked women's exploitation to repressive laws and policies that curbed legitimate dissent and paralyzed mass organizations. The state was seen as favoring foreign capitalist and local elite at the expense of rural and urban poor women. Campaigns against militarization of the countryside, the proliferation of anti-communist vigilante groups and war-related sexual crimes took much of the time and energies of progressive women activists throughout the eighties (Sobritchea, 1996-99).

*Feminists from the academe helped provide the overarching framework(s) for understanding those intricate connections between class and gender on one hand, and between global and national/local issues, on the other hand. They gave historical context to contemporary developments, tracing the roots of modern expressions of patriarchy to the country's four hundred years of colonial experience and neocolonial relations with Western countries. As they now continue to challenge the hegemony of patriarchal bodies of knowledge, feminist scholars have also shown the way towards the production of alternative paradigms and practices.*

**The continuous struggle to promote women's rights and welfare bore many fruits. In recent years, important pro-women legislative and executive directives were passed.** These include, among others, laws against sexual harassment, wife battering and rape. Labor policies were strengthened to ensure that women are not discriminated in employment, promotion and training opportunities. The passage of a Republic Act on Women in Nation Building ensures the allocation of resources and establishment of mechanisms at all levels of governance (i.e. village to nation) that would promote the active involvement of women in shaping the future of the country.

In 1996, a Presidential directive mandated that 5 percent of the budget of all government agencies be allocated for gender programs. This has paved the way for the fast integration of gender equality and women's empowerment principles and development approaches in government programs and processes.

Among civil society groups, mainstreaming of women's empowerment principles has led to a more dynamic participation of ethnic, rural and urban poor women in leadership positions and in engagement with the State for more democratic and just governance. There are hundred of women's groups all over country at the moment, organized into big federations or networks. These formations are brought together by common agendas that span the depth and breath of gender, class, national, ethnic and global issues.

Despite these ground breaking achievements, much has still to be done. Patriarchy and the everyday expressions of women's subordination are deeply embedded in the systems and practices that reproduce poverty. Nearly half of families in the Philippines still live below subsistence level. Women have to bear the brunt of this problem as they increasingly (14 percent of total households) become primary breadwinners and single parents. The current financial crisis has compounded an already difficult economic situation. Women not only have to contend with rising prices of food and basic commodities but also food shortages. With the unabated expansion of the industrial and infrastructure sectors, lands for production of staple crops are fast disappearing, creating in the process, job displacements and high rates of employment as well as underemployment.

*The exodus of Filipino women abroad to work as domestic helpers and entertainers is indeed as sad reflection of the country's inability to grapple with the complex problems of the economy.* Not only are these women deprived of the joys of watching their children grow or living with loved ones.

Drawn into the world capitalist system as providers of cheap labor, they often become hapless victims of physical and sexual abuse. In 1996, women constituted more than half (54 percent) of all Filipino overseas workers (POEA, 1997). They work in more than 100 countries, but the majority is in Asia. What is perhaps the most serious problem faced by women and children is the pervasiveness and increasing intensity of acts of gender violence.

Women regardless of economic status, age and educational background experience all forms of sexual and physical abuse -- from verbal or emotional battering to sexual molestation and incest rape. Women's bodies have become the primary site of patriarchal control, eroding the gains in education, political activism and economic independence.

### **Challenges to Women's Studies and Feminist Scholarship**

As the end of this century draws near, we have to sit back and reflect on the challenges of the coming century. The advances in science and technology and reconceptualization of the international economic order have given rise to many disturbing developments for women. The gains of the past decades are fact being eroded by new and more virulent forms of patriarchal ideologies and practices. Advances, for instance, in the fields of reproductive health and rights. Information technology has contributed to the rise and spread of sex trafficking of Asian women by making available, through internet communication, information about the prostitution industry. This trend is likely to continue and will expand to facilitate the circulation of females not only in the flesh market but in other sectors that require cheap and flexible labor. In the next century, computer-aided equipment will be increasingly used by governments to track down the movements of people and monitor their every act. New regimes and sites of control will emerge, giving way to more insidious forms of patriarchal expressions.

*There are, therefore, serious challenges to Women's Studies and feminist scholarship. We need first and foremost, to reexamine our understanding of patriarchy and how it is embedded in culture as well as in the social and political fabric of society. More importantly, we need to understand how it operates and reinvents itself.*

Because power runs unevenly through social formation, no event can be regarded outside its grid. Knowledge, truths and sciences are as much instruments and effects of power as are ideologies, propaganda or falsehood. Power is not exterior to knowledge or to social relations, but is their condition of existence. Because power can be conceptualized as an ever-changing grid with specific points of intensity, sites of greatest force, it can also be seen as a grid that necessarily generated points of resistance. (Gunew, 1990).

### ***Towards a Framework of Building Women's Studies Curriculum***

*The feminist framework for building Women's Studies must be encompassing to address all expressions of patriarchy. It must be rooted in the past, ever conscious of the enslaving as well as liberative influences of indigenous and colonial traditions. It must be forward looking, alert to the possibilities of new forms and locations of control.*

*But other than providing an analytical lens to understand patriarchy and its processes of reproduction, the framework for building Women's Studies must incorporate the struggles, the many forms of resistance of women across time and space, across social classes, ages, ethnic groups and nationalities. It must be sensitive to individual and collective strategies of protest.*

The sites of patriarchal power are many. The culture, politics and history of women's subordination are inscribed in discourse, in written and oral texts, in communication, in myths, material artifacts and symbols. They are embedded in culture representations of self, the body, identity, sexual orientation, the community, the state and others.

Following the traditions of structuralism, it is also possible to conceptualize of patriarchy as inscribed in social organizations and in ideologies (e.g. values, worldviews) that nourish and given them life. Social practices related to the institution of marriage, reproduction, family, kinship and community are all in varying ways implicated in the reproduction of gender inequality. Central to this discourse is the appropriation, distribution and circulation of women's bodies and labor, in the guise of promoting social harmony and the viability of social strictures. To legitimize the validity of such practices and strengthen their truth-claiming positions, these are reinforced by such ideologies as female domesticity and the biological rootedness of female "infirmities."

*Theories and concepts about the origins of society (e.g. the primacy of man the hunter and food producer), the nature of modes of production and patterns of sexual division of labor (e.g. secondary role of women in major societal changes) must now be subjected to feminist criticism and exposed for their misogynist and phallogocentric biases.*

But the very same loci of oppression provide opportunities for everyday and strategic forms of subversion. Women submit to masculine power even as they constantly challenge the parameters of such control. Through strategies of negotiation and reconceptualization of relationships, they are able fight for their interest and in fleeting moments, create spaces of freedom and autonomy.

The greatest challenge of feminist scholarship is to understand, document and theorize about these twin processes of submission and resistance, collusion and subversion.

**At the societal or macro-level, it is critical to frame the discourse of Women's Studies in the context of knowledge production and truth-claiming processes. We have to engage mainstream science - the bastion and source of hegemonic patriarchy - in contesting assumptions about epistemology, ontology, the nature of science and assumptions about human nature.** In this way, we can forcefully challenge the positions of the church, media, the state, of East-West politics with regard to women's capabilities, rights and status.

The totalizing claims of macro-economic models about development and progress must be reexamined and contested in the light of ongoing problems of food shortage, involution of poverty, financial crisis, environmental degradation and the like. But the bigger challenge for us here is to provide viable and sustainable alternative models and solutions. *At the core of this feminist project is the reinvention/restructuring of the world order premised, not on aggression and destructive competition, but in lasting peace. I would like to echo the ecofeminist values of non-hierarchical relations, and of intra-and inter-generational equity and justice.*

### ***Possible Themes for Curriculum in Asia***

A project on building curriculum in Asia can be organized along two major themes: feminist critique of mainstreaming bodies of knowledge and production and emancipatory feminist knowledge. Several sub-themes can fall under each category as shown in the following examples:

- **Feminist criticism or deconstruction of mainstream knowledge.** The first phase of Women's Studies in the Philippines was marked by spirited attempts to understand the plight and condition of women. Empirical and theoretical studies grappled with the manifestations and causes of women's oppression. Studies under the heading "Situation of Women" proliferated and gave cultural color to the experiences of women. This was necessary at that time in order for the discipline to be accepted as a valid field of inquiry in tertiary education. Today, with ample empirical data to support the reality of gender inequality, feminist scholarship can move on into other less explored areas of inequity. Some of these areas are:
- **Studies of social constructions and cultural representations.** Women's Studies can revisit and undertake feminist critique of the ways Asian cultures have socially constructed or culturally represented maleness and femaleness, sexuality, the body, the self and identity as mediated by class, ethnicity and nationality.
- **Rereading of political and social histories.** This agenda will enable Women's Studies practitioners to address the invisibility of women in canonical writings about the history of their country. It will highlight women's contributions to society and provide a women's perspective and analysis of history. The re-reading of history may highlight the struggles and the triumphs of women against patriarchy.
- **Feminist critique of traditional pedagogy and mainstream philosophies of learning.** Women's Studies must take the lead in transforming the methods classroom learning.
- **Feminist critique of the methods of social investigation.** Positivism and quantitative research approaches have come under severe attack their failure to account for the experiences of women.

Explorations into research approaches that are women-centered can be carried out to address the invisibility or misrepresentation of women in social science researchers.

The second theme can focus on building new knowledge that can be incorporated in the teaching of various social science disciplines. These can include sub-themes like women's literature and arts, making feminist politics, feminist methodologies, feminist teaching approaches and the like.

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