

# FORGING SISTERHOOD WITHIN AND WITHOUT THE UNION: the Organizing Experience of MAKALAYA

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*This article discusses the experience of the Manggagawang Kababaihang Mithi ang Paglaya or MAKALAYA in organizing women workers amid the worsening crisis brought about by globalization. Against the backdrop of a globalized labor market, the feminization of labor in manufacturing and informal work and the shrinking of trade unions, MAKALAYA came into being to respond to the needs of women workers often ignored by trade unions. In organizing women workers, MAKALAYA attempts to meld feminist perspective with social movement unionism. Veering away from the traditional trade union approach and adopting the social movement unionism concept, it combines trade unionism and community organizing to organize women in both formal and informal work.*

“The gender struggle within trade unions is indeed assembling a plane in flight.”- Mye Hega, 2003

The trade union is the ultimate weapon of the working class to improve their condition and quality of life. The strength and power of the labor movement is a result of a history of struggles across nations and across industries. However, with the onslaught of globalization and its



impact on the world of work - the integration of economies, expansion of production, instability of employment and the feminization of labor - the power of the labor movement is slowly being eroded. Given the present reality *vis-à-vis* a new set of working class and new work arrangements, will the conventional trade union strategies and organizing styles still be relevant? Or does it mean trade unionism will be a thing of the past? Against the backdrop of these rapid changes in the world of work, the concept of the “social movement unionism” is emerging as a new approach in organizing workers. As the changing time calls for a new approach to organizing workers, the Manggagawang Kababihang Mithi ay Paglaya or MAKALAYA explores and applies such concept in organizing women workers.

This paper intends to discuss the experience of MAKALAYA in organizing women workers in both the formal and informal economies amid the worsening crisis brought about by globalization. Against the backdrop of a globalized labor market, the feminization of labor in both manufacturing and informal work and the shrinking of trade unions, MAKALAYA came into being to respond to the needs of women workers often ignored by trade unions. In organizing women workers, MAKALAYA veers away from the traditional approach used by trade unions in formal industries. Instead, MAKALAYA attempts to apply the so-called “social movement unionism”<sup>1</sup> utilizing the combined trade unionism-community organizing strategy to establish trade union-community network and coalition and to organize women workers in both formal and informal economies.

This paper consists of four parts. The first part discusses the situation of women workers in the context of globalization by giving focus on the global assembly line, the situation of women workers in formal and informal economies and the impact of globalization on trade unions. The second part discusses the role and participation of women workers in the history of trade unionism in the Philippines. By way of a case study, the



third part discusses the experience of MAKALAYA in organizing women workers. The last part poses some issues and challenges that confront MAKALAYA at present and also posed discourse points to those organizing women workers given the emerging new type of workers as an outcome of globalization.

## **Women Workers in a Globalized Economy**

From an economic perspective, globalization and its three basic pillars – liberalization, deregulation and privatization – are often associated with growth and change. Its basic features are the borderless global market economy and the rapid development in the information communication technology (ICT). The expansion of production, the integration of economies, the rapid mobility of goods, capital and communication among countries have been apparent, but all these have negatively affected the labor movement and the working class especially in developing countries like the Philippines. With these conditions, globalization has ushered in a change in the lives of women workers, either positively or negatively.

### *The International Division of Labour*

With globalization in an upscale swing and coupled with the advancement of the communication technology, capital investment remains in continuous mobility. The desire to reduce production costs and amass greater profits have led multinational corporations to relocate parts of their business operations to developing countries like the Philippines by taking advantage of the latter's cheap labour and raw materials. And because of lower production costs, these multinational corporations have comparative advantage in the global market that enabled them to rake in bigger profits.



The rapid shift of labor-intensive production in developed countries to other parts of the globe is one of the significant effects of a globalized economy. As such, one could read a label of a mass-produced garment or item for sale in Western malls and from there on, one could start the analysis of the journey of this global assembly line. Thus, labels which read “Made in Mexico, China, El Salvador, Sri Lanka, Dominican Republic, the Philippines, Guatemala, Seychelles, Indonesia, Mauritius, Thailand” indicate a “hidden geography of production” (Mills, 1999, p. 7). But another thing unknown to the consumer is the fact that such item is most likely produced and assembled by women and most likely, they were paid very low.

The strategy of labour flexibilization which gave rise to the practice of subcontracting - a form of production that subdivided production phases where the labour-intensive part is relocated to developing countries while maintaining the complex and more technical in developed countries - further aggravates the plight of women as workers. Aldana (in Dungo, 2005), further elaborates that subcontracted work are those “manufactured in a series of stages as well as those which are light and easily transportable, such as semiconductors or cut-up pieces of garments with specified designs...” (p. 43).

Subcontracting work is widely dispersed in various countries around the globe that take advantage of women’s cheap labour. One noted example of subcontracting work is the *maquiladora* plants built along the Mexico-US border that employ mostly Mexican women to produce textile and electronic goods for consumption in the US (Mills, 1999). According to Vickers (1991), women in *maquiladora* factories work 18 hours a day with limited benefits and under unhealthy conditions. Particular in the Philippines, the practice of subcontracting work has given rise to “homework,” a form of work arrangement where quota work is brought home and paid on a piece-rate basis (Dungo, 2005).



While the global economy becomes fully integrated, it relies heavily on Third World women as its foundation and source of cheap labour. In Third World countries, decades of research have documented women's predominant employment in export-oriented manufacturing industries particularly in textile and electronics. Mills (1999) further notes that women's labour is attractive to multinational corporations who assume that young women without families will likely marry and as such, their period of employment is limited and consequently, they are contented with low pay, fewer benefits and job insecurity. In addition, women's skills are assumed to be specifically suitable to very detailed, meticulous and repetitive types of work in the textile and electronics industry.

As the practice of labour flexibilization, outsourcing and contractualization are replicated in various parts of the globe, the employment of women in industrial work seems a growing trend and a global assembly line is eventually taking shape. This pattern of employment has also popularized catch phrases like "the New International Division of Labour", "global feminization" and "global assembly line" (Mills, 1999, p. 9).

### *Women Workers in the Formal Economy*

With the worsening crisis felt by majority of the Filipinos, women's entry into the labour force is on the rise due primarily to opportunities opened up by globalization particularly in the electronics and garment industries, as well as the need to augment income for family survival. Moreover, women from poorer households are further impoverished as government adopted structural adjustment programs that require the country to increase production while lowering social service expenditures. Given the diminishing social services supposed to be provided by the government, many of the poor women bear the brunt of taking care of sick family members while



having to experience postponing their own health and medical needs. Under such condition, more and more women are forced to accept low wage work in factories and in recent years are attracted to informal work. While at the same time, domestic work and childcare remain their exclusive responsibilities.

The National Statistics Office (NSO) stated that in January 2008 about 32.3% of employed people are self-employed, a 1.9% increase from 2007 (Bas, 2008). Ortiz-Ruiz (in Bas, 2008) adds that the formal sector shrunk from 6.3 million in 2003 to 4.7 million in 2007 while the informal sector grew to 27 million from 21 million in the same period. This increase is a result of globalization that demands cheap labor in export-oriented industries, manufacturing and outsourcing services. Moreover, the January 2008 Labor Force Survey has estimated that there is a total of 33.7 million employed Filipinos who are 15 years old and over. On the other hand, the unemployed women are estimated at 6.7% while the men were estimated at 7.8%. The same survey states that Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR) is at 63.4% (NSO, 2008).

In January of 2008, the service sector is the biggest employer of workers, comprising 50.2 percent of the total workforce (NSO, 2008). Most workers employed in this sector are in wholesale and retail trade. Women in this sector are mostly into vending and operating variety stores with smaller incomes (NSO, 2004 as cited by Philippine NGO Beijing +10Report, 2005). Next to the service sector, the biggest employer is the agriculture sector, at 35 percent and followed by industry at 14.8 percent (NSO, 2008). In terms of overseas employment, the NSO 2006 Survey on Overseas Filipinos registers an estimated total of 1.52 million Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). Of this population, female OFWs accounted for 50.4 percent while male OFWs were estimated at 49.6 percent (NCRFW, 2008).



Moreover, women account for almost 80% of the 900,000 workers in 62 export processing zones in the country (De Lima, in Philippine NGO Beijing +10 Report, 2005). They are predominantly found in the electronics industry that provides three-fourths of the country's exports. Lack of job security, contractualization and vulnerability to occupational hazards are among the issues confronting women workers in this industry. In similar situation, the women workers in the garment and other industries are experiencing job uncertainty due to the expiration of the Multi-Fiber Agreement and non-resumption of the Philippine quota. With the decline of the garment industry way back in the 90s, employment of women in the said industry took a nosedive from an estimated 400,000 to 320,000 by the end of 2003 (GETB, in Philippine NGO Beijing +10 Report, 2005). Likewise, many garment workers, sewers and embroiderers were displaced by highly mechanized machines and computer-aided embroidery machines and are now part of the ever growing population of informal workers (Ofreneo, 2002).

As women lose jobs due to the mechanization of operations, other workers lose their jobs due to firm closures and retrenchments. Aganon (2002) notes that 48 percent of closures were due to "organizational factors like reorganization, downsizing, redundancy and mergers or change in management" and 22 percent were "lack of markets, slump in demand and competition from imports while two percent account for increases in minimum wages" (p. 126). She further notes that retrenchments were higher in male than female workers.

Consequently, as large numbers of workers lose their jobs, trade unions are plunged into a crisis that eventually weakens their ranks. Aganon (2002) elaborates some manifestations of such crisis besetting trade unions, as follows: decrease in the number of unionized workers due to labor flexibilization and downsizing; mergers, privatization and outright sales of



business affecting formal sector workers; lack of substantial gains in collective bargaining agreements; and closure of firms to evade CBAs through declaration of bankruptcy, albeit operations are restored in other places, one form of union busting strategy.

Likewise, the rampant practices of flexibilization and contractualization among industries have weakened trade unions' bargaining power. Based on 2007 data, Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs) covered only 249,000 workers or a matter of 13.2% of the 1,893,000 union members (Aganon, Serrano, Mercado & Certeza, 2008). Aganon (2002), in another study, notes that several company practices tend to weaken the power of unions. With massive retrenchment among companies, trade unions are rendered powerless. They cannot prevent the retrenchment of workers especially when companies justify their actions through the "authorized cause" provision of Art 283-284 of the Labor Code. These authorized causes include automation, retrenchment, redundancy, closures, and mergers. Another management practice is the strategy of "casualization" where a batch of workers is hired for only three months after which the management hires a new batch for the next three months. With casual workers, the union cannot recruit new members. In addition, other companies resort to "brainwashing" the workers. In this case, the management appealed to workers to help out in cost cutting measures as the company is losing money even though the union provides data to counter such claims. In another instance, the management changed the job titles of some union members by promoting them to professional positions, thereby disqualifying them to be part of the bargaining panel during negotiations.

In summary, the trend of women's employment in the formal economy is on the rise. However, they concentrate on labor-intensive occupations, particularly in the global assembly line in the garments, manufacturing and electronics industries of which the work is monotonous,



low paid and does not provide them the opportunities to develop or acquire new skills. However, despite the increased employment opportunities brought about by globalization, current management practices like flexibilization, sub-contracting and casualization have weakened trade unions' strength as well as women's involvement in them. As trade unions experienced difficulty in organizing its ranks as well as in negotiating for better wages and conditions in collective bargaining, will women-friendly provisions forever be left behind in negotiations?

### *Women Workers in the Informal Economy*

The informal sector, a phenomenon of the 70s economy covering those working as micro-entrepreneurs, home-based workers, self-employed, unpaid family workers, sub-contractual workers, vendors, among others, grows unabated. Despite the variety of work and services offered by these workers, their work is commonly characterized as informal, small-scale, marginal, lowly paid, unprotected, unregulated, and unorganized. With the growing unemployment brought about by globalization, more and more people tend to gravitate to informal work. As employment declines in major sectors like agriculture and manufacturing, informal work is the only viable option for many poor women.

Estimates based on the 2003 Labor Force Survey of the National Statistics Office (NSO) show that informal workers account to a total of 20 million, or 65 percent of total employed labor force (in Lao & Inocion, 2008; NCRFW, 2004 as cited in Philippine NGO Beijing+10Report, 2005). Of these, women comprise an estimate of 6.2 million, or 39.7 percent, accounting for almost 53 percent of the entire employed women labor force (NCRFW, 2004 as cited in Philippine NGO Beijing+10Report, 2005). The major reasons for the unprecedented growth of the informal sector include the labor displacement in formal



sector brought about by globalization, gender discrimination in the workplace, and the burden of dual responsibilities of working at home and earning an income.

Ofreneo (2002) summarizes the issues confronting women in the informal sector as follows:

- **Invisibility.** Despite their numbers, women in the informal economy are not accounted in the mainstream economy making them invisible in government statistics as well as excluded from programs and policies;
- **Unorganized.** Because of the nature of their work and location, women in the informal sector are scattered and hard to organize. As such, they are not as cohesive and do not have a representational identity like other sectors; and
- **Vulnerability.** The vulnerable status of women in the informal economy is brought about by a confluence of problems that beset them. These include irregularity and instability of employment, exposure to occupational and environment health hazards, exploitation and abuse, low level of awareness of their rights as women and as workers, and lack of social protection.

### *Women's Leadership and Participation in Trade Union in the Time of Globalization*

The labor force participation statistics show that women are very much involved in both formal and informal work and their numbers keep on increasing in an unprecedented manner. However, in terms of union participation, they constitute a small portion as compared to men. Unlike



men, women face more constraints in terms of political participation, trade union involvement being one of them.

Political participation is gendered (Peterson & Runyan, 1993). Factors such as gender socialization, the differential situation of men and women as well as social institutions and structures interact in discriminating against women towards political involvement. Since gender stereotypes are fully internalized by individuals through socialization, it is more likely that both men and women developed attitudes that affirm men's political involvement while discouraging women's. As such, women who tend to engage in any political pursuit or hold leadership positions are met with resistance.

Moreover, the gender division of labor creates different lived situations of men and women. As reproductive work is relegated to women while productive work is primarily the concern of men, women experience double burden when they work to earn income while being held responsible for reproductive work. Aside from the longer workday that limits women's participation in any political involvement, women's availability tends to be problematic especially when this competes with her domestic and mothering/family obligations. Consequently, the situation of women and the requirements of trade unions as to schedules, locations of meetings and magnitude of trade union work seem incompatible. As trade unionism is often associated with men and traditionally identified as men's work, women's concerns are of no importance to them but rather treated as "side issues." Thus, women's issues remain peripheral in bargaining negotiations. Similarly, Gallin & Horn (2005) note that since the labor movement has long been led by men, it has imbibed the prevailing patriarchal values of society, regardless of its progressive thought and radical opposition to other aspects of the social order. Likewise, Hega (2006) echoes similar sentiment:



With few exceptions, male workers still support the confinement of women to the home and rearing of children as their foremost responsibility. This perception is reflected in the attitudes of majority of union leaders and even members who consider it irrelevant to draw women into trade union work. This partly explains why most unions' work methods and systems are designed not for women in general and more so for working mothers (p. 4).

The workplace as a social institution posed another obstacle to women's political participation and trade union involvement. The horizontal and vertical gender segregation in the workplace also discriminates women. Horizontally, women predominate in jobs that are light, monotonous and reflective of their reproductive work such as in the service sector, manufacturing and informal work while vertically, they are predominantly located at the lowest rung in almost all industries. On the other hand, industries dominated by male had norms, practices and standards that speak of a "man's world" (Peterson & Runyan, 1993, p. 68). Randall (in Peterson, 1993) has this to say about discrimination in the workplace:

Forms of discrimination in the workplace vary, but the presence of gender hierarchy and sexism create a less favorable environment for women, who must then struggle harder than male counterparts to be successful. As long as the workplace and political office are identified as "male terrain," women constantly confront and must deal with resentment of their unwanted presence. Women are most frequently reminded of their outsider status when they are viewed in terms of their gender and sexuality and not as colleagues. Subtle and not-so-subtle references to women must either become "like men" or become invisible (p. 68).



Despite the many barriers that restrict women's involvement in trade unions, historically, their role in trade unionism had been significant. Berenice Carrol (in Peterson, 1993) reiterates that women have initiated the earliest labour strikes in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Another strike launched by women was the first of rebellious actions that led to the Russian Revolution. Other mobilizations like the 1912 Lawrence, Massachusetts textile workers strike inspired the formation of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. Last, but not least, in the Philippines in the 1980s, despite the no union policy in export processing zones, women workers launched a series of strikes to protest labor conditions that gave birth to the Women Workers Movement in 1984. These examples suggest that women, whether in male-dominated or women-only industries, usually organized their ranks and established their own trade unions to respond to their particular needs and interests as women workers, promote their rights and advance their struggles as women and as workers.

Moreover, since many of the women workers are found in almost all low-paid jobs in both the formal and informal labor markets, women workers' organizing takes various forms. Unlike the conventional work-based trade union organizing in formal work and male-dominated industries, women deconstructed the notion of trade union organizing. In particular, it went beyond the confines of an employer-employee relationship. More so, women workers' organizing approach tries to meld the struggle for better working conditions with women's strategic gender interests.<sup>2</sup>

One significant example is the case of the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India which was formed to represent the self employed poor workers who were ignored by trade unions in formal sectors. SEWA argued that the role of trade unions is to protect workers' rights regardless of the absence or presence of an employer-employee relationship. Recognizing the problems confronting self-



employed women such as exploitation from moneylenders and contractors, police harassment and discriminatory laws, SEWA's services and programs are broader than conventional trade unions to include legal assistance, representation for workers' rights, day care provision, insurance and health scheme provision, and the formation of cooperatives. To fully serve its constituents, SEWA fuses development work with trade union functions on the argument that it services non-formal workers. And by linking unionism and cooperatives formation, SEWA has delivered workers from exploitation and unemployment (Kabeer, 1995).

In like manner, in other communities, women workers are exploring alternative ways of organizing women while others are strengthening worker-based women networks by expanding membership to women in fishing, farming and informal sectors. In essence, such actions are efforts at transforming the traditional trade union structure which usually confines itself to organizing formal economy workers to a social movement unionism (SMU) that organizes all forms of employed workers (Aganon, 2002).

Aganon et al.'s (2008) discussion of SMU could be summarized as follows:

The concept of social movement unionism was first introduced by Peter Waterman in the late 1980s but then evolved into different articulations by various authors like Kim Moody, Ismet Akca and Robert Lambert. Despite varying articulations and understanding of the concept of SMU, a common thread emphasized the need for trade unions to bring their struggles beyond the confines of the workplace and beyond national boundaries, in alliance with other social movements. Of the various articulations, the "class/popular-community" articulation of SMU by Kim Moody is the most popular.



However, Moody's "class/popular-community" articulation was criticized by Waterman because of its vanguardist stance. He then re-conceptualized SMU as "class/new social movement unionism." For Waterman, the new social movement unionism goes beyond the economic and political unionism as it focuses on all forms of work, utilizing socio-cultural forms, forging alliances with civil society, and being international in scope. Among its features are the following:

- It consists of struggles within and around wage work not simply for better pay and working conditions but for increased worker and union control over the labor process, investments, new technology, relocation, subcontracting and training and education processes;
- It struggles against hierarchical, authoritarian and technocratic working methods and relations for socially-useful and environment-friendly products, for a reduction in the hours of work, for the distribution of which is available and necessary, for the sharing of domestic work, and for an increase in free time for cultural self-development and self-realization;
- It is intimately related to the movements of other unionized or non-unionizable working classes or categories and to other potential allies as an autonomous, equal and democratic partner, neither claiming to be, nor subordinating itself to, a "vanguard" or "sovereign" organization or power;
- It is [also] related to other non- or multi-class democratic movements in their efforts to create a powerful and diverse civil society;



- It is related but perhaps less intimately to political forces... with similar orientations (i.e. which demonstrate their recognition of the value of plurality of autonomous social forces in an emancipatory and transformatory direction);
- It works for the continuing transformation of all social relationships and structures... in a democratic, pluralistic and cooperative direction;
- It takes up the new social issues within the society at large, as they arise for workers specifically and as they express themselves within the union itself...;
- It favors shopfloor democracy and encouraging direct horizontal relations both between workers and between workers and other popular/democratic social forces, grassroots and community contacts and solidarity internationally, in the struggle to create a kind of global civil society and global solidarity culture;
- It is open to networking both within and between organizations, understanding the value of informal, horizontal, flexible coalitions, alliances and interest groups to stimulate organizational democracy, pluralism and innovation; and,
- Being active on the terrain of education, culture and communication, stimulating worker, popular and alternative culture..., supporting initiatives for democracy and pluralism both inside and outside the dominant institutions or media, locally, nationally and globally (pp. 26-27).



Meanwhile, given the changes in the labor market and employment relations and arrangements, the traditional trade union structure is no longer enough to respond to the varying needs of different types of workers. Instead, the trade union movement has to reflect on and rethink its position and location amid these changes. Trade unions must rethink its strategies beyond collective bargaining and organizing approach other than trade union formation within the confines of formal work settings. The experience of women workers in terms of organizing their ranks has a lot to offer in which the trade unions can learn from.

### **Women Workers in the History of Trade Unionism in the Philippines**

Throughout the course of Philippine history there is a strong indication of women's participation in the world of work as well as in the trade union movement. Although women workers were considered invisible in many historic documents, there are accounts however that proved their significant participation in trade union struggles.

The trade union movement in the Philippines has its roots in the working class struggle against the Spanish colonial rule in general and the printing press workers in particular. As early as 1816, the *cigarreras* (tobacco workers) held strikes on issues like unfair wages and sexual harassment. Had it been written, such action could be the first mass mobilization and the first workers' organization in the country. But it was only in 1901 when women trade unionists were recorded in history. Thus, the names of Celerina de la Cruz, Fausta Bernardo, Margarita Pasamola and Antonia Zamora were then considered as trade unionists because of their involvement in organizing unions in the Carmelo and Bauerman Printing Press in Manila (Hega, 2006).



During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women workers were employed as *cigarreras*, *bordaderas* (embroiderers) and *sinamayeras* (abaca weavers). Their products were among the country's exports. At this time, sex discrimination, sexual harassment and low wages were among the issues faced by women workers. Low wages and the deplorable working condition in factories were among the factors that led women to stage strikes or *alborotos* especially in the tobacco factories in Manila, Navotas and Malabon (Angeles, 1990). Taguiwalo (2002) provided another account that affirms women workers' significant participation through trade union struggles. With an analysis of newspaper articles in 1906 and 1934, she highlights women workers' significant participation in two militant actions of the working class. In 1906 women vendors in Divisoria protested against a city hall ordinance on increased stall rentals. In 1934, women tobacco workers participated in the general workers' strike where Narcisa Paguibitan, a woman trade union leader, played a significant role as a member of the workers' delegation that sought a meeting with General Frank Murphy in Malacanang.

The women-specific demands pushed by trade unions would further support the position that women workers were very much in the world of work. The founding of the *Congreso Obrero de Filipinas* or the Workers Congress of the Philippines in May 1, 1913 included the protection for women and child laborers in their agenda (Del Rosario, 1989). In 1918 more than 8,000 women workers were working in factories (Arriola, 1989). By mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, about 3,000 women were employed in various cigar factories (Carpenter, in Del Rosario, 1989). Women-only trade unions were then organized such as the *Union de Cigarillas la Alejandria* and the Tobacco Women's Labour Union. The provisions of working seats and separate toilets/lavatories for women were among the demands women workers raised and won in 1923<sup>3</sup>. Later in 1931, more than 7,500 women became members of trade unions (Arriola, 1989). Moreso, the 1931 record of the Bureau of Labor has accounted membership of women in all the 12



major labor organizations. Alzona (1989), in her book *The Filipino Woman: Her Social Economic Status, 1565-1937*, observed that like men, the women joined unions primarily for protection and benefits. Further, she stressed that women workers have taken part in the strikes that occurred in the country to “show their loyalty to the organizations and their consciousness of the need for cooperation in labor movements” (p. 106).

Other issues like maternity leave, equal pay and the prohibition of child labour were part of the demands during the continuous picket and labour protests in 1936. Women trade unionists also supported the struggle on women's right to vote (Arriola, 1989).

Tribune Manila reported that women workers of the Alhambra Cigar Factory staged a picket in May 1936. In July of the same year, about 10,000 women and men workers held a demonstration in front of Malacanang Palace. Among their demands included the following: (1) equal pay for equal work of women and men; (2) the prohibition of employment of children below 14 years old; and (3) the grant of free education to poor children. While a large number of women have been active in factory work, those who were not absorbed by factories did embroidery and hat weaving in their homes (Del Rosario, 1989).

With the closure of the sugar and tobacco factories during the Japanese Occupation, massive unemployment grew until the post-war years. It was also during this time that both women and children received the lowest pay among workers. In 1949, seventy (70) trade unions formed the Congress of Labour Organization (CLO) with membership of 100,000. In this same year, the largest strike broke out in a sugar plantation which also employed women. In 1950, women dominated the mat and hat weaving, textile and sewing industries. Half of the workers in the tobacco, shoe, brick and furniture industries were women while two thirds of domestic



workers were also women (Del Rosario, 1989). During the 50s and 60s, employment of women declined that even the RA 679<sup>4</sup> posed as “detrimental to the employment of women... as employers began adopting hiring policies preferential to men” (Fidelino in del Rosario, 1989, p. 60).

The 70s had given birth to the formation of the women’s organization *Malayang Kilusan ng Bagong Kababaihan* (MAKIBAKA). One of their significant programs is the formation of a “mother’s core” which involved some women workers (Collegian, in Del Rosario, 1989). When Martial Law was declared in 1972, the government adopted the export-oriented economic development policy that led to an increase in number of factories such as in the garment and textile, food processing and electronics industries. As a result, women’s employment increased significantly over time. According to Del Rosario (1989), as a policy, the Philippine government offered a package of investment incentives in order to encourage foreign investment in the country, including very cheap women’s labor who comprise the biggest labor force in export-oriented industries. From then on, the growth of women’s employment in export-processing zones increased over time. However, despite greater involvement in the labor force, the condition of women as workers has not improved until the end of this decade. Del Rosario (1989) cites the following problems confronting women workers: unemployment, underemployment, low pay, exploitation in the workplaces, absence of child care support, domestic work burden, lack of skills development, limited opportunities for trade union leadership, dislocation (for those working in the export zones), and an overall decline in the quality of life.

Even beyond the 90s, women workers were very much economically active. Hega (1998) notes that between 1989-1992, the growth rate of women’s employment was at 4.4 percent based on the National Statistics Office (NSO) report and between 1989-2002, the increase was



noted at three percent. Moreover, the Philippine NGO Beijing+10 Report (2005) notes that growth in women's employment has already reached more than 50 percent. As of October 2004, of every 100 workers, around 38 were women (NCRFW, in Philippine NGO Beijing +10 Report, 2005) or 37.51% (National Statistical Coordination Board, in Aganon et al., 2008). With the development of the ICT sector in the 1990s, the demand was high for skilled work yet majority of women found employment only at the lower level in the ICT industry (Hega, 2003).

With globalization as the new face of the millennium, the feminization of labor became a constant feature of the Philippine labor market. Women's employment not only grew but has also expanded almost everywhere - in manufacturing, service, agriculture, etc. In addition, the global assembly line targets women as its reserved labor force. The flexibilization scheme that is widely practiced in the global assembly line in the form of homework further draws more women to be economically active. The flexitime offered by such arrangement enabled women to combine housework, childcare and work with income. According to Aganon (2002), as the operations of globalization become full-blown, women's labor will remain preferred by industries not because of their work skills and attitude but more so because of their social status that makes them vulnerable to accept flexible work and all its various schemes and exploitative features.

Though there is growth in terms of women's employment in recent years, this does not translate to growth in trade union participation of women. Instead, there is a wide gender gap in trade union participation. Aganon et al. (2008) note that women's involvement in union leadership range from zero to 40%. In addition to the wide gender disparity in trade union participation, women's participation is also declining. From 59.6 percent in 1996, it decreased to 34.2 percent in 2000 (NCRFW, in the Philippine NGO Beijing +10 Report, 2005), then further declined to 17.9 percent as reported



in the 2002 General Survey of Labor Organization by the Bureau of Labor and Employment Statistics survey of one million trade union members under 92 trade unions (Hega, 2003).

On the other hand, barriers to entry of women in trade unions are manifold. As cited by Del Rosario (1989), the study “Documenting the Struggle of Filipino Women Workers Engage in Strike Action in Export-Oriented Industries” conducted by the Samahan ng Kababaihang Manggagawa sa Pilipinas (SKMP) points out that the primary constraint to women workers’ participation in trade unions is the double burden. In like manner, the reproductive responsibilities deter mothers to participate in trade unions and only those who are single are drawn into trade union involvement (T. Borgonos, personal communication, August 31, 2008). Del Rosario (1989) further notes that “disaffection with the union leadership aggravated by the absence of regular union activities and concerted actions which can raise consciousness and spur committed involvement” (p.66) is another reason that discourages women’s participation in trade unions.

Moreover, the 4<sup>th</sup> Philippine Periodic Report to the UN CEDAW notes that women’s positions in trade unions, whether elected or appointed, are often relegated to positions reflective of their domestic functions such as being secretaries, treasurers, and auditors. Among the barriers to women’s active participation in trade unions include time constraints due to multiple concerns as mothers, wives and workers, non-supportive environment due to the macho culture of trade unions and limited access to training and competency development. With women’s limited access to leadership positions, eventually the women are denied representation in trade union’s policy and decision-making (Hega, 2003). Likewise, women’s leadership in trade unions decreased from 35 percent in 1998 to 25.6 percent in 2000 (NCRFW, in the Philippine NGO Beijing +10 Report, 2005).



On the other hand, Hega (2006), a woman trade union leader posits that the dominance of men in trade unions posed as the major barrier to women's active trade union involvement. Thus, she emphasizes:

From its very beginning (it) is a man's world and a terrain which scrutinizes women who are attempting to break into the circle of "brotherhood." Nowadays...most union structures remain to be insensitive to the need of women workers. Trade unions oftentimes avoided confronting the causes of patriarchal exploitation women workers have to face but instead confine their struggles to issues common to male and female workers. Consequently, issues such as maternity benefits, sexual harassment, pay equity and other so-called women's issues are seldom or not at all taken up by the unions. As unions "wage battles for lofty ideals" – like better wages and greater political power - women issues are considered "very specific" and "too narrow in scope" and are often left at the bottom of union priorities (p.3).

Further, she notes that despite the presence of women union leaders who championed women's rights and whose calibre is at par with their male counterparts, still, they are confronted by machismo in the trade union movement. Much has to be done in terms of pursuing the struggle for gender equality within trade unions. Despite the pronouncements of several labor centers regarding their commitment to improve the lot of women workers, women's issues remain peripheral in collective bargaining negotiations. Such pronouncements remain only in papers and documents but never translated into actions. And neither the formation of women's committees and desks nor the formulation of women's program within the unions would guarantee that women's issues become priority in the agenda of the trade unions (Hega, 2006).



Given the changing conditions brought about by globalization - the feminization of employment in manufacturing and service industries, the unprecedented growth of women informal workers and the weakening power of unions - the culture of workers and the traditional union organizing approach have not adapted to the changing times. Gallin & Horn (2005) remind us that the growth of the service sector, the expansion of the labor market and the privatization of the public sector have given rise to a new working class which is predominantly women from the informal sector and with no previous union experience. This implies the need for trade unions to seek a new organizing approach and strategy.

### **Shaping Identity within the Trade Union: The Organizing Experience of MAKALAYA**

Against the backdrop of globalization and its consequential effects of shrinking employment, feminization of labor in electronics, garment industries, service sector and informal work, weakening power and decimation of trade unions, and the growth of women workers, the Manggagawang Kababaihan Mithi ay Paglaya (MAKALAYA) was established. The changes in the world of work served as rationale for its birth.

#### ***Early Beginnings<sup>5</sup>***

The early beginnings of MAKALAYA could be traced back to 1988 when a core of women trade unionists who were involved in organizing and education work started discussions on women's issues and concerns in a male-dominated trade union movement. Out of these discussions came the need to organize and motivate women to be active in trade unionism. With support from the Gender Program of the Labour Education and



Research Network (LEARN), this core of women designed a module on gender awareness as a strategy for organizing women workers. The graduates of the LEARN Basic Women's Awareness Seminars (BWAS) then realized the need for a forum where women can discuss personal concerns. Thus, the Women Workers' Forum (WWF), a loose network of graduates of LEARN seminars, came into being (M. Hega, personal communication, August 31, 2008).

From 1990 to 1994, the women met twice a year to discuss women's issues in different workplaces through symposia and cultural activities. Out of these discussions, the women had realized the need to integrate women's concerns in the trade union agenda. Moreover, they saw the need for space for women to discuss concerns that are not a priority of trade unions and to create a movement that would be responsive to the needs of women in trade unions. Thus, in 1995, the WWF was renamed Manggagawang Kababaihang Mithi ay Paglaya or MAKALAYA, formally established in March 1998 with membership composed of women trade unionists, community women and women workers in informal work arrangements.

Viewed as a parallel organization of trade unions, MAKALAYA maintains its autonomy from the trade union structure yet working side by side with them on issues concerning women's equality and gender equity. As an organization, it aims to mainstream women's concerns in the trade union agenda. In working with trade unions, it particularly advocates the following:

- the institutionalization of gender education programs in unions;
- the representation of women in all levels of trade union structures;
- the formation of Women's Committee in trade union structures;



- the inclusion of women-friendly provisions in collective bargaining negotiations;
- the integration of women-friendly laws and legislation in union agenda; and
- the integration of women's concerns in trade union policies.

Given its goal of developing an agenda that would empower women in all aspects of their lives, it encourages trade unions to respond to gender concerns as an important part of the working class struggle (M. Hega, personal communication, August 3, 2008).

Although the women's movement took pains in the advocacy of mainstreaming women's concerns in trade unions, such efforts are met with resistance especially from the male trade union leaders. Male leaders considered such acts as divisive. Consequently, efforts and appreciation at mainstreaming is uneven across trade union federations and labor centers. Given the difficulty of integrating women's issues and concerns in trade unions, MAKALAYA aims to "organize unity beyond the federation and labour center structures" (Hega, 2003). Furthermore, she expounds on MAKALAYA's reason for being, thus:

Realizing the impact of neoliberal globalization on workers' employment and organizing, MAKALAYA also exists to operationalize the "working people-social movement unionism" concept as opposed to the traditional view that unionism is only for the wage earners and unions exist only for representation and bargaining. It therefore tries to mix trade unionism and community unionism as an organizing strategy asserting that the working class consciousness must be imbibed by all workers, whether involved in formal employment or informal work. The organization also recognizes that it is no longer viable to organize workers without



seriously looking at workers in the informal economy since this growing section of the working class cannot be seen as separate from the total economic system (p. 8).

### *MAKALAYA's Goals, Programs and Services*

As an organization working for the betterment of women workers in the formal and informal economies, MAKALAYA's objectives are:

- To increase unionists' awareness on gender issues and concerns;
- To popularize and advocate women's issues at the local, industry and international levels;
- To empower women workers to strengthen the family as a basic unit of society and the labour movement as a progressive force in the Philippines;
- To organize women workers and assume active leadership role within the union structures and integrate women concerns in collective bargaining agreements, programs and activities;
- To mobilize women workers to protect and fight for their rights as a distinct group of society; and
- To foster unity and solidarity among women, particularly in the Philippines.

As an organization for women workers, it responds to both practical and strategic gender needs of its members. Thus, its services and programs cater to the needs of women taking into consideration their productive and reproductive functions. Specifically, these programs are:

- A. Education Program - The education programs of MAKALAYA are of two types, namely:



- Women's Empowerment Training (WET) – this program focuses on personal enhancement to develop women as whole and integrated persons. This program serves as entry point in raising the consciousness of women by focusing first on developing their personal skills and competencies before political orientation on women's issues are offered to them. In each session, MAKALAYA organizers allocate time to orient women about MAKALAYA and its activities. These sessions also serve as venues for membership recruitment and mobilizations; and
  - Women Intensive Labor Development (WILD) – this program consists of workshops and conferences that focus on the political, organizational and advocacy work involvement of women. Its main component is Feminist Leadership Formation.
- B. Women Counseling, Entrepreneurial, Livelihood and Legal Services (CELLS) – the thrust of this program is to provide professional support and assistance to women through referrals to network partner organizations.
- C. Women Research for Development (WORD) – the researches under this program focus on gender and women's issues. The program aims to provide women with updated information to advance the advocacy on women.
- D. Women Bulletin (WOMB) – the program aims to popularize gender issues at the local industries, national and international levels by utilizing the researches and knowledge and information shared by women during seminars and education activities.



## *MAKALAYA's Organizing Principles, Processes and Strategies*

MAKALAYA organizes women workers through chapter building. A chapter is composed of various women workers' organizations in a particular geographical area. Each chapter maintains its autonomy, elects its own set of officers and formulates its own programs and plans. The chairperson of each chapter is represented in the National Council of MAKALAYA. The National Congress elects the members of the National Council and the Executive Board every three years. The Executive Board implements the programs and activities of MAKALAYA while the National Council, acts as the decision-making body in between Congress that meets at least twice a year. Its members come from diverse age groups, marital status, sexual orientations, geographical locations, religious affiliations, and educational attainments – sort of a sisterhood in diversity (Hega, 2003).

At present, MAKALAYA has 5,514 members from nine chapters located in various parts of the country (Hega, 2006). Specifically its membership is composed of women from two labor centers, one public and four private sector federations, two urban poor organizations, and three labor non-government organizations (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2003).

MAKALAYA's organizing work processes and strategies are anchored on the following principles:

- Alternative structures should be created where women and men can develop their full potentials as human beings;
- The need to provide for equality of women and men in the economic, political and socio-cultural structures in all spheres of life;



- There should be recognition, respect and premium in the distinctions between women and men; and
- The need to develop simultaneous initiatives in responding to gender and class issues.

Among the strategies adopted by MAKALAYA in organizing women workers are:

- Formation of women's committees within the trade union structures with sustainable programs and services;
- Capability building of women as union leaders and negotiators;
- Provision of support mechanism for women with reproductive responsibilities to enable them to participate in trade union activities; and
- Provision of a comprehensive education program for women.

In terms of organizing strategy, MAKALAYA adopts the “vertical-horizontal” organizing model on the view that it is the most appropriate strategy vis-a-vis women workers' needs and concerns. As Hega (2006) discusses:

Vertical or sectoral organizing pertains to categorizing members based on the work they do. ..its main purpose is to define women workers' role and agenda for different workplaces. It covers the inclusion of women's issues in collective bargaining, establishment of women committees, identification of campaign issues like sexual harassment, and the development of their leadership capabilities in union administration and negotiations. The informal sector women also explore this strategy since it covers specific



occupational groups like street vendors and community caregivers. This is their form of collective representation vis-à-vis the local government. Horizontal organizing, on the other hand is a geographical grouping of its members regardless of individual classification as worker. The idea of horizontal organizing is for members to actively take part on community issues and to develop their sisterhood. ..it also helps surface workers' problems that are not traditionally taken up by the unions. For community organizations, some take the form of direct MAKALAYA chapter organizing while others are recruited individually and facilitate the networking with MAKALAYA. The issues covered aside from employment issues, are those related to social services, housing problems and other related problems that should be addressed to the local and national governments (p. 6).

Generally, MAKALAYA, like any other community or people's organization, follows the same conventional steps in community organizing, however, the following elements differentiate it from others:

- The use of gender lens or perspective in organizing women workers.

In organizing women workers, MAKALAYA is guided by a perspective based on the combined concept of social movement and the Gender and Development (GAD) framework. Using a gender lens in analyzing issues, it starts its analysis of the situation of women workers through a gender lens that viewed women's oppression both at the level of class and gender. In analyzing women workers' issues, it looks both at the situation of women and men workers' conditions and relations in both the productive and reproductive spheres. In particular, it scrutinizes how capitalists exploit women and men in the workplace as well as analyzes their roles and relations in the domestic spheres. The



analysis goes beyond the home and workplace as it is extended to other areas of life: the economy, politics and culture. Further, it views women's problem as an issue of power and power relations. Since women are disenfranchised and powerless, it is imperative that women's empowerment is an important goal of organizing (MAKALAYA, 2002).

- Adoption of the Social Movement Unionism through the combination of labor- community unionism and organizing women both at the formal and informal economies.

MAKALAYA's organizing approach and perspective is heavily influenced by the concept of "social movement unionism" (combination of trade unionism and community organizing with focus on workers in both formal and informal economies) combined with the GAD (gender and development) framework. Such concept is based on the assumption that the working class consciousness has to be internalized by women workers both in the formal and informal sectors. Recognizing that trade unions are traditionally concerned with issues of workers in the formal sector and given the dissipation of formal employment, MAKALAYA is resolute to organize women workers in both the formal and informal economies. Further, Hega (2006) elaborates, "concretely, this means recognizing the need to redefine working people and unionism in the context of changing labor market brought about by neo-liberal globalization. Equally important is to analyze the changes with explicit attention given to women's needs, interests and perspectives" (p.5).

Adopting the social movement unionism concept, it links up not only with trade unions and labor centers but also with other movements like the women's movement, human rights and other progressive movements for social transformation. It embraces labor internationalism



through forging alliances with local, national and international labor movements.

Recognizing the similar issues and situations faced by its diverse members, it served as an advocacy group that mobilized women to collectively analyze issues and formulate actions towards the goal of empowering women. Its political advocacy covers issues on women's rights, sexual harassment, reproductive health, violence against women (VAW), women's access to the Gender and Development (GAD) budget of government agencies, as well as putting gender perspective to labor laws and standards. Since its concern of women's empowerment and gender equality goes beyond economic issues of workers, it also involves itself in "women in politics" through membership in the AKBAYAN Partylist (Hega, 2003).

- Feminist values as part of its practice

MAKALAYA promotes an organizing approach that practices feminist values such as interconnection, cooperation, focus on both process and results, autonomy, consensus building, personal is political and simultaneous struggle for class, gender, race and environmental issues. MAKALAYA tries to operationalize these values through its practices, policies, organization structure and methods of work.

- Re-visioning the notion of leadership by challenging machismo in all fronts (trade unions, workplace, home, society)

The core focus of MAKALAYA's education program is women's self-development as well as developing women leaders. To empower women, MAKALAYA believes that it is imperative to deconstruct the



traditional concept of power and politics that is confined to engagement in the public sphere. Instead, MAKALAYA posits that:

For women, politics consists of determining lives, therefore, making decisions both in the public and private spheres. Moreover, it means making the links between these spheres, based on an understanding that the personal is political and vice versa. Women's politics means managing and changing conditions in the political and economic structures, including power relations therein, and defining issues of one in relation to the structural issues (Hega, 2003, p. 7).

### *Developing Women Workers' Leadership*

As MAKALAYA recognizes the difficulty in mainstreaming women's issues in trade unions, it has adopted innovative strategies that focus on women's personal and organizational needs towards integrating gender concerns in the broader trade union movement. As such, MAKALAYA acts as a pressure group within and outside the labor movement while extending guidance and support to women workers in terms of meeting their practical needs.

One of MAKALAYA's concerns is developing women leadership as a prerequisite to their empowerment. However, it does not subscribe to the male-oriented leadership styles practiced in trade unions. In lieu of this, MAKALAYA recognizes the importance of consciousness-raising and capability-building of women workers. MAKALAYA conducts courses that aim to: 1) develop women's organizing skills and ability to improve their conditions; 2) enhance their capacities in negotiations and capacitate them to represent and defend their interests in trade union's decision-making structures and organization; and 3) build their confidence to defend their rights as workers and as women. In MAKALAYA's education programs,



self-development is given importance on the view that self-empowerment is a prerequisite element in the collective empowerment of women (Hega, 2006).

MAKALAYA gives importance to both the substance of its education programs and to the processes of learning, specifically the types and methods of learning. Having an understanding of the difficult situation of women with familial responsibilities in attending live-in seminars, MAKALAYA utilizes strategies such as study circles, symposia and one-on-one discussions to adapt to the needs and availabilities of women. MAKALAYA inculcates to its educators that MAKALAYA has to bring education to its members and not the other way around. As such, house visits and informal “*huntahans*” are part of it (MAKALAYA Brochure).

### *Networking and Linkage Building*

In lieu of its social movement character, MAKALAYA establishes network and alliances with other organizations both locally and internationally. As a network in itself, it organizes a wide variety of workers in different workplaces. It establishes linkages with other organizations for exchange of information and sharing of experiences and knowledge yet maintains its autonomy as an organization. It establishes links with other women’s formations at the local, national and international levels.

As a network of different women’s organizations, its thrusts include working towards gender equality, social justice and women’s empowerment. It provides direction and support to its member organizations and individual members as well as establishes sisterhood among women workers. Recognizing the fact that it cannot address the needs and problems of women workers alone, it forges alliances with other movements for social transformation and as member of local, national and international women’s



groups and formations. Many of its members are members of AKBAYAN Women's Party. Its advocacy work focuses on integrating women's workers issues at all levels such as in the workplace, community, local government units and in national policies and laws (Hega, 2003).

### ***Confronting Sexism within the Trade Union Structures***

Organizing formal women workers and working within trade union structure is not easy for MAKALAYA. Its organizers are challenged on two fronts – one is the struggle for women workers' issues in the workplace and the other is the sexism and discrimination from male-oriented trade union culture. MAKALAYA compared these dual struggles like “fighting a two-headed dragon”. The following issues were culled from vignettes of their stories (M. Hega and T. Borgonos, personal communication, August 31, 2008).

- **Everyday experiences of sexism and male resistance.** As experienced by MAKALAYA leaders and organizers, male resistance manifests in various forms such as trivializing everything that has to do with women, regarding women as invisible entity and labelling. Male trade unionists, consciously or unconsciously, practice sexism and discrimination against women leaders. For instance, during meetings, women's opinions are never acknowledged. But when men articulate the same opinion, they are given attention and recognition. Likewise, when women are reporting, it became an opportunity for men to go to the comfort rooms, smoke, take a rest or stretch out.
- **Personal attack to women leaders.** Women's commitment to fight for women's issues and their assertiveness is taken by males as an affront to them. In the context of jokes, male trade



unionists label them as having marital problems, lesbians, angry and problematic. Power relations between men and women are not viewed as the problem; instead women themselves are viewed by men as the problem. Whenever men make fun of gender concerns, especially in the presence of women, remarks such as “*Wag kayong magbiro may masasaktan*” (Don’t crack jokes someone will get hurt) or “*Uy, bawal ang sexist jokes. Magagalit si \_\_\_\_\_.*” ( No sexist jokes, \_\_\_\_\_ will get mad at us) are often heard.

- **Anything that concerns gender as butt of male jokes.** Many male trade unionists do not genuinely support nor are committed to help support the women’s struggle. For women leaders, male articulation of anything gender is mere lip service, gender issues form part of male jokes. As such, women are faced with a difficult struggle. Aside from labelling women, male trade unionists creatively make jokes with sexist innuendoes to annoy the women. For instance, the Basic Women’s Awareness Seminars (BWAS) was renamed by male trade unionists to *Mga Babaing Nawawala sa Sarili* (Women going out of their minds) and the Women Workers’ Forum (WWF) to World Wrestling Federation with innuendos on the physiques of some women leaders.

## **Strengths and Gains of MAKALAYA**

Though still in the process of struggling to win a difficult revolution, MAKALAYA has achieved significant milestones in the trade union movement in its almost two decades of existence. In viewing MAKALAYA’s performance in this struggle, Hega (2003) opines, thus:



One can always use the analogy that it is [either] “half-full or half –empty” depending on who looks at it. But the solidarity of trade unionists and community women into a community of learning and mobilization is a battle won. Women overcoming the gender divide and creating a space for women leadership and reforms in the realms of organizations, workplaces and State institutions is a major step for gender fair society. It’s a long way but in this case the steps are as good as objectives fulfilled. The small gains and the big victories are changing gender relations in the various contexts of the individual members and of the allied organizations (p.11).

With almost two decades of practice, MAKALAYA has already achieved gains in both trade unionism and changes in national labor laws and standards. These include:

- Women workers are empowered to address gender issues in the workplace;
- Increase in awareness on sexual harassment among trade union members;
- Members realize the importance of gender issues and conditions of discrimination against women;
- Integration of benefits in the CBA provisions such as menstrual leave, full salary and service charge during maternity leave in addition to the social Security System benefits for hotel workers;
- Adoption of an Anti-Sexual Harassment policy for companies;
- Inclusion in the CBA provisions such as refraining women from working beyond midnight, provision of support stockings for pregnant women, light work assignments during pregnancy, and paternity leave;
- Formation of women’s committees in trade unions; and



- Provision of comfort rooms and dressing rooms for women (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2003).

In organizing women, some of the strengths of MAKALAYA are as follows:

- **Utilizing non-traditional entry points in organizing women.** It has adopted “non-organizing” activities to create venues and opportunities for women workers to come together and talk. Livelihood seminars, sportsfests, stress management sessions and focus group discussions, among others are utilized by MAKALAYA to reach out to women and establish contacts on an individual basis. For instance, yoga class is used as an opportunity to discuss women’s health issues; and information gathered during the sessions were used in organizing and educating women in communities.
- **Putting feminism in organizational practices and culture.** MAKALAYA ensures that its chapters are autonomous by having their own constitutions and programs. Chapters are encouraged to decide on their own as long as these conform to the organizational principles and beliefs of MAKALAYA. However, MAKALAYA requires its chapters to submit reports to ensure that they are practicing the principles of MAKALAYA. If they are in difficult situations, chapters seek the assistance or advice of the National Office (NO), while MAKALAYA upholds decisions made by chapters. To cite a particular example, in a sexual harassment case against a teacher, a MAKALAYA chapter member sided with the harasser. Since such act runs counter to MAKALAYA principles, the chapter elevated the case to the NO for decision.



Instead of suspending the member, the NO provided the member with information and reasons why MAKALAYA does not tolerate sexual harassment acts and allowed the member to decide for herself. Eventually, she left the chapter.

- **Combining women's practical needs with political consciousness.** MAKALAYA explores various approaches to reach out to women workers. Though its work is political, it does not ignore the practical needs of women especially in the communities. Thus, livelihood seminars are utilized to organize women or consolidate members. In identifying livelihood for a particular group, MAKALAYA gives priority to products that the area is known for and tap local women as trainers. For instance, in Zamboanga, when indigenous women expressed their need for livelihood programs, MAKALAYA responded by providing livelihood training in *kakanin*-making, of which the province is noted for. Aside from seminars that cater to women's practical needs, MAKALAYA provided community women with education programs to deepen their awareness on gender issues. On the other hand, for women who are in Women's Committees of trade unions and who are already graduates of LEARN seminars, MAKALAYA's approach is focused more on trade unionism and gender issues.

### *Issues and Problems*

As discussed in the previous sections, the problems of women trade unions in the past still resonate at present. Despite the gains and good practices that could be culled from its experience, MAKALAYA is faced with these problems and challenges:



- **The dilemma of “organizing the organized.”** Recruiting trade union members from women’s committees for membership in MAKALAYA draws resistance especially from male leaders who consider this strategy divisive. For them, union work should be the priority of members and other involvement outside the unions are dealt with resistance and hostility. Despite being part of the union structures, Women’s Committees’ activities are considered “non-union” work by male members. As Hega (2003) puts it, “any additional expression outside the union structure but concerns workplace issues is seen as a competition, if not a diversion. As such, pressure is experienced by women workers in becoming active members of MAKALAYA.”(p. 10)
- **“Double-burden” of women in the trade unions.** As MAKALAYA puts more efforts in developing women leaders with gender perspective, it deconstructed the concept of power as inner capacity and does away with male-oriented leadership that prevails in the trade union movement. Instead, it focuses on “unknown” women who may not be vocal and articulate but have the capacity to care and nurture other women. However, when these women developed leadership capacities, they are given more tasks and responsibilities by trade unions, eventually they experienced double burden in balancing responsibilities between the trade union and MAKALAYA. And in most cases, it is women’s concerns that are set aside.
- **Diversity as both strength and limitation.** MAKALAYA has a diverse membership. Women from various backgrounds come together to share knowledge, skills, experiences, and resources and create a community of women. For instance,



women from trade unions train women in the communities about setting up cooperatives. For MAKALAYA, creating confluence among women of diversity is considered one of its strengths, however, it is also a limitation. Given the diversified composition of its members, it has put forth too much effort in responding to the needs of its diverse constituency, especially in terms of stretching out its financial and human resources as well as efforts to respond to the multiple needs of its members.

- **Women's committees as expression of tokenism and gender divide.** With the presence of women's committees, male trade unionists become too complacent to exert more effort to appreciate and own women's issues as part of trade union issues. Due to the availability of women, it becomes an excuse for male unionists not to attend gender education justifying that it is women's concerns and there are already women who could be participants. Men simply provide lip service since their unions already have women's committees. Moreover, formation of women's committees further segregates men's and women's work. As compared to other union committees, the women's committees are not given the appropriate recognition by unions. Issues raised by women's committees are considered "side issues" or "just women's issues" that could easily be "disposed" had bargaining negotiations went rough. Such male trade unionists' attitudes only reflect trade union culture that makes it difficult to mainstream gender concerns into trade union issues. In addition, men viewed the women's committees as women's responsibilities while theirs is trade union work. Thus, creating a new gender divide.



- **Sub-contracting scheme pits workers against each other.** As much as trade unions do not want to lose their workers, the strategy of sub-contracting as practised by companies has pitted workers against each other. In Basilan, as Coca-Cola shifted to sub-contracting strategy in distributing/marketing their products, its consequential outcome is the retrenchment of sales personnel. As the trade union puts too much effort to retain its sales personnel and resists sub-contracting, the situation also creates livelihood opportunities for informal workers of which some are MAKALAYA members who plan to be Coca-Cola distributors. Though such plan is still on hold, situations like these will eventually be encountered in other firms (Hega, 2003). This situation calls for trade unions to rethink its strategies in handling the issues of informal work and retrenchment due to sub-contracting.

## **Lessons Learned and Future Challenges of MAKALAYA**

Based from the experience of MAKALAYA, the following insights can be gleaned:

- Feminist values, processes and practice offered an alternative “way of seeing and doing things” that other organizations can learn from.

Perhaps trade unions can learn from MAKALAYA’s approach in organizing women workers. The feminist values and processes as practiced by MAKALAYA have effectively empowered and developed women’s leadership capacities. Strategies such as giving



attention to women's actual conditions in the home and the workplace, organizing where the women are and considering diverse needs of women are effective strategies to mobilize women workers.

- The need to link the formal and informal workers as part of a particular industry.

As sub-contracting becomes the standard practice of companies, it is inevitable that workers are pitted against each other. Hence, trade unions should think of new organizing approaches outside the traditional trade union organizing. The link of formal workers with sub-contracting workers in the production chain can be further explored to develop strategies that fit to these new set of workers and work relations.

- The importance of women's spaces.

Giving attention to creating women's spaces is an important consideration for MAKALAYA. Autonomy is a political need for women to develop their confidence and capacities. Autonomy is a necessity to develop women-focused initiatives that respond to particular practical and strategic gender needs and interests. The history of trade unions as discussed in the previous sections showed that when women's space is not considered, women are compelled to create their own spaces and organizations outside the trade unions.

- The need for trade unions to respond to both the practical and strategic needs of women workers.



The trade unions can learn from MAKALAYA on the need to respond to both the practical needs and strategic interests of women workers. Practical needs can be used as entry points to organizing women or to consolidate women. As long as the practical needs of women are ignored no amount of political orientation and education efforts will be effective in mobilizing women for trade union work.

- Develop and empower women through redefinition of power and deconstruction of leadership.

MAKALAYA has succeeded in developing women leaders by giving emphasis on the redefinition of power and reconstruction of power relationship. Unlike the traditional trade union notion and approach to leadership development, MAKALAYA developed women's leadership through tapping the innate and creative capacities of women. It focuses on developing caring and nurturing leaders concerned with the needs of members involved in both productive and reproductive work. Such leaders are more concerned in developing a community of women through learning the value of collective life and democratic processes by learning, working and struggling together.

### **Some Potential for Replications of the MAKALAYA's Organizing Experience**

MAKALAYA's organizing experience is rich in lessons as well as potentials for replication. Some of these include:



- *On organizing strategies and the importance of SMU.* MAKALAYA's combination of a feminist perspective and social movement unionism is a good approach in organizing women workers. The feminist perspective helps to analyze the situation of women workers both at the spheres of workplace and home. The once private issues arising from the home as a result of the gender division of labor and socialization have been made "public" and have become demands and themes in campaigns and bargaining negotiations. On the other hand, MAKALAYA's adoption of the SMU in organizing women workers has proven the following points:
  - > MAKALAYA's organizing approach and processes has showed that the traditional union organizing approach is no longer viable *vis-a-vis* dwindling union membership. Organizing beyond the confines of formal workplaces and extending union representation and agenda to other women workers is necessary since globalization has given birth to new sets of workers that also entails a new set of organizing approaches and strategies.
  - > It showed the importance of organizing women workers since a great number of women are now drawn into work both at the formal and informal economies. Likewise, women's participation in leadership is crucial in the revitalization of trade unionism especially nowadays that union membership is dwindling. The experience of MAKALAYA has shown that women can be organized and once organized, they can be potential leaders and organizers.



- > Forging alliances with other groups both at the local and international arenas and participation in other social movements is necessary for an organization like MAKALAYA to legitimize their struggle as well as to rally support for workers' struggle from other groups. At the same time, forging alliances with international groups and networks is advocating for the internationalization of the workers' struggle.
- > By applying the SMU strategy of utilizing labor-community organizing, MAKALAYA has established networks and coalitions between formal and informal workers as well as between trade unions and community organizations.
- > MAKALAYA's struggle and advocacy does not limit itself to economic issues and concerns but also include engaging in political struggles covering a wide range of issues from gender, human rights to the environment. Being a member of AKBAYAN partylist is a means towards this goal.
- *On encouraging active participation of women.* MAKALAYA's strength in organizing women workers can be attributed to two strategies. First is the removal of barriers to women's entry to participation in collective initiatives. These consist of tactics that include advocacy for affirmative action and policies that set quota for women's representation, establishment of organizational units within trade union structures like women's desks and committees, conduct of gender awareness targeting husbands and encouraging them



to share in housework and engaging supportive male leaders and members in women's activities. Second is the creation of enabling mechanisms such as the provision of day care services during seminars and meetings, creating spaces for women to develop their confidence and leadership, creating a support group for women to process emotional and physical trauma caused by abuse, and scheduling meetings and other activities based on the limitations and convenient time for women. The efforts at raising male awareness on gender issues and rights and encouraging their involvement in housework is a strategy to address women's multiple burden.

As a way of ending this paper, rather than presenting a conclusion, instead, some questions are raised and posed as challenges to MAKALAYA as well as to those in the trade union movement:

- Will involvement in both the trade unions and MAKALAYA reinforce double burden to its women members? Is there no other way to balance involvement of women in both trade union and MAKALAYA so as not to create double burden to women workers? How will women's committees achieve autonomy while within the union structures?
- Will the attempt to combine trade unionism and community organizing strategies strengthen or weaken the trade union movement? Will the simultaneous organizing of women in the formal and informal sectors weaken organizational focus?
- How can unions address the issue of workers in the formal and informal sectors being pitted against each? And being part of the production chain in a particular industry, is there a



possibility for trade unions to carry the issues of informal workers in bargaining negotiations and vice versa?

- What new organizing strategies can unions adopt to address the issue of dwindling membership of trade unions and the growth of workers in informal work arrangements?
- Does the formation of an all-women structure within the trade union movement only reinforce the gender divide? Up to what extent can men become involved in pursuing the struggle for gender equality in the workplace?

These questions are dilemmas for trade unions as well as for MAKALAYA as long as these remain unanswered. The experience of MAKALAYA in its attempt at organizing women workers in the formal and informal work is still a “project in progress”. But in relation to the trade union movement, MAKALAYA is in a situation of continuing struggle for a difficult revolution. As the educator-trade union organizer Alice Hanson Cook<sup>6</sup> (Briskin, 2004) asserted in the book, “Women, Still the Most Difficult Revolution,” organizing women is indeed and will continue to be a difficult revolution.

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The concept on social movement unionism (SMU) in general focuses on the need for trade unions’ struggles to go beyond the confines of the formal workplace as well as national boundaries, in alliances with other social movements. It was first introduced by Peter Waterman, retired professor at the Institute of Social Studies in the Netherlands in the late 1980s and from then on the discourse on SMU was further developed by various authors that resulted in variations of meanings. However, the most



popular is the “class/popular-community” formulation by Kim Moody. Waterman criticizes Moody’s formulation and re-conceptualized SMU as “class/new social movement unionism.”

<sup>2</sup>It was Maxine Molyneux (1985) who suggested the need to identify women’s two types of interest: practical interests which arise from women’s condition based on the sexual division of labor and strategic interests which arise from women’s position of having unequal access to resources and power. Practical interests include welfare needs like food, shelter, clean water, health, care, income, education, credit, etc. They are short-term and easily identifiable by women themselves but meeting them do not change the subordinate position of women in society. Strategic interests include gender equality, woman’s emancipation, measures against male violence, elimination of gender division of labor, the elimination of discrimination, etc. They are long-term, common to all women and not easily identifiable by women without consciousness raising efforts. However, Kate Young (1987) asserted that a distinction has to be done between the two because it is important to differentiate wants or lacks from objectives that require collective action that could propel some change in the present social order. Thus, Young recasted them into practical gender needs and strategic gender interests. In the context of planning the “practical gender needs and strategic gender interests” concept is used as a tool of analysis.

<sup>3</sup>In 1923, Act 3071 (or the Women and Child Labour Law, an Act requiring employers to provide seats and separate toilets and lavatories for women workers) was enacted to regulate the employment of women and children. The Act also forbade women to work in mines.

<sup>4</sup>Enacted in 1952, RA 679 established equal pay for equal work of women and men, and it also required employers to grant their female employees a 14-week maternity leave with 60% of their salary as payment.



<sup>5</sup>Information in this section is drawn heavily from discussions with Mylene Hega and Tes Borgonios, trade union leaders and officers of MAKALAYA

<sup>6</sup>Alice Hanson Cook (1903-1998) devoted her life for the workers' cause, especially women workers. Her career spanned years of involvement in social work, adult education, labor organizing, foreign service and 20 years of teaching at the Cornell University's School of Industrial Relations and authored several books and articles including The most difficult revolution: Women and trade unions (with Val Lorvin & Arlene Kaplan Daniels, 1992). She was a pioneer in bringing women workers' issues like maternity leave, pay equity and comparable worth.



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