

WOMEN WORKERS IN HERSTORY:
THREE SNAPSHOTS*

Jurgette Honculada**

REVISITING AND RECLAIMING THE PAST

As we gather today to celebrate our double milestone—
Women's Month and the tail-end of the Centenary of the Philip-
pine Labor Movement¹, I recall Bertolt Brecht's lines²:

*Did kings haul the blocks and bricks?
And Babylon, destroyed so many times—
Who built her up so many times?
Where did the masons go at nightfall
When they finished mortaring the Wall of China?
Caesar beat the Gauls.
Didn't he at least have a cook with him?*

Brecht's lines bespeak the class blindness of mainstream history. As we celebrate the Philippine Labor Centenary with the proclamation of May 2002 to April 2003 as the centenary period, we must be keen to the double bind women workers and unionists face, gender blindness in addition to class blindness.

* This paper draws heavily from *Working Women of the 18th Century* by Ma. Luisa Camagay, University of the Philippines Press, 1995, as well as the 1998 report of the SENTRO research team entitled "100 Years of Working Women".

**Commissioner for Labor, National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women (NCRFW); and general secretary, National Federation of Labor (NFL).

With the remarkable exception of a Bureau of Women and Young Workers photo exhibit, most centenary-related activities have highlighted the roles of male founders and heroes. Paraphrasing Brecht, we ask: where were the women workers and unionists in history?

There is a need to view history from the underside and to trace the women on its margins. We must learn to count women and thus to make them count, and this is not mere word play. We must mark their milestones and track the deficits in their struggles. Women must learn to re-read history to learn its lessons well. With such revisiting, the past can become a guide out of the current impasse, and a beacon to a future that makes sense.

March 8 Began with an Unsafe Workplace

March 8, International Women's Day, looms large in the history of women and work. On that day in 1857 textile and garment women workers marched in New York to protest low wages, inhuman working conditions and a 16-hour working day. Six decades later in 1908 as many as 30,000 women marched for an eight hour workday, suffrage and a stop to child labor. Most poignant of all, thousands filled New York City's streets in March 1911 to mourn the deaths of 175 garment workers, mostly young women from European migrant families, in a factory fire.

In 1917 ten thousand female textile workers went on strike in St. Petersburg, adding fuel to what would become the conflagration of the Russian Revolution. Finding one day inadequate to celebrate women's gains and mark their shortfalls, Filipino women in and out of government moved in concert to have March proclaimed as Women in History Month.

Some Vignettes and Three Snapshots

Being neither a historian nor an academic, I propose that we start the re-telling of history with a few vignettes and three snapshots. In this undertaking, we cite the groundbreaking work of women historians and social scientists who, besides having prodigious research and analytical skills, were armed with an attitude and a viewpoint. For example, Elizabeth Eviota has written extensively on the conjuncture of class and gender and Ma. Luisa Camagay painstakingly burrowed into French archives to produce *Working Women of Manila in the 19th Century*. History, after all, needs to be demystified and here we note that the Bible is, among other things, a series of narratives of extraordinary events in the lives of ordinary people.

To Begin, Chronologically

The labor of Filipino women in the informal sector dates back to the 18th century with women working in services, sales and trade, and garments and textiles. But women's labor goes back to the dawn of her-story. Eve thought to partake of the fruit of the tree of knowledge and for this act of autonomy and agency, she was, from then on, condemned to bear her child in *travail* which is French for labor but which in English intimates the pain and suffering attendant to childbirth. Thus, women were the first workers, laboring in the very act of procreation. But it is no simple act, being part of a package deal that includes and marks child care and house work as women's lot, as well.

WOMEN IN THE INFORMAL SECTOR: 18TH CENTURY IN THE ISLANDS

In the 18th century women were engaged in services as, for instance, *criadas* or domestic helpers and *comadronas* or

unlicensed midwives and *hilots* (chiropractor). They were also occupied as *tenderas* or storekeepers, *vendadoras* who sold goods at home, on the streets, in the markets and other trading centers. They were also engaged in garment and textile production as *costureras* (seamstresses) and *bordadoras* (embroiderers).

Prostituted Women

There were four categories of prostituted women in the 18th and 19th centuries: those based in prostitution houses, the street walkers, those who provided home service, and those home-based. Then as now, society did not look too kindly on them. Official records indicate that 17 women were deported in 1842 to Davao for the offense and 26 of such women were deported to Palawan in 1872. They were mostly young, in their teens to the 20s, and migrants from the provinces promised jobs in the city. A century and a half later, it's the same old story, only the figures have multiplied.

Snapshot No. 1: the Cigarreras of Manila

Factory-based production in the country started with the establishment of tobacco factories in Manila and Cavite in the 18th century with the introduction of the tobacco monopoly in 1782. It is ironic that a (largely) male vice ushered in formal female labor. Three of the four Manila-based factories solely employed women for their deftness and perceived honesty. Camagay writes that according to archival reports, it was the male cigarette workers and porters, rather than the *cigarreras* who were involved in smuggling. The earliest records of 17,000 tobacco workers counted 4,000 women in this number; at the close of the 19th century the women tobacco workers had reached 30,000.

The *cigarreras* of Manila were a stable and reliable workforce, but neither were they submissive nor subservient as evidenced

by a strike (*alboroto*) they staged in 1816 on the issues of underpayment of wages and usurious practices, sexual harassment (by a *maestra* or lead worker, also female), verbal abuse and arbitrary treatment. The strike resulted in prohibition of usury, dismissal of violators, and regular and transparent wage payments.

Cigarreras and Emerging Themes

A number of themes emerge with the advent of a formal labor sector through the establishment of tobacco factories. One is the creation of labor standards with fixed working conditions such as wages and hours of work (and even maternity leaves). A second theme is the institutionalization of the quota system with wages dependent on output. Yet another theme is internal migration: many cigarette workers hailed from the deprived areas of Bulacan. A fourth theme was police harassment: outside the factories, the *cigarreras* were subject to harassment by rural police (*cuadrilleros*) who raided their homes at will and maltreated them.

Finally, the beginnings of occupational segregation is noted with men taking higher positions such as foreman (*capatas inspector*) and team leader (*cabo de cuadrilla*) and women forming the bulk of production workers as *cigarreras*. In an ironical twist, Camagay notes that “[t]he employment of women ... made the males assume occupations which were usually considered feminine” such as weaving, housemaids and even as *lavaderos* or washermen. In other words, the scarcity of females for housework compelled men to move into women’s work.

Snapshot No. 2: Maestras— Young, Mobile and with Initiative

The *maestras* or female schoolteachers came to the fore with the secularization and sex-segregation of primary and intermediate education in 1863. Teaching was the vocation of choice

for middle-class women and the *maestra* was usually young with 18 as the average entry age. They were also mobile as evidenced in the case of a teacher from Pampanga, in Central Luzon, who was assigned to Laguna in the southern Tagalog area, and later to Tondo in Manila. Some *maestras* were known to have opened private schools, reflecting great initiative.

Maestras and Emerging Issues, Gender and Otherwise

Three issues may be highlighted, the first being the gender pay differential: in 1863 male and female teachers received uniform pay but three decades later, women received only 60%-66% of men's pay by law. A second issue was that female teachers were "married to the profession" with a disproportionately high incidence of single women or spinsters in the teaching profession. One can only speculate whether this was related to the Maria Clara model of womanhood as a paragon of virtue.

In contrast, Camagay tells of the *sinamayeras* (sellers of a native fabric called sinamay) who could, apparently, receive suitors in the shops they worked in. A third issue was the revolutionary engagement of teachers as evidenced in the report that 29 male and 12 female teachers were dismissed from teaching in 1896 for involvement in revolutionary activities.

Snapshot No. 3: Professional versus Unlicensed Midwives

The third snapshot focuses on what might have been one of the earliest instances of a conflict between formal and informal sector workers. Unlicensed midwives commonly assisted women in childbirth, their preponderance evidenced in the three appellations by which they went: *matronas*, *comadronas* and *parteras*.

With the professionalization of the vocation through the establishment of schools of midwifery, the young and licensed midwives or *matronas titulares* threatened to upstage their older colleagues. But the older and more experienced midwives prevailed over the *titulares* with continuing public support and demand. This episode marks the introduction of the division between formal and informal or non-formal labor.

RE-READING HER/HISTORY: DÉJÀ VU

Feminists read history as cyclical rather than linear and this seems to be borne out by the issue of the gender wage gap. In 1930 women in manufacturing received 30% of men's pay, in 1961 women workers got 60% of men's, dropping to 54% in 1978. In the 1980s women in agriculture and manufacturing received 37% and 66% of men's pay, respectively, with women in services drawing a percentage in-between both sectors. One reason for the wage gap was unequal work: while *cigarreras* constituted majority of the workforce, the *capataces* and *cabos* were male.

Two Approaches, Then and Now

One approach to these gender-related problems is to say "So what? The problems (wage gap, double burden) have been with us for the past 286 years and will remain until the next millenium". But the *cigarreras* have shown the way by launching in 1816 what could arguably be the first strike in Asia. Do an *alboroto* and win your demands. This was demonstrated in the 1930s when 30,000 male and female Alhambra cigar workers massed at Malacanang to press for gender demands (equal pay for equal work) and to oppose child labor. In the 1980s Bataan

economic zone workers, mostly young and female, went on strike and slowdown in defiance of martial law prohibitions.

THREE CHALLENGES

- First, revisit and reclaim your past.
- Second, be politic and claim your space.
- Third, use your imagination: rethink and redefine.

Challenge No. 1: Reclaiming our Past

We address this challenge by first confronting the enemy within for the struggle for gender equality is the toughest nut to crack. Often we are our own worst enemies when we settle for second place or automatically defer to men whether at home, workplace or union. We must do our homework and reclaim our historical space and in so doing, we can better put stakes on the present. We must let her-story infuse and inform our trade union culture and concerns.

Challenge No. 2: Writing Herstory by Taking Power

At the core of our efforts towards gender equality and equity lies the issue of governance, women's leadership in unions. If we do not take our place at the table of decision-making, we will forever be consigned to the margins. What difference will gender make in governance? New priorities, for one thing, pushing gender issues at the bargaining table (child care) and budgeting for women's training and leadership. New ways of celebrating, for another, making labor celebrations (such as Labor Day) more inclusive of family. New ways of negotiating (win-win rather

than win-lose) and of education (e.g. hiring babysitters so union members with babies can attend seminars).

Challenge No. 3: Forming new Symbols, Forging new Strategies

When reality is a dead-end, try fantasy, not as escape but as creation. On the one hand, trade union culture has largely developed to suit males who are not saddled with a double burden, hence late nights out, long bargaining sessions and week-end meetings. On the other hand, the terrain of industrial relations has fundamentally and irrevocably changed but our organizing formulas have not kept pace.

Trade union culture must become more inclusive, addressing both men's and women's demands. The women are saying life and work belong together and the three classic contradictions must be overturned (mental vs. manual, rural vs. urban, male vs. female) for the trade union movement to be relevant to the present and to its new constituencies. Trade union practice must likewise seek new paths rather than stick to outworn organizing formulas. We must form new images in our heads and new strategies on the ground, each one informing and strengthening the other.

And so, in the Philippines, We Celebrate

- 100 years of women and unions
- 286 years of women and formal labor
- 400 years of women and informal labor
- women and labor *ad infinitum*

... through debate and discourse, with song and verse, in play and work, with the best of us and the worst of us.

I would like to end with a reflection paraphrasing feminist Claudia van Werholf, who said that in the end we must lay claim to our birthright as women: the land, our houses, our children, the fruits of our labor.

End Notes

¹The first Filipino union, *Union Obrera Democratica*, was founded in February 2002.

²*Questions of A Worker Reading History* (translated by David Johnson), n.d.