

WITHER WOMEN'S HISTORY?

Ma. Luisa T. Camagay

Introduction

This is an opportune time to assess the level of writing on women's history in the country. It is common knowledge that the interest to write the history of women started in the seventies as a result of the growth of the feminist movement and the development of social history in the West. The shift in history from political and diplomatic approaches toward social history paved the way for the inclusion of women in the historical narrative. We are therefore indebted to this kind of history.

In this brief paper, I wish to focus on the following topics: 1) the marginalization of the Filipina in our historical narrative; 2) the role of sources in writing the history of the Filipina; 3) the oral history method; and 4) the issue of periodization.

Join me in my review of the past writings on women's history in the Philippines.

The Marginalization of the Filipina in Historical Narrative

The Filipina, like her sisters in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the rest of the Western world, has been made invisible and marginalized in history. This adverse condition foisted on women fortunately has strengthened the solidarity of women from all corners of the world to assert their proper place in history.

The terms 'invisible' and 'marginalized' are often used in Western literature to describe the fate of women in historical

accounts. Two schools of thought try to explain why these terms and women go together. One school of thought believes that women have been marginalized and made invisible in history because most of the historians were men who focused mainly on political and diplomatic history. Family and society, which are the traditional fields of women, have not been considered important. The shift of interest from political to personal and social concerns was a consequence of the development of social history and historical demography as new disciplines. Furthermore, this school asserts that there are not enough sources available from which to base the history of women.

The second school of thought, on the other hand, is convinced that women's invisibility and marginalization in history are not due to lack of sources. There are in fact many sources according to Joan Wallach Scott. Unfortunately these are not what traditional historians consult. These are the iconographic evidences such as pictures, literature, diaries, letters, and those that are derived from oral history.

Feminist regards the study of the history of women as an important key toward women empowerment. But to learn from the past, which is the wellspring of women's strength, we have to use the discipline of history.

The Marginalization of the Filipina in Philippine History

It is said that every generation writes its own history. This history reflects the primary concern it confronts. It is on this premise that the writing of history of women was initiated in the 1920s. Women then were advocating for their right to suffrage.

The first known book written on the history of women in the Philippines appeared in 1928 when Ma. Paz Mendoza-Guazon wrote *The Development and Progress of the Filipino*

Woman. This was followed in 1934 by a book written by Encarnacion Alzona entitled *The Filipino Woman: Her Social, Economic and Political Status, 1565–1937*. The two books aimed to make the legislators realize the relevance of reviewing women's history in order to appreciate women's potentials and contextualize the women's right to vote. It is to be recalled that through a plebiscite, women in the Philippines were granted the right to vote.

It took sometime before these types of books reappeared. Instead, what proliferated were history books written by men like Teodoro Agoncillo, Nicolas Zafra, and Gregorio Zaide. Only in the 70s was there a resurgence in the interest on women's history due to the feminist movement in America and Europe. The agenda of this period was the liberation of women from invisibility and marginalization. Women in the Philippines realized how these were reflected in the lack or absence of women in historical narratives. One look at the index of the book *A Short History of the Filipino People* was enough to validate this point.

Sr. Mary John Mananzan, Wilhelmina Orozco, and others came out with writings which questioned women's invisibility in history. Their sentiments on the matter ran parallel with those of Gerda Lerner as *compensatory history* (Lerner 1979:325). This type of history sought to redress the wrong traditional historians have done to women by making women take a central role and create a space in history making. In this type of history, the women who are written about are those who managed to achieve what men have accomplished. In the *theory of contribution history* (*Ibid.*:326), on the other hand, the achievements and contributions of women in society are listed. Examples of this type are the books *Women of Distinction, Filipino Women in Nation Building: A Compilation of Brief Biographies* by Herminia Ancheta,

and *The Valiant Women: Biography of Filipino Women* by Aura Sabilano. There is nothing wrong with this type of historical narrative as it is part of the process of writing women's history. It has been accepted by feminist historians that this is simply a transition where women are included just to fill in the gaps in the framework set by men and not by women. Because the framework is insufficient, feminist historians are exploring other sources, methodologies, and approaches that could match the complexity of women's experiences. They say that in women's history, women's lives, experiences, and consciousness should be well documented.

Let us therefore proceed to the sources of women's history.

The Role of Sources in the Writing of Women's History

Sources are important in writing women's history.

Two positions are held regarding the sources of women's history. One states that there is a dearth of sources and that this is the reason for women's absence in historical narratives. The other states otherwise: there are enough sources on women but these are not properly utilized. As traditional history regard written sources as the only legitimate sources for analyzing and writing history, it is not difficult to comprehend why women are rarely, if ever, mentioned in written history. And yet, there are written sources that have been ignored by male historians. These are letters, diaries, autobiographies, and memoirs. Aside from these sources, New History is now tapping unwritten but legitimate and verifiable sources such as things used and created by women like the pots, baskets, woven cloth, pictures, rituals, and even food that they cook; tales, poems, songs, and some such culled from oral history.

Joan Scott has this to say on why available sources on women's history are not utilized:

It is clearly not the absence of information about women but the sense that such information was not relevant to the concerns of history that led to the invisibility of women in the formal accounts of the past (Scott 1988:10).

We can still make use of the traditional sources of history but they must be viewed from a feminist perspective. This is what is meant by looking at history in a new light. The time has come for us to be critical with regard to the presentation of women in the traditional sources. This feminist perspective is still being glossed over even by men historians who try to explain the invisibility of women in historical narratives (Perrot in Kleinberg 1988:48).

Letters are rich sources of information about women's feelings, sentiments, and even their views of day-to-day events. This is what Patricia Arinto did with the letters of Rizal's sisters (Arinto in Kintanar 1996:181–190).

We can no longer use the alibi that there are no sources of women's history. It is high time that we systematically set up a clearing house or information center specifically for women. We can categorize these sources into four, namely, 1) printed sources on women, 2) private papers such as letters, diaries, and memoirs, 3) tape recordings of interviews, and 4) iconographic materials (*op. cit.*:52).

The products of the oral history breed into the creation of new historical sources. Oral history is not a history in itself but a method of gathering data from the past. This method is developed in the belief that only through narration could ordinary people become part of history. This method is a response to the desideratum to include the experiences and the past of ordinary folks. This is what is called 'history from below' or 'history of the inarticulate'.

It has been considered that ordinary people are not only objects of history but also subjects or contributors to the overall production of knowledge. When a sentiment or view is transcribed and written, it becomes a new historical source.

Oral History as a New Methodology

Through oral narration, the voices of women are heard and from there a new perspective and new knowledge is formed.

Many feminists think that despite the frequent use of oral history, its full potential is yet to be fully explored. They are therefore suggesting an interdisciplinary feminist methodology for this purpose.

What is this methodology that will be used in oral history? The interdisciplinary feminist methodology involving the various disciplines in history, sociology, and psychology is needed to have a fuller understanding of women's consciousness. To better comprehend the history of women, it is not enough to note down the doings and experiences of these women (domain of history) but also to investigate the deeper meanings of these events to them who are after all the subject of the narration (domain of sociology and psychology).

With the growing use of this method, we must learn to listen to the stories of women. In here the expert is not the one asking questions or investigating, but the person being asked or investigated. Through oral history, a woman can narrate her experiences and reflect on the meanings of these experiences, and can thus situate and find her own place in society or world where she belongs. Let us also look into the meanings of these experiences through her choice of words. It is said that the language use and discourse of men and women differ. If our intention is to highlight the voices of women, then we should be faithful and sensitive to the lan-

guage they use, for their language mirrors their interaction with the dominant patriarchal culture that molds history and society. Let us listen closely to the tales of women and consider that they, too, have value and integrity.

From our talks with women, we discover many things. For example, sociologists used to say that work and family are two separate social aspects until this was disproved by women's experiences. For women, family and work are closely interrelated. This only proves that aspects in women's lives are closely intertwined and wholistic.

Let us tackle another subject in the writing of women's history. This is the issue of periodization.

The Issue of Periodization

The purpose of periodization is to organize an overwhelmingly complex history. We divide the past in order to study it systematically. However, periodization that is based on political and diplomatic events is criticized as inappropriate for analyzing women's history. It is said that this method is an excellent proof that history favors men. Wars, political events, and rulers are standards for establishing periodization in history.

While it is widely believed that changes in the status of men will immediately result in the changes in the status of women, such is not always the case. An example of this is what Kelly-Gadol said about the Renaissance Period. According to her, Renaissance brought changes only to men and not to women. Hence, using this male-centered periodization in history will not be reflective of the women's experiences.

What is recommended, therefore, is a type of periodization that is anchored on the experiences of women and not only on men. While we cannot expect a particular period common

to all women, it is, nevertheless, important to note that there should be different periods for women according to their respective places in society, their experiences, and areas of origin. Periodization, therefore, should reflect the rich history and culture of women.

Conclusion

Wither will history of women go?

From where I am I see a moving away from compensatory history and contribution history that are both transitional histories. It is hoped that the direction writers of women's history will take will divert from the traditional themes where women are victims of male oppression, and, instead, show women as active individuals charting their own destiny and future. We, feminist historians, hope to see the day when women's history will move toward a universal history which envelopes the stories of various genders in society: women, men, homosexuals, and lesbians. Then and only then can we properly document humanity's history.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alzona, Encarnacion. 1934. *THE FILIPINO WOMAN: HER SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL STATUS, 1565-1937*. Benipayo Press.
- Arinto, Patricia. 1996. "Reading Correspondences: A Critical Analysis of the Letters Between Rizal and His Sisters." In *REVIEW OF WOMEN'S STUDIES*. Edited by Thelma Kintanar. Vol. V, No. 2; Vol. VI, No. 1, pp. 181-190.
- Du Bois, Carol Ellen, Kelly Gail *et al.* 1987. *FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP: KINDLING IN THE GROVES OF THE ACADEME*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Humm, Maggie. 1992. *MODERN FEMINISM: POLITICAL, LITERARY AND CULTURAL*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Lerner, Gerda. "The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History," pp. 325–326.
- Kleinber, S. Jay. 1988. RETRIEVING WOMEN'S HISTORY. Berg/UNESCO.
- Michelle Perrot. "Making History: Women in France," pp. 48–52.
- Scott, Joan Wallach. "Making History: Women in France," p. 10.
- Richardson, Diane and Victoria Robinson 1993. INTRODUCING WOMEN'S STUDIES: FEMINIST THEORY AND PRACTICE. London: The Macmillan Press.
- Tiglao, Amaryllis. Editor. 1989. THE FILIPINO WOMEN IN FOCUS. UNESCO.