

RETURNING WOMEN'S MEMORY: SOME NOTES ON A GENDER-SENSITIVE HISTORICAL METHODOLOGY

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Pinning Our Hopes on History, But What History and Whose History: A Critique

Assessing the substantive (meaning the subject matter of history) and methodological (meaning the process of writing history) dimension, history—Philippine History—has been male-dominated, elitist, colonial, and generalizing. The history of history would show that its early period gave emphasis on written sources, which are collectively called documents. The no-record-no-history principle has confined the preoccupation of writing history to the literates and articulates. In patriarchal societies, literacy is a male domain. In communities and societies marked by social hierarchies learning (i.e., formal education) and writing become the domain of the upper class and the males. This explains the elitist character of historical methodology, which resulted in the production of historiographies from the upper-class-male perspective.

Before nationalist historiographers provided a reinterpretation of our past, a survey of written sources and historical reconstruction would show that the writing of history was the preoccupation of the colonizer (white and also male). Many of these colonial writings were in the forms of ethnographies, e.g., *relaciones*, *estadismos*; most of them written with the purpose of acquainting the colonizer with the ways of their subjects.

The overemphasis on the process of state-formation has resulted in a generalizing history—one that has emphasized the Philippines as a unitary social group—thus, undermining the heterogeneous character of the population in both its cultural matrix and economic development. This generalizing history has hampered the process of sifting through significant particularities—temporal and spatial contexts, differences defined by cultural factors, class, gender, ethnicity, and others which are all essential in the formulation of historical explanation. The reduction of many local histories to a generalizing national history has resulted in the marginalization of many sectors of Philippine society in historical writings.

The myth of objectivity anchored on the positivist tradition has also reduced history to mere narration and chronology. This is one feature of traditional history that has been challenged by feminist historical research. For a history that is woman-centered and is concerned with the subjectification of the woman in the whole process of historical reconstruction is antithetical to the positivist tradition. The aforementioned features of history have contributed in the invisibility of women in our history.

Towards a Gender-Sensitive Historical Methodology

If history could propagate subservience, it can equally serve as a subversive mechanism for the shaping of a liberating consciousness. Thus far developments in history augur well towards a more meaningful and gender-sensitive historical reconstruction.

Just as many social sciences have recognized triangular method (the employment of several research techniques), historians have begun to adopt a broader perspective regarding the possible sources for the reconstruction of history. Aside from written sources, historians have accepted the impor-

tance of oral history, oral traditions, and physical evidence, e.g., artifacts.

Schweitzer and Voldman have drawn the conclusion that the use of oral history is very much akin to women "since women have committed much less to writing than have men." Further, women have used verbal communication more than the written word (Schweitzer and Voldman in Perot 1992:41). Oral history provides women the opportunity to narrate. But historians are also reminded that the application of oral history does not guarantee a feminist methodology. Feminist Kristina Minister warns of the male socio-communication system which has been dominant in the conduct of interviews. Thus, she suggests that "what needs to be altered for women's oral history is the communication frame, not the woman" (Minister in Gluck and Patai 1991:27-41).

In the ultimate analysis, the value of a feminist oral history is in the reflexive process whereby both the narrator and the researcher have become subjects of the research process.

The growing recognition of the importance of oral history as a methodology towards a female-centered history evolved in consonance with the emphasis on local histories. The shift from center to periphery or peripheries recognizes the plural contexts particularly in the Philippines. Local histories allow the unfolding of historical reconstructions founded on unique developments. This is in contrast to reconstructions that simply locate local articulations of national events.

Local history as a methodology has been significant in locating Filipino women in specific historical contexts. For instance, in Philippine history specifically the events at the turn of the 19th century, the Katipunan has been the favorite arena for the search of historic women and heroines. But this is not the only temporal and spatial context for women's participation in history. Varied conditions in the Philippines

created a spectrum of roles and historic women. In a similar manner, colonialism though a shared experience created not a singular pattern but varied impacts on communities; those in the mainstream of colonial polity, e.g., Manila and its immediate environs and many urban centers, were affected differently in contrast to those areas that sustained resistance and maintained a great degree of territorial sovereignty, e.g., the Cordillera. All these particularities are captured not in a generalizing history but in a local history.

These methodologies fill the inadequacies of the traditional reconstruction of history. There are howls of protests regarding the biases in favor of a women's history. But the exclusion of women, thus their invisibility in Philippine history, has resulted in a shortcoming that requires a form of historical rehabilitation.

So, what importance would documents (written sources) have in the light of the new history, a women's history? The previous discussion does not completely dislodge the use of the written word. Just as history is a never-ending discourse, historical accounts also continue to undergo reinterpretations. The feminist framework should contribute to deconstruction of documents. Historians and researchers should become aware of the value of internal criticism in order to detect the invisibility of women in accounts.¹

Locating the Historic Woman: Attempts at Feminist Historical Research

The Dialogical Relation Between Social Contexts and Women's History. In generating a women's history we also generate society's history. The following diagram shows that in the process of locating women and making them visible in historical writing, one should consider social contexts lest the attempt at reconstruction will simply fall into the trap of

mere narration of important persons, places, and events. Explanation founded on causal relations is the crux of history. Women are not marginalized in a social vacuum; historical explanations of the process of marginalization are essential in the reconstruction of a women's history.

In the following account, a friar-chronicler described a Cordillera woman involved in a resistance:

Hence by means of a sorceress, a priestess of his named Caquenga he (referring to the devil) began to disturb the Indians to whom this wicked said such things that many determined to follow the rites of their ancestors and not to receive the teaching of the divine law. So devilish was this cursed anitera that she kept stirring up some of them against the religious. . . and crying "liberty!" they fled to the Mountains (Blair and Robertson, THE PHILIPPINE ISLANDS. Vol. 3 1:267).

In applying internal criticism and deconstruction, how should the following account be reinterpreted?

Who Is the Historic Woman? There has been a 'decline of hero ethics' resulting from the 'feminization of culture', according to Featherstone in his article "The Heroic Life and Everyday Life." There is the continuing shift to the use of historic woman instead of heroes and heroines. Featherstone remarked:

If everyday life revolves around the mundane, taken for granted and ordinary, then the heroic life points to its rejection of this order for the extraordinary life which threatens the possibility of returning to everyday routines, but entails the deliberate risking of life itself.

The everyday world is the one which the hero departs from, leaving behind the sphere of care and maintenance. . . . A basic contrast, then is that the heroic life is the sphere of danger, violence and the courting of risk whereas everyday life is the sphere of women, reproduction, and care.

Generating a Historical Periodization

Social Contexts (Community/Society)

(Nodal/turning points, e.g., crisis situations like a natural disaster, new technology, resistance movements, economic depression, etc.)

Women's History

Women in the context of identified nodal points

In specific life histories, how do historic women evolve?

The process of locating heroines usually results in the search of the masculinized female, one plucked from the everyday life. The concept of historic woman captures and preserves the woman in her domain or sphere and social context. In the seminars conducted by the National Centennial Commission-Women Sector, a common concern was the set of criteria for spotting and selecting historic women. Since women evolve in different historical contexts, setting parameters for a historic woman will negate feminist methodology. There could be general questions though that could be addressed like: a) the impact the woman has created in the community or social group; and, b) the contribution of the woman to the upholding and advocacy of women's rights

and cause. But the actual impact and the actual contribution of the historic woman should be determined by social contexts.

The compendium of historic women's lives would result in a spectrum of roles—non-traditional but also traditional, (which could have been sustained, and could have contributed to the recognition of women/women's cause).

What Questions to Ask. Feminist historical research is a rejection of the structured research methodologies that require a uniform instrument for data generation. With women's history, women get to talk to their fellow women without having to be mediated by a male.

The following general data categories could provide a guide for a meaningful life history of the historic woman: personal data, description of the woman's contribution, the community's collective memory of the woman, events that served as constraints in the woman's life, people who influenced her decisions, life changes, views of the woman regarding her being a woman, the events of her time.²

In the end the empowerment of women rests on their control of their past, their history.

Endnotes

1. In historical methodology, written sources are subjected to two types of criticism. External criticism aims to authenticate a written source while internal criticism addresses the issue of credibility. By credibility is meant the motives and circumstances behind the production or writing of an account.

2. This set of data-categories has been a result of discussions with my colleagues at U.P. College Baguio in an initial exercise at an attempt to write a women's history in Northern Luzon.

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