

**MILITANT AND NATIONALIST ORGANIZERS:  
THE FILIPINO WOMEN IN THE 1906  
ISSUES OF *MULING PAGSILANG***

**Judy M. Taguiwalo**

Today, there is a growing enthusiasm to document women's role in the different epochs of our history, thanks primarily to the women's movement and women's organizations. However, there are challenges that we still have to confront, one of which is the need to clarify the role of women in the people's struggle during the American regime. So much has been written about the intense struggle of the peasants and the workers against the oppressive policies of this period in our history but these are gender-blind. Most of the literature on women's struggles focused mostly on the suffrage movement where it is made out that women from the elite class predominated.<sup>1</sup> Not much is on the other struggles of under-class women.

This paper aims to contribute to the efforts of documenting the struggle of the Filipino working class women during the American regime. It will attempt to reconstruct the picture of the Filipino women as gleaned from the pages of the 1906 issues of *Muling Pagsilang*, a nationalist newspaper published in Manila from 1903 to 1908. These are found in the archives of the University of the Philippines Diliman Main Library and Philippine National Library.<sup>2</sup>

**Context of the Newspaper**

*Muling Pagsilang* was published from September 1903 until 1908 as a sister publication of *El Renacimiento*. The period of its circulation coincided with the first decade of American colonial rule in the Philippines.

On July 4, 1901, the American colonizers declared the cessation of war and transferred power from the military government to a civilian authority. By then President Emilio Aguinaldo had already been captured and was made to swear allegiance to the American government. To stabilize the newly installed colonial government, several steps were undertaken. The Sedition Law, which made it a punishable crime for anyone to criticize the colonial government, was enacted. Elections were also held in some selected provinces if only to show American commitment to liberal democracy. Participation was, however, far from being democratic. Excluded were members of the under class, who, even then, were already perceived to be sources of social disequilibrium. The right to vote was confined to members of the upperclasses, who were likely to uphold the colonial Establishment. These were the men who could read and write in English or Spanish; at least 23 years of age; with a total net worth of at least P500, or paid at least an annual income tax of not less than P30; and, above all, had sworn allegiance to the American government. The Americans were, of course, proven correct in their perception of this group of people. Not even a decade passed, and already, some of them formed the Federalista Party, which not only worked for the acceptance of American rule but also lobbied for the Philippines as a state to be annexed to the United States of America.

But while there were those working for the destruction of the sovereign Republic of the Philippines so valiantly fought for by our foreparents, the culmination of which being the Revolution of 1896, there were also those who did not cease to work for its survival and betterment. The armed struggle for Philippine Independence continued in different parts of the Philippines such as those led by Ola in Bicol, Sakay in Tagalog region, the Pulahanes in Leyte and Samar, and the Filipino Muslims and ethnic groups in Mindanao. And even

when the colonial rulers tried to put an end to such struggles for a sovereign Philippine Republic by promulgating several laws such as the Anti-Bandit Law in November 1902, and the Reconcentration Act of 1903, the people's struggle in various fields continued (Agoncillo:241–242).

Political parties and loose aggrupations advocating for independence through the parliamentary struggle were formed especially after Governor General Luke E. Wright's announcement that the general elections would be held once hostilities in the Muslim provinces ended (Corpus:547, 550). Among these were the Partido Nacionalista, the Independistas, and the Immediatistas—all advocates of immediate independence from the United States (Corpus:551).

The people's nationalist sentiments were also manifested in journalism and literature. Through the newspapers, novels, and even theatrical presentations, whether written in Spanish or English, Filipinos continued to express their resistance to American domination and their aspiration for independence. According to Agoncillo:

*Sa likod ng mahigpit na pagbabala at pagbabawal na banggitin man lamang ang salitang "kasarinlan" at makisangkot sa ano mang kilusang may layong kumatig sa pagsasarili ng Pilipinas, ang mga manunulat sa Tagalog at sa Kastila—yaong hindi napalukob sa pamahalaang kolonyal at ayaw tumanggap ng biyayang kaloob nito sa mga kulaburetor—ay hindi natakot at lalo pa manding pumalaot sa kanilang pagtutol at panunuligsa sa mga Amerikano (Agoncillo:243). (Despite strict warnings and prohibition of mentioning even just the word 'independence' and involving in any form of activities which aims to promote Philippine independence, writers in Tagalog and Spanish—those who have not accepted the colonial government and refused to accept the privileges accorded to collaborators—did not show fear and, instead, openly expressed their dissent and criticisms against the Americans.)*

Side by side the struggle for independence was the struggle of the working class for higher wages and better terms and conditions of work. It was around this time when workers took to labor unionism. For example, in the Carmelo and Bauerman Printing Press, employees that included four women, organized the first labor union on August 17, 1901 (Scott:11). This union, together with other workers' unions formed later, would unite to form in 1902 the *Obrera Democrata*, a federation of 150 unions with a total of 10,000 individual members including the workers' families. The federation served as a mechanism for cooperation among the workers, and for spearheading strikes, not to mention mass actions such as the May 1, 1903 demonstration held in front of Malacañang (Constantino:362).

### **The *Muling Pagsilang***

The newspapers, *El Renacimiento* and *Muling Pagsilang*, both owned by Martin Ocampo, were known to be at the forefront of Filipino newspapers critical of the American colonial rule (Agoncillo:241). While *El Renacimiento* was established in September 1901, *Muling Pagsilang*, its Tagalog counterpart, was established on September 3, 1903, with Lope K. Santos as editor (Santos:29).

Santos describes thus the usual content of *Muling Pagsilang*:

*Ang mga karaniwang inilalathala namin sa Tagalog ay ang articulo de fondo, o pangulong tudling, mga bahaging nauukol sa paglilibang o masasayang lathala, maiikling kasaysayan, dagli o mga kuru-kurong may mga tuligsa at mga salitang laban sa pamamalakad ng mga Amerikano. Mahalaga sa mga mambabasa sa Tagalog ang mga ito higit sa mga balita, kaya't kung hindi rin lamang malalaki at mahahalagang balita, ito'y bihira namin ilathala . . . . Isa sa mga lathala namin sa araw-araw ay pinamagatang "Buhay sa Maynila" . . . na naglalathala. . . ng*

*mga pagbibiro, panunukso, pag-aliw sa mga mambabasa at pagtudyo sa mga maling nangyayari sa bayan* (Santos:31). (We usually publish articles that are editorial in nature; those that entertain, provide a historical background, and contain opinions critical of American rule. These articles are more important to our Tagalog readers than the regular news, hence, we rarely print news articles unless they involved big and important news . . . . One of our daily sections, "*Buhay sa Maynila*" [Life in Manila], contains articles that entertain and tease the readers, and satirize the wrongdoings in our land.)

Santos further mentioned that the newspaper was distributed through direct subscription and not peddled in the streets as commonly practiced today.

*Muling Pagsilang* usually had four pages and came out daily, except on Sundays. At times, a two-paged supplement called "*Dagdag sa Muling Pagsilang*" would be printed to include additional news and commentaries. There was no editorial box to speak of nor bylines for every editorial and news articles written. The regular column, "*Buhay sa Maynila*," only had a *nom de plume* but the writers of serialized novels like *Banaag* at *Sikat* and "Letters to the Editor" had their names printed.

A variety of local and foreign events, especially those related to the struggle of the Filipinos, were reported. These included the activities of the Pulahanes, the trial of Macario Sakay, the outbreak of cholera, the Cuban Revolution, and the Russo-Japanese War. The paper was generous in providing space for the announcements and reports of activities of workers' unions, news about independence-related initiatives, and reprints from other newspapers. News coverage was not limited to Manila as the newspaper also included events in other parts of the country (like the killing of the American governor in Davao by a native tribal chieftain). Other regular sections included a column on learning the Tagalog language,

and paid advertisements from paper and book stores, lawyers' offices, and occasionally from government agencies.

*Muling Pagsilang* was forcibly closed in 1908 as a result of a libel case filed against its publisher, Martin Ocampo, and *El Renacimiento* editor-in-chief, Teodoro Kalaw, by Interior Secretary Dean C. Worcester, who felt referred to as the predatory bird described in the editorial "*Aves de Rapina*." The Supreme Court found the case in favor of the litigant and ordered the closure of the paper. As if that were not enough, all the assets of these newspapers were foreclosed and confiscated in 1910 (Santos:35).

### **The Filipino Women from the Pages of 1906 Issues of *Muling Pagsilang***

As earlier mentioned, the Filipina as a suffragist was the picture commonly portrayed during the American regime. Not much is written about the women who actively participated in the movement for workers' rights and welfare, and the movement for national independence.

What initial picture can we draw from a critical reading of the pages of the 1906 issues of *Muling Pagsilang*?

A cursory reading would yield a blank frame, especially if one uses the presence of women's names in the editorial box. Indeed, there was not a single woman in the editorial board of this newspaper.<sup>3</sup> But, upon closer scrutiny, the frame is far from blank nor small. Inching their way into this space are writers to the editor, members of organizations advocating independence, resolute organizers of women's associations, militant protesters daring to negotiate with the American Governor General and other high ranking officials.

### **Writers to the Editor**

One Francisca B. Aquino from Taguig, Tipas, Rizal answered the newspaper query and request for opinions from

the readers regarding the return of the friars to the different towns in the Philippines. In her letter dated 12 July 1906, which appeared in the August 13th issue, Aquino introduced herself as a *'babaying dahop sa dunong'* (woman lacking in education) but nevertheless daring enough to answer the question because "*sinomang Pilipinong may pagmamahal o pagmamalaskit sa kanyang lupang tinubuan ay hindi matitiis na di sagutin ang tanong na ito*" (any Filipino who has love and concern for the country's welfare cannot afford not to answer this question). Aquino rejected the idea of the friars' return because of the havoc they have inflicted on the land. According to her, even Filipino priests who are pro-friars should also be evicted. In her opinion there were already enough church administrators and, anyway, should there be a need for more, she suggested the setting up of a seminary as what Bishop Maximo Aglipay, who founded the Philippine Independent Church in 1902, had done. She further called for the boycott of these friars and their services like baptism, wedding, and masses, and of their other religious products.

Pilar Lazaro was a prolific writer to the newspaper. Her articles commonly expounded on the need for women to be involved in social issues. In one of her articles which appeared in *Kapatid ng Bayan*, another Tagalog newspaper, and reprinted in the August 13th issue of *Muling Pagsilang*, she wrote that women, like men, have the "capability to think and form opinions regarding ways to improve the conditions of our suffering nation."

Another article of Pilar Lazaro entitled "*Isang Anyaya sa mga Babayi*" (An Invitation to Women) appeared on the front page of the August 20th issue of *Muling Pagsilang*. In this article, Lazaro called the attention of women to form a committee that would "unite our brother-politicians toward a better way of establishing our country's independence and sovereignty."

There were immediate responses to Pilar Lazaro's invitation. The very next day her piece appeared, one Aniana Trinidad gave her concurrent opinion. On August 22nd, Sinforsosa Castillo, Lucia Santos, Rosario Lopez, Maria Luisa Peñaflo, Felipa Patricio, Tomasa Torres, Urbana Garcia, Elena Reyes, Maria Mendez, and Maria Perez sent the same concurring views while extending their solidarity in the newspaper, *Kapatid ng Bayan*. The women in "Palanyag"—Maria Faustino, Catalina Pascual, Carmen Quiogue, Alejandra Santos, Bibiana Cuevas, Juana Hernanguela Santos, and Aurelia Santos—also sent their desire to join through another newspaper, *Kapangyarihan*. Two more letters of concurrence from Josefa Velasquez of Diaz, Looban Trozo and Sabrina Salazar of Daang Cervantes were printed in the August 23rd issue of the same newspaper. Irene Bulaon, on the other hand, wrote a letter which expressed her agreement with Lazaro's plan but wanted to see the unification of all those working for independence, including even the collaborationist 'federalistas'. A specific date and a place for the meeting were proposed by Remedios Sayo of (Trozo) San Jose.

Pilar Lazaro wrote another letter invitation on September 1, 1906, for the unification efforts, but no article appeared regarding the realization of this plan in the succeeding issues of *Muling Pagsilang* in that year.

### **Members of the 'Kilusang Independista'**

Sometime in August 1906, in Nabutas (now Navotas) the *Lupong Independistas* was formally founded and officers were elected. While only men were elected, it is worth mentioning that a woman spoke, together with Fortunato Quintos, Lope K. Santos, and Angelo Angeles, in the assembly. Her name is Sotera Santiago (August 6th issue).

The feat of Sotera was surpassed by Tarcila Antonio. She was not only the lone woman speaker in the founding meeting



of *Lupong Independista* in Bakood (Cavite) on August 11, 1906, which was attended by 700 people, she was also elected as the Second Secretary garnering 109 votes from a total of 500 votes cast. She also sat and actively participated in a meeting that lasted from 7:00 up to 11:15 p.m., which certainly was way beyond the traditional hours for women to be outside of their homes during those times<sup>4</sup> (August 13th issue).

Another woman was also elected in the founding meeting of the *Lupong Independista* in Pateros, Rizal on August 26, 1906. Salome Siolo was elected as 'Vice Secretaria' and received 137 votes, the highest number of votes ever received by an officer in that election. She and Carmen Sulit, together with Lope K. Santos and Nicasio Manalo, were the speakers in that meeting prior to the election (August 27th issue).

While it can be argued that not all organizations had women members and that Salome Siolo and Tarcila Antonio only held the position of second secretary, their election meant that in the *Independista Party*, there was already a certain level of acceptance of electing women in leadership positions at a time when women did not even have the right to vote in the country.

### **The Protest of the Divisoria Women Vendors**

The perception that women during the early part of the twentieth century were confined to the three K's (*Kirche* or church, *Kuche* or kitchen, and *Kinder* or child) should be shattered by the 1906 *Muling Pagsilang* reportage on women's struggles in the labor movement. For example, there is the report on the collective action of women vendors in Divisoria.

In a news article entitled "*Mga Tinderang Dumaraing*" (The Women Vendor Protesters) which appeared in the August 7th issue, there was already an allusion to the previous protest activities of the women vendors in its lead paragraph:

*Hindi lamang ang mga nagtitinda sa Divisoria ang dumaraing. Ang mga nasa pamilihan man ng Dulumbayan ay nagsitutul din laban sa bagong pasya ng mga pinuno tungkol sa pagdaragdag ng singil sa kanila.* (The vendors in Divisoria are not the only ones who are protesting. Even those in the Dulumbayan market are also opposed to the new management policy of increasing market fees.)

August 6th issue bannered the confrontation of many women with the Governor General and that a certain Luciana de la Rosa spoke to present their demands. The Governor General responded by telling the women vendors to “*magharap ng isang kasulatan at doo’y itala ang mga pinagbabayaranang matwid*” (put down in writing their requests and what to them are just market fees).

A related news article appeared in the August 17th issue regarding the removal from office of all municipal employees in the Divisoria market by Mayor Roxas due to the employees’ anomalous collections and charging of higher rates than the official ones.

On August 18, Saturday, several women vendors approached the office of *Muling Pagsilang* to announce their plan not to sell in Divisoria on that day as a protest. They were opposing the high municipal fees and the plan of selling several stalls. According to them, they only have very small capital and could not compete with those who have bigger capital.

The protest action seemed to have an impact. On August 20, 1906, Miguel Velasco (this member of the Junta Municipal of Manila was perceived as the brains behind the tariff increase) and a certain Mr. Hastings met with the Governor General to explain their decision to auction off the stalls in Divisoria. In the news report, the Governor General seemed satisfied with the explanation and he then ordered Velasco to meet with the protesting women vendors and explain to them the bases for such a municipal plan (August 21th issue, page 1).

The meeting between Velasco and the women vendors of Divisoria was held on August 21, 1906, at 4:30 in the afternoon. Velasco proposed to auction off stalls in Divisoria which were not frequented by people, while the existing stalls would not be sold openly but the vendors still have to pay the new tariff: two centavos for every square foot for stalls in Divisoria and one centavo for stalls in Kinta because fewer people pass in that area. The plan was greeted by a strong howl of protest from the vendors. They cried: "*Puera ang subasta! Puera ang subasta!*" (No to auction! No to Auction!) and "*Ayaw kami! Ayaw kami!*" (Reject! Reject!) to the new plans. They also shouted "*Welga! Welga! Mabuhay ang welga!*" (Strike! Strike! Long live the strike!) as their response to the plan of increasing the tariff on the stalls (August 22th issue).

The strong opposition of the women vendors was due to the fact that an increase in the tariff would mean more than a hundred percent increase from what they were used to paying. For example, said one woman vendor, the plan would increase to 65 centavos the 30 centavos she was paying. The ambulant vendors, mostly those selling vegetables, dried fishes, and fish vendors are few compared to those with stalls, especially the meat and textile vendors (August 22th and 27th issues).

Another meeting was held on August 27 between the vendors of meat, fish, clothes, vegetables, shoes, cigarettes, pots, and others; members of the Municipal Junta; a certain Mr. Hord, who was with the Internal Revenues; Mr. Cromwell, a market assessor and collector; and a certain Mr. Markenzie. Pedro Paterno was the lawyer for the Divisoria vendors. According to the vendors, it was only Mr. Velasco who was eager to implement the new tariff. Mayor Roxas agreed to the proposal of Paterno of raising the tariff but only after January 1907. The protesters' response was a loud cry, "*Ayaw, ayaw kami. Ibig namin ang dating taripa*" (August 28th issue). (Reject the new plan. We want the old tariff back.)

After several months of absence in the newspaper, the Divisoria women vendors' protest appeared once more in the issue dated December 10, 1906, when almost all vendors went to the American Governor General to show their opposition to the imposition of the new tariffs. According to them, the fees were exorbitant for those with very little capital. Governor General Smith immediately called for Miguel Velasco, the alleged proponent of the new rates, to explain the new policies. However, the Governor General did not face the women and only instructed his secretary to relay his message to the protesters that they should form a committee composed of eight women who will meet with the former. The news article ended with a statement that "*handa na ang lupon nilang binubuo ng walong babayi na haharap sa gobernador-general*" (December 11th issue). (The committee of eight women is now ready to meet the Governor General.)

The reasons for the strong opposition to the imposition of new fees in Divisoria appeared in the column "*Buhay sa Maynila*" that had '*Bubuyog*' (bee) for a byline in its December 19th issue:

*Kami po'y mga tindera dito sa Divisoria na dati dating nagbabayad ng dalawang peseta isang araw at may puesto fijo kami. Ngayon po ay tinaasan ng municipio ang upa. Tumutol kami, paano po ito ay sa binili na namin noong araw ang mga puestong iyan. Sino ang magsasauli ng kuwintang ibinili namin?*  
(We are women vendors in Divisoria who used to pay only two pesetas a day for our stalls. Now the municipal government increases our rent. We are opposed to this because we have already bought our respective stalls. Who is going to return the money we paid for these stalls?)

On December 21, after a four o'clock afternoon meeting at Dulaang Rizal, women and men marched toward the Ayuntamiento to meet with the Governor General. They brought with them two 'cartel' (statement) written in Tagalog and Spanish, which stated that "According to Art. 67 of Carta de Manila, the people

are requesting the abolition of the new tariff and for the reopening of the Divisoria market.” A certain Dr. Lukban was mentioned as the leader of that protest action. He and several men and women went to the Governor General’s office for a meeting that lasted for one hour. They presented to the American official a statement signed by 3,000 people. An elderly woman, who was not a vendor but who joined in the meeting, spoke and aired her sentiments. She requested for the reopening of the market because of the inconvenience its closure had inflicted on the public.

In response, the Governor General formed a committee to investigate the grievances of the Divisoria vendors. It was composed of Felix M. Roxas, Tomas Arguelles, and Mr. Cromwell of the Internal Revenues. The committee was tasked to analyze whether the new tariff was too much and to present their findings on February 15, 1907.

### **Women as Organizers**

Women did not only participate in collective protests but also become active members of organizations fighting for independence. Some even established their own organizations that promoted cooperation or mutual self-help among its membership.

In the August 25th issue, a news article appeared on page one about a plan to establish a work group to be composed of embroiderers, seamstresses, and laundrywomen, written by an ‘unnamed well-known lady from Maalat’. The plan was to organize an association of women from these three occupations that will accept job orders. The association would have a commission of 25 % (25 *por* 100) for every work accepted by the members which would be used as a providential fund for sick or unemployed members. However, the organization would be administered by a management committee. There was no subsequent news about this plan.

There was a more detailed description of a women's organization established on November 4, 1905, called '*Sinag ng Marikina*' (Light of Marikina). The organization was intended for recreation, education, and livelihood activities and was composed of two sections. The first section was 'Club o Bahay Lupunan' that took care of the education and recreation and the other was 'Bahay Hanapbuhay' that took care of the livelihood projects. The members contributed five centavos every week for the organization and two pesos as part of the capital buildup for a store they were planning to set up.

The leadership of *Sinag ng Marikina* were Julia Ortega, president; Severina Lopez, vice-president; Josefa Marcos, secretary; Fermina Santos, treasurer; and Crispina Agapito, Crecenciana de la Cruz, Ambrosia Santos, Maria Salvador, Benita Francisco, Maura Francisco, Pricilla Fernando, and Maria Bruno as consultants (December 3rd issue).

It can be gleaned from the statement of *Sinag ng Marikina* dated 25 November 1906 of their recognition that women's role extends beyond the confines of the homes and should encompass the development of the country:

*(T)ayong mga babayi'y hindi nilikha upang maging isang hiyas lamang ng bahay at umasa sa magagawa ng sariling lakas, kundi may katungkulan din naman makipisan at makipagkaisa sa mga bagay na nahihinggil sa kagalingan lalo na't nauukol sa ididilag ng bayan na siyang HARI ng lahat ng mamamayan* (December 3rd issue). (We, women, were created not merely as jewels of homes and to rely on our capabilities, but we have a duty to participate and cooperate in activities that will promote the development of our country, which is paramount over all citizens.)

The statement ends with a declaration that membership in the organization does not diminish their femininity.

*Halina mga kabinibini at mga kababayan, at ito'y hindi kasagwaang makapupusyaw sa dangal ng ating pagkababayi,*

*kundi ito'y luwalahati at puri ng ating bayan at sa katapusa'y taga pag-alaala sa susunod sa atin.* (Come, women and compatriots; it is not a disgrace on our womanhood, instead, it brings glory and honor to our country and leaves a lasting legacy for those who will come after us.)

### **Conclusion: One More Link Toward the Creation of a Militant History of the Filipino Women**

While preliminary, the picture of the Filipino women, as gleaned from the pages of the 1906 issues of *Muling Pagsilang*, is one proof that contrary to the common portrayal of the Filipino women as meek and subservient, Filipino women were nationalist, militant, and feminist. Our sisters in 1906 continued the militant struggle for their rights as espoused by the *maestra at cigarrera* (teachers and cigarette vendors) at the turn of the 19th century, and the nationalist tradition of the women members of the uprisings against the Spaniards and of the Katipunan. They pursued the tradition of protest journalism and writing as started by Rosa Sevilla and Florentina Arellano of *La Independencia*. And they initiated the advocacy for equal rights between women and men, which would heighten in the 1930s in the campaign for Filipino women's right to vote.

There is a need for further research and study to validate and reinforce this conclusion and to analyze the condition and factors behind the militancy of women who participated in social concerns and collective actions during the American colonial rule in the Philippines. There is also a need for a paradigm shift: from a man-focused conceptual framework to one that is woman-focused. As the paper shows, unless the researcher is looking for women s/he will not find them.

### **ENDNOTES**

1. The women written about by Sturtevant and Doeppers were exceptions. Sturtevant wrote about Salud Algabre, the woman who

joined the Sakdal strike in 1935, while Doeppers wrote about the women workers who launched a strike in 1934.

2. The University of the Philippines-Diliman Library has limited issues of the *Muling Pagsilang*. It has only the issues of July 2-5; August 6-31; Sept. 1-30; Nov. 7; and Dec. 5-28. The Philippine National Library has fewer with only the following issues: Feb. 24; July 6, 7, 9, 10-13, 16-21, 23-28, and 30.

3. There were two women, Rosa Sevilla and Florentina Arellano, who wrote in the September 3, 1808 issue of *La Independencia* under the editorial guidance of Antonio Luna (Landicho: 13).

4. In his autobiography, Lope K. Santos mentioned Tarcila Antonio as a woman of right age who joined in the search for witnesses for him in a libel suit regarding his news on the zoning in Cavite. It was also in Tarcila Antonio's home where Santos stayed while in Cavite and where the witnesses met before being brought to Manila (Santos:34).

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