

Abstract

**Working Women of Manila
During the 19th Century***

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The work documents the life of gainfully employed women in the 19th century. Seven occupations of women were studied, namely the *cigarreras* (tobacco factory workers), the *matronas titulares* (licensed midwives), the *maestras* (teachers), the *criadas* (female domestic workers), the *tenderas* and *vendadoras* (store owners and vendors), the *costureras* and *bordadoras* (seamstresses and embroiderers) and the *mujeres publicas* (prostitutes).

With women often absent or marginalized in the pages of history, the study attempts to unravel through archival sources and other non-documentary sources like literature and iconography the life of these working women. Despite the meager archival materials on women and more specifically working women, this study prides itself in having used primary sources to document working Filipino women during the Spanish period.

The study's significance not only lies in the point of view of the kind of sources utilized but also the focus of the study. Women belonging not to the elite class but the laboring class become the focus of our investigation. It is about time that the life of women from the laboring class be documented and recognized by history.

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It was evident in the course of the study that despite the pursuance by the Filipino woman of traditional occupations such as *maestra*, *tendera* and *costurera*, she manifested a surprising assertiveness which is a far cry from our stereotyped notion that the Filipino woman during the period was an embodiment of timidity and coyness. The *cigarreras* for instance were known to stage strikes referred to as *alborotos* in order to demand wage increases and better working conditions.

One of the task of *la nouvelle histoire* or new history is precisely to document the marginalized sectors of society like women. It is in this context that the author took an interest in the life of the working Filipino woman in the 19th century. Interestingly, gender discrimination already existed during this period as evidenced by the low wages received by the *maestras* compared to the *maestros*.

Moreover the working Filipino woman had to reckon with the presence and influence of the friar. Application for work or for professional examinations like the case of the *maestra* and the *matrona* required a letter of reference from the friar. Not only that, the *maestra* was directly responsible to the friar who acted as the local school inspector. Petitions of prostitutes asking for a commutation of their banishment to Balabac or Davao necessitated a letter from the friar attesting that the petitioner had indeed reformed.

These are just some of the findings in this preliminary work on the history of the Filipino woman. For how are we to trace the development of the Filipino woman from a historical perspective if we ignore their past. Hence this work on the working woman of Manila in the 19th century.