POSSIBILITIES OF THEORIZING IN THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT: The Philippine Experience*

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Between the time I submitted my abstract for this paper and its delivery, a lot of things, mostly my feelings, underwent change. Allow me then to share some of these feelings (anxieties and fears) and questions on the topic.

First of all, when I received a copy of the program, I was overwhelmed by the company I was in. I have always admired the struggles of the Palestinian women and to be with them in a panel entitled 'Women in Political Turmoil' is indeed an honor for they, among others, would have one of the most powerful struggles in the world. Immediately the question that confronted me was how our struggles are similar or different and in relation to my topic, what is the level of theorizing in both our movements?

Our Different Contexts

The first point I would like to bring up is on the different levels of theorizing of the women's movement all over the world and the importance of contextualizing the theorizing that is going on in our countries. Everytime I visit First World countries, I am simply overwhelmed by the shelves and shelves of books that have been written on women. They cover all sorts of topics from participation in the labor force, women's work at home, women's culture, feminist ideology, and of course feminist theories. Aside from feeling envious, i.e., I wish that we had the same number of books, I cannot but wonder at the many women hours that have to go into the writing and making of these books. The next question I ask myself is: to what extent have these books altered the lives of women in these countries; how many women have read them?

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*This paper was presented at the International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women held at Hunter's College in June 1990.

As I reflect on the realities of the women's movement in the Philippines, where women activists are involved in other mobilizing women, educating themselves as well as their fellow women, organizing rallies against the US bases and its impact on our women, mapping our strategies on how to be more effective organizations for women and of course, taking care of our children, I ask myself who, among the women activists, have the free time to do the reflecting and then the writing. The realities in the Third World countries like ours is such that the urgency of our needs has always preceeded the "luxury" of pausing for a moment and analyzing where we are going.This condition results in the seeming absence of Third World contribution in the realm of women's studies theory. Of course, another effect of the proliferation and dominance of feminist books from the First World is a new type of colonial mentality where feminism from the West is accepted to be the universal brand of feminism. In many instances, assumptions and paradigms from the West are adapted by feminists in the Third World without due consideration of the particular socio-cultural, political and economic context that they live in. Does this mean then that there is no theorizing being done in our movement?

Academician/Activist Dichotomy

To my mind, the answer lies in how we define theorizing and this leads me to the second point: the dichotomy between the academician and the activist. We are so familiar with this because, in our countries, one is either an academician or an activist, but never both. For many years, we have been limited by the belief that the academician is an objective observer of social reality and therefore has the important role of explaining society. Her many years in the University qualifies her for the crucial task of theorizing. The activist, on the other hand, is seen as a partisan player whose life is devoted to protests, organizing and other "political" activities. Many believe, academicians included, thats such activities prevent her from the "more rigorous" responsibility of reflection and abstraction.

It is unfortunate that we continue to reinforce such a dichotomy. In this conference, for instance, the powerful presentation of the issue of violence against women has elicited reactions as if it isn't scholarly enough. What is scholarly then? Is it scholarly if it were being devoid of feelings and anger or in social science language, if it were objective?

Meantime, perhaps as a response to the sometimes detached and clinical presentation of women's issues by women in the academe, women activists have found no use for such formulations in their everyday political work. Preconceived notions of the delineation and "proper roles" of academicians and activists are therefore perpetuated and reinforced through this practice either as members of academe or as participants in political movements.

In the Philippines, we are also faced with such a dichotomy but we are slowly dealing with it. We realize that to be able to move forward, women from the academe, who have become more sensitive to the needs of grassroots women, and women activists, who have become tolerant of the demands of the academic world, should work together. Hence we have women social scientists talking to grassroots activists on the process of doing research, and grassroots activists substantiating the academicians formulation of the intersection of class and gender in our country.

I am not saying that the ongoing relationship between activists and academicians in the Philippines is without problems. There are tensions that arise from their respective understanding of the tasks ahead but I think the dialogue has in a way tempered women is academicians from making a career out of women's lives and women activists from the dangers of action without reflection.

One can not deny that some women academicians have written books and undertaken research on women as part of a conscious desire to build university career and not necessarily out of a genuine desire to help oppressed sisters. While activists have criticized this as a form of opportunism, this does not automatically diminish the possible contribution of such projects towards the understanding of women's conditions.

It is also true that the demands of organizing, educating, mobilizing and other political activities can be so great that reading up, reflecting and writing are considered luxuriesin comparison. The inability of government to tolerate pluralist ideas has often resulted in state repression and this is added tension to these women activists. Yet there is still a need to stress that the rich political work activists are involved in contain, in fact, the seeds of theorizing. If people are able to pause and reflect on their experiences, this in itself constitutes input and a valuable contribution to theorizing in the women's movement.

I therefore argue that it is time to do away with this dichotomy of academicians and activists. While we have to deal with it in our present realities, we have to slowly change such practice beginning with ourselves. We are slowly, but surely, learning to complement each others' strengths. In the process of working together, we hope that academicians would take up the cause of the activists and the latter, the rigor and discipline of reflection. Theory is not built in the relatively secure grounds of universities. Nor is it found solely in political organizing. For the moment, theorizing is only possible if there is a dialogue between the so-called "thinkers" and "doers". We are working towards that future where the passion for a better world and the discipline for reflection would have been found in all of us.

Collectivization of Theoretical Work

One of my greatest anxieties about this paper is that this is a personal reflection without the benefit of a collective critique. It is based only on personal experiences and snatches of discussion with some women activists but there has not been any serious collective discussion of it and to my mind this is one of its great limitations.

Theorizing requires a continous, conscientious process of collective thinking where the experiences of women are validated not as each one's individual phenomenon, but as a social one. Therefore, an important ingredient for women's theorizing is participation in the women's movement where dialogue and systematic reflection in themselves are considered indispensable goals.

This process is not without problems. First of all, the women's movement is not made up of one variety of women (although some men would say that all these women hate men) but it is, in fact, a heterogenous lot—married, single, separated, lesbians, no children, many children, college graduate, elementary school graduate, organizer, researcher, teacher, artist, poor, middle-class, worker, peasant, writer, catholic, protestant, indigenous and a whole lot of different identities. When women come together, they all bring in their different backgrounds, and yes, different levels of awareness, organization, and capability of abstraction. Also one should not forget the diverse opportunity that are open to some and not available to others.

How can a mother of four, without help, take time out to read certain literature and discuss with fellow activists? Compare this with a mother of three, who can entrust her children's care to other women by which therefore she becomes relatively free to spend time on reading. Or consider the factor of the differences in time requirement for comprehension and abstraction for somebody who is familiar with the written texts and the nuances of debates, and another who is new to this written form and has not followed the historical debates.

It would be idealistic for me to conclude that everyone should participate in such theoretical discussions, for there are differences in the objective conditions of the women that can hinder meaningful participation. The challenge precisely lies in providing opportunities for women from different classes and backgrounds through which they can share in such an important process and experience.

Impact of Theorizing on the Women's Movement

With the above discussion on the context and process of theorizing, the next logical questions would be: Have theories made a difference? Have written materials on the topic successfully debunked the myth of equality of women and men in the Philippines? Have they uncovered the mechanisms for the exploitation and oppression of women? And the bottom-line question, have theories altered the lives of women?

Most of these questions can be answered in the affirmative, but it is necessary to elaborate on them. The theoretical work, although fairly recent, is affecting not only academe but also other sectors in the Philippine society. Recognition of women's problems has put to fore the discriminating, oppressive and exploitative practices that affect women's lives. They also contributed to an understanding of the mechanisms by which some practices continue to be reproduced. The research projects of the activists and social scientists are slowly substantiating the general claims of feminists. This will mean that women can come up with sharper formulations, and correspondingly, more appropriate tactics and strategies. But admittedly, there is still a lot of things to be done.

Theory on women, simply put, is an embodiment of women's knowledge. The range of issues that theorizing has addressed is, in a way, an indication of its relevance to the women's movement.

To what extent does it reflect the concerns and lives of the grassroots of women? How are priority issues identified? In the past, much of the research work done on women has been dictated by funding priorities. Hence the incredible volume of work done on family planning with a certain framework or the proliferation of the so called "WID (women in development) perspective" in proposals. This has led many to observe that women's concerns is fashionable; therefore many are joining the bandwagon.

Today, we are saying that for theorizing to be meaningful, it does not have to achieve a certain level of abstraction. In fact, that should be the least of its concerns. The most important thing is, it should be able to reflect on the everyday practice of different women. Moreover, it must present a critique of the patriarchal order where the mechanisms for the continued exploitation and oppression of women are laid bare. Theorizing must therefore provide a space for the articulation of a social order where women and men are equal in the real sense of the word.

The Broader Movement for Freedom and Justice

For many Third World countries, the women's movement cannot be separated from the broader movement for freedom and justice. Women's issues cannot be addressed in isolation from other political issues. We must realize that partriarchy works in a more insidious way with foreign domination, backwardness in the rural areas and other problems of society. It is therefore necessary that the women's movement link up with the broader progressive movement.

Historically, many of the activists in the women's movement have come from the broader progressive movement. This has its strengths and limitations. The most important positive feature is that most of them are well-versed and rooted in political issues other than those concerning women. Such background allows them to integrate the women's perspective with other issues with relative ease. This is assurance that women's issues are not isolated from the other political issues. The limitation, on the other hand, is that they also bring with them a certain way of looking at and doing things which can affect the way women's issues are projected. Since they have been involved with the broader movement for a longer period of time, the changing of perspectives and focus will also require a period of adjustment.

But perhaps the more crucial question is how do these two movements affect each other, specially in the sphere of theorizing? While others may not agree (especially the men), the reality is that the progressive movement in the Philippines, just like many others in the world, is male-dominated. Many feminists have used this as a reason for forming women's organizations outside the movement. They argue that it will be difficult for the broader movement to address women's issues so it is necessary to form groups that will specifically address them. Does this rule out any contribution to the women's movement and vice-versa? On the contrary, the presence of women in this movement and the continuing discussion with the women's movements can pave the way for a richer theory on Philippine society, one that is enlightened by the feminist perspective. The women's movement can no doubt also learn from the lessons of the broader movement and enrich its discussion with a more holistic perspective of an underdeveloped country like ours.

In summary, one could say that theorizing is a long, arduous process of learning from each other. While this task has been monopolized by a certain sector in society, this "old" way of theorizing has to give way to the more relevant and responsive practice of articulating women's knowledge and their dreams.