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Book Review: Women's Movements and the Filipina (1986-2008)

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Women's Movements and the Filipina (1986-2008). 2012. Mina Roces, Hawai'i, University of Hawai Press. 297 PP (Hardcover) (\$41.95). ISBN 978-0-8248-3499-9.

Reviewed by Dizline Mfanozelwe Shozi¹

As the introductory chapter outlines, this book reviews how women's organisations advocated for the change of gendered relations in all sectors in the Philippines. A unique feature of the Filipino Women's Movement is that it drew women from various structures and included different categories of women such as academics, leaders of women's organisations and government appointees and advisers. The movement extended beyond the Philippines borders but was nevertheless able to effectively operate. The Women's movement lobbied the Philippines government, as well as countries hosting Filipino women workers or migrants, and international bodies such as the United Nations.

The issues raised by women's movement covered almost the entire range of women's experiences such as health and reproductive rights, domestic violence, sexual harassment, globalisation and its effects, the plight of women workers and peasant women, indigenous women, Muslim women, rape, incest, class, unemployment and contractualisation of the labour force, comfort women. Militarisation, Prostitution, the impact of Christianity on shaping feminine ideal role models, the media and education as socialising factors, sexuality including lesbianism, poverty, environmental factors and foreign debt.

The Filipino women's movements had covert ways of raising controversial issues but the book highlights that divorce and abortion have been much more controversial and thus public discussion on this has been muted. One of the most interesting aspects of the Philippine Women's movement, however, which the book highlights, is the critical role played by feminist nuns, whose unique status as religious women made them effective activists in the religious Philippine context, and who earned their legitimacy through their own mission work with the poor. The nuns' unique contribution to the Women's movement was their deconstruction of the religious roots of women's oppression, seeking to empower women by demystifying suffering, and re-socialising women into rejecting the catholic ideals that endorsed subservice to men. The nuns were subjected to patriarchy in the Catholic Church, experiencing daily in their own lives the effects of discrimination which enabled them to empathise with the oppression of ordinary women. Through their mission work abroad, or spending years overseas, these nuns gained an international perspective, and opportunities to establish international links and networks. Participation in the women's Commission of EATWOT, for example allowed these unusual women space to critique patriarchy in the Catholic Church in the good company of other feminist nuns from the developing countries. Filipino feminist nuns published articles not just on feminist theology from the Philippines perspective, but also Filipino women's issues and the women's question. The nuns were linked to educational institutions that allowed them to introduce the first women's studies courses and to conduct or support research on women's issues in the local context, as well as providing information about health, sexuality and reproductive health. The

¹ Commission for Gender Equality

nuns further ensured that in everyday ritual and prayer women were told not to tolerate violence against them and were informed about women's rights and women's choices.

The second chapter of the book explores the work done by women activists to portray prostitution as violence against women. Activists believed the use of term "commercial sex worker" glamorised prostitution and decontextualised it from the violence, abuse and exploitation while exempting the perpetrator from responsibility. Hence, activists claimed that the right term was "prostituted women" which emphasised their victimisation, rather than the term "sex work", which gives dignity to a type of work that victimised women. The book highlights that prostitutes are not just victims of male violence and male desire but also victims of poverty. Prostitution is not a choice but an attempt to survive.

The book highlights the fact that prostitution laws in Philippine are gender-blind because it is argued that if prostitutes were victims, they should not be treated as criminals since the real criminals were the men who wanted to buy sex. 'Sex work' only exists because of the demand from men. Male demand has remained unquestioned and unaddressed in national policies or laws or even in public discussions. In 2006, CAT-W launched the slogan "women are not for sale and real men do not buy women". The work by the movement to raise the issue of prostitution in the public sphere is seen as a start to the work of addressing taboo topics, particularly other forms of violence against women and issues around sexuality, which were equally hidden in a veil of silence. Ordinary women participated in demonstrations, with peasant women becoming spokespersons, carrying placards and chanting slogans, resulting in women developing solidarity across class boundaries as they linked arms to face the police.

In addition to the work around challenging entrenched views about prostitution, the movement further focused on sexual harassment; as part of the campaign they were compelled to examine women's objectification in the workplace from job advertisements to promotions. A key group of women, alongside those from Catholic backgrounds, were Cordillera or indigenous women, who organised themselves around a number of issues. For Cordillera women, who were defined as primary agriculturalists, although agricultural tasks were divided between women and men, child care was shared. The author notes that traditionally, it was the women who worked in the farm while men stayed at home to cook and look after children. Furthermore, custom did not discriminate between men and women on inheritance, and inherited property was kept separate from conjugal property. The book, however, highlights that women thought to be lazy earned the censure of the community because laziness was considered grounds for divorce, even more than allegations of adultery, which took a long time to prove.

As usually and practised almost anywhere in the world, Cordillera women were marginalised from political decision-making dominated by the male elders of the council of elders. Village affairs were considered the domain of men who were tribal chieftains and the council of elders, making women "almost an invisible sector in village political life." The unique features of Cordillera women's activism were campaigns against alcoholism, militarization, the building of dams and open-pit mining. Since alcoholism resulted in domestic violence, women organised themselves to prevent the entry of liquor into their villages by physically stopping vehicles attempting to deliver the product.

Roces notes that it is not surprising that the movement focused on the issues because they remain at heart of the international agenda of women's organisation. But a critical issue missing from the discussion of the book is the involvement of women in the economy and the judiciary. Another very significant gap highlighted in the introductory chapter is the absence of a section on the Filipino Muslim Women's movement, which points to an important gap not covered by

the study. It is often the case that issues of Muslim women are side-lined, but the writer did not provide information why also chose to exclude Muslim women.

References

Roces, Mina (2012) *Women's movements and the Filipina (1986-2008)*, USA: University of Hawai Press.