

GABRIELA: Contributions of a Third-World Women's Movement to Feminist Theory and Practice

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Abstract

The rich countries in the West have a hegemonic grip over the economy, politics, and cultures of the world, including theorizing in general and feminist theorizing in particular. In this paper, I examine the contributions of GABRIELA, a Third-World women's movement in the Philippines, to both feminist theory and practice which hitherto are unrecognized. This paper combines post-coloniality, critical theory, and feminism to develop a new insight on feminism as women in a Third-World country live it and envision it. This paper deals with how a women's movement in the Third World work for the construction of a just society by struggling against the constraining social, economic, political and cultural structures. In the countries of the South, male domination and poverty in general cause the oppression and marginalization of women. The study revealed that GABRIELA members in particular struggle against patriarchy, imperialism, corruption, and feudalism as well as struggle for social and national liberation. This paper examines the role of social movements as a learning site which empowers women.

Introduction

The women's question is a key issue today. This research is important for two major reasons. One, there is a problem with gender roles universally. Women everywhere have to struggle against common problems, such as machismo, patriarchy, sexism and sexual discrimination. In addition, mainstream literatures on women are also problematic, as they do not recognize the contributions of Third World women's movements to feminist theory and practice. Western sources discuss in great depth the contribution of women in the West with respect of feminist theory building. However, missing in the picture is the sacrifices women in the Southern Hemisphere make in order to construct a just society. Their contributions are invisible and their voices are unheard because women in the Third World lack power, relative to people in general and women in particular in the rich, western world.

GABRIELA stands for General Assembly Binding Women for Reforms, Integrity, Equality, Leadership, and Action. It is the most prominent women's movement in the Philippines, because it was born in the period of the Marcos dictatorship when women aligned themselves with the rest of society to struggle for a new social order. As a result, many were arrested, detained, imprisoned, tortured, raped, and even killed. Its members are a cross-section of Philippine society: women workers, women peasants, women indigenous peoples, women students, women church people, women professionals, and women nationalist entrepreneurs (GABRIELA, 2005). The women's movement in the Philippines chose the acronym GABRIELA, as it was the name of a prominent female revolutionary in Philippine history who fought against the Spanish colonialists. Thus, "Gabriela" is a metaphor for women whose struggle is one that is in unison with the struggles of others in society for social liberation.

GABRIELA contributes to the literature on social movements and on feminist ideologies coming from the South. GABRIELA asserts that women's struggle is integrated into the larger

struggles for social justice that benefit the oppressed, workers, peasant indigenous peoples, fisher folks, children, and gays. Thus, there is no artificial separation between the so-called old social movement that fights for the working class and the so-called new social movements.

Furthermore, GABRIELA contributes to feminist ideology. The established feminist ideologies include conservatism, libertarianism, social democracy, and revolutionary Marxism. GABRIELA develops a Third World feminist ideology that views women's problems not only to be caused by male domination, but also foreign domination and feudalism. It claims that women can only be free, if society is free. GABRIELA challenges these hegemonic structures by proposing and advancing women's rights, a self-reliant economy, and social justice and involves women in a host of activities in order to facilitate social transformation. As a social movement, it is a learning site where new knowledge is constructed and acted upon. While opposed to corporate globalization, it calls for the globalization of the concern for women's rights.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the prominence of GABRIELA as a women's movement, there is hardly any recognition in the literatures of the contribution Southern women's movements. Most literatures deal with the contributions of western women in the U.S. or Western Europe, which accentuates the invisibility of their Southern sisters. Moreover, there is a popular misconception in the west that Southern women's movements support the traditional roles that women play in society, such as being housewives and mothers. Quite on the contrary, Southern women's movements have rich practice and theory that enrich the feminist discourse. Bonds of sisterhood can be forged across geographic, color, and ethnic lines, if Northern sisters and Southern sisters learn from each others' experiences. For this purpose, the Internet provides a space for global sisterhood.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to examine the contributions of GABRIELA to gender equality in the context of social liberation in the Philippines.

Research Questions

This paper addresses the following research questions.

1. How do Filipinas challenge traditional structures?
2. What contributions do Filipinas make to social change?
3. How does GABRIELA facilitate women's participation?

Theoretical Framework

The following theoretical and conceptual frameworks guide this study: critical theory, feminist theory, and post-colonial theory. By using competing perspectives, I am able to develop uncharted perspectives in analyzing the role of women in the Third World in conceptualizing and working towards a just society.

Research Methods

This paper uses four research methods: case study analysis, literature review, document analysis, and participant observation. This paper conducts a case study analysis of a specific women's movement in the South, particularly in the Philippines. It also critiques and reviews the literatures on the old and new social movements and situates GABRIELA's contribution to the literature. By using printed materials as well as online resources, this paper analyzes the

impact of GABRIELA on the lives of women in the Philippines. Lastly, I have been a volunteer working in the field of human rights and thus I have worked in coalition and alliance work with many GABRIELA members in several campaigns and activities. For this reason, participant observation was critical in providing inside information and context regarding GABRIELA's philosophy and action.

Critical Review of Literature

This paper reviews two sets of literature that are important to the study of GABRIELA: social movements and feminist ideologies. Literature on social movements and feminist ideologies do not adequately explain the conditions and struggles of Third World women. For instance, western literature on social movements divides them into the old social movement and the new social movement (Finger, 1989; Holst, 2002). Members of the old social movement are class-based, focusing essentially on the workers and the peasants. Members of the new social movement, however, deal with such diverse issues as civil rights, anti-war, peace, anti-nuclear arms, environment, women, development, human rights, indigenous peoples, children, health, AIDS, debt crisis, lesbians/gays/bisexuals/ transgender, and anti-IMF-WB-globalization, among others.

Another set of literature relates to feminist ideologies. The classical feminist theories (Wollstonecraft, 1792; Mill, 1869; de Beauvoir, 1949) explain the relationship of women to the conservative, libertarian, social democratic and revolutionary Marxist ideologies. However, these ideologies do not explain the national democratic ideology of Third-World feminist movements where women struggle against foreign domination, domestic economic exploitation as well as patriarchy simultaneously.

There is hardly any mention of Third World feminist ideologies and programs. GABRIELA is an example of a women's movement situated in the midst of the struggle for national liberation in the South. GABRIELA defies and blurs the dichotomous structuring of the old and new social movement for the following reason. While GABRIELA deals distinctly with women's issues, it is integral to the national liberation struggle and at the same time harnesses the power of half of the country's population—that is, women—toward liberation. Unlike the traditional "old" and "new" social movements which wage separate struggles, GABRIELA's women's struggle is deeply linked to the national democratic movement.

GABRIELA contributes to the literature on two counts: on social movements and on feminism. First, GABRIELA defies the traditional classification of the old vs. the new social movement, as it deals with issues dear to both movements. Second, it treats women's struggle not as a separate struggle but an integral part of the social struggle for total social and human liberation and therefore is embedded in the larger social movements.

Findings

Exposing and Opposing Traditional Structures

Not all women are alike. GABRIELA does not support women just because they are women. GABRIELA takes positions which are critical of all these three prominent women: Imelda Marcos, Cory Aquino, and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (GMA). In fact, GABRIELA prods women to study, understand, and oppose social structures that hinder social and women's development. These structural problems include foreign domination, oppression (feudalism and

bureaucrat capitalism), and patriarchy. Opposing these social evils, GABRIELA proposes economic and political change.

GABRIELA exposes the evils of society as well as promotes its agenda and its actions through social marketing. It uses traditional methods such as brochures, leaflets, pamphlets, newsletters, news releases, press conferences, as well as current informational technology such as websites, electronic mail and blogging. Their reach is in the village, local, regional, national, and international levels (GABRIELA, 2005).

Proposing Social Change

In response to the above structural problems, aboveground and underground agents of social change gave birth to different movements to wage the struggle for social change. There are underground umbrella revolutionary movements, such as the National Democratic Front (NDF), of which MAKIBAKA (New Women's Movement for National Liberation) is a member. There are also aboveground umbrella social movements, such as BAYAN (New Alliance for National Liberation), of which GABRIELA is a member organization. To be sure, there are many other women's organizations waging their separate and collective struggles. GABRIELA does not wage a struggle separate from the larger social movement. Rather, GABRIELA is a component of the larger national democratic movement under the Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (BAYAN or New Nationalist Alliance) umbrella. Aside from GABRIELA, members of BAYAN are organizations that represent labor, peasants, government employees, overseas workers, indigenous peoples, gays and lesbians, health professionals, church workers, teachers, scientists and technologies, and artists.

GABRIELA was founded in April 1984 when forty-two organizations coalesced in their common interest to advance women's rights and overthrow the dictatorship. The U.S. chapter was founded in 1989. Today, it is an alliance of over two hundred fifty organizations in the Philippines. As a struggle that is not separate but united with the Filipino people, GABRIELA advocates national sovereignty; genuine representative and grassroots democracy; support system for women and equality between the sexes; civilian supremacy over the military which truly protects the people; end to militarization; non-discrimination; land reform that recognizes women's participation in agricultural production and the ancestral domain of the indigenous peoples; a self-reliant economy; nationalist, pro-people, non-sexist and liberating education; a socio-cultural system that respects women; basic sciences and technology that serve the needs of Filipinos in general and women in particular; and solidarity with women's groups abroad in their common struggles against sexism, imperialism, and militarism all over the world (Maza & Tujan, Laya, 1993, p. 5).

GABRIELA, as a social movement, is a learning site which mobilizes and organizes women, moves them to critical reflection, raises the consciousness of women through popular education, and incites them to action. Unlike western feminist movements which treats women's struggle as a distinct struggle, Third World women's movements, such as GABRIELA, consider women's struggle as integral to the whole society's struggle against poverty and patriarchal domination.

Facilitating Women's Participation

GABRIELA facilitates women's participation through various means: organizing, advocacy, actions, and events. It has departments that focus on campaigns, public information

and education, women's rights and services, women's health and welfare, international relations, as well as administration and finance (GABRIELA, 2005; Barbara Mahel, 1988).

GABRIELA mobilizes and organizes women all over the Philippines across non-exploitative classes and among enlightened individuals who are united against foreign domination, oppression, and male domination (GABRIELA, 2005). The majority of the members of GABRIELA are women peasants. Other members are women workers, women urban poor, housewives, women professionals, women religious, and women students. The highest decision making body is the National Assembly which meets once in two years. In its absence, the National Council meets, of which the members are those elected to the National Coordinating Committee and regional representatives. The National Secretariat serves the needs of the alliance. There are local and regional organizations as well.

GABRIELA treats women as socially contextualized; as such, its grassroots-level members are women peasants, women workers, women indigenous persons, women urban poor, and women professionals. Aside from considering women as socially embedded, GABRIELA as a social movement is embedded in a larger multi-sectoral social movement. Each social-movement member has its own separate agenda, such as workers' rights, peasants' rights, indigenous peoples' rights, students' rights, and human rights. Together, however, all the members of the umbrella social movement to which GABRIELA belongs have a common agenda: they struggle against poverty, foreign domination, feudalism, and corruption and they work towards the construction of a society where genuine economic development, social justice, and equality will reign supreme.

Conclusion

Restatement of the Research Problem

There is a universal problem with gender that affects all women, including Filipinas as well, such as male domination. But more importantly, Filipinas make major contributions, but there is hardly any recognition of their theoretical work and action, as the dominant literature highlights writings about women in the West and the North, thereby reinforcing the invisibility of their sisters in the East and the South.

Summary

GABRIELA challenges the traditional structures of imperialism, oppression, and patriarchy (Maza & Tujan, *Laya*, 1993, p. 5; GABRIELA, 1996). It contributes to social change by promoting a self-reliant economy, land reform, human rights, and gender equality. They promote women's participation through mobilizing, organizing, education, campaign, actions, and events.

GABRIELA makes significant contributions to the literature in terms of its theory and practice. While necessarily against male domination as well as for gender equality, GABRIELA goes beyond the calls of liberal feminism. It views women's struggle not as a separate struggle but as component of the national liberation movement which struggles against foreign domination, domestic oppression, and patriarchy. GABRIELA is opposed to corporate globalization but is actively working for the globalization of women's struggle for total human liberation. GABRIELA combines the calls of the old and new social movements and links up arms with them in a multi-sectoral alliance. GABRIELA sees the struggles of the workers and the peasants as their struggle. It sees the struggles of environmentalists, human rights activists,

peace advocates, LGBT, and anti-corporate globalization as theirs. Truly, by blurring the boundaries between the old and the new social movements, GABRIELA has broken new grounds in both social movement and feminist theorizing and praxis.

Implications

My research deals with GABRIELA, which is a learning site where women have developed their theory from their reflections of their practice. Their work and theory have not only proven that western feminism is insufficient to explain their context but also that Third World feminists have a lot to offer in terms of theory building. They have proven that the artificial separation between the old social movement and the new social movement is not applicable to the Third World feminist movement. They have likewise demonstrated that the Third World women's movements have their own theories of how Third World women can achieve genuine liberation.

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