

THE FEMINIST CHALLENGE*

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1. Feminism in Global Perspective

The United Nations Decade for Women, set up for the purpose of looking into the situation of women worldwide, has come and gone, the majority of women unaware that they were its intended beneficiaries.¹ Ironical as this may be, we would have to acknowledge the fact that, it failed to alter the condition of women's lives, the Decade has nevertheless placed the struggle for gender parity securely on the global agenda. Moreover, the subordination of women is now accepted as the consequence of discriminatory practices engendered by social structures rather than as a natural state of affairs in which female weakness and nurturance complement masculine strength and authority.

Despite this consensus about women's inferior status, the articulation of a program that would express feminist demands as such has been called into question.

Claims to represent all women voiced by First World feminists have been refuted as specious at best and, at worst, racist. To counteract the tendency of white, middle-class women to set forth their own experience as universal — a predisposition exclusive to the superordinate — others more "revolutionary" have dismissed feminism outright as irrelevant to the needy who comprise the world's majority. Thus at the mid-Decade UN Conference at Copenhagen, the word "feminism" was rejected by some participants, ostensibly speaking for women of color, in this manner: "To talk feminism to a woman who has no water, no food, and no home is to talk nonsense."

Fortunately, such debates have been outdated by recent formulations in which the imposition of a false unity on women's movements is no longer considered imperative.

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Instead, new meaning and respect has been invested in "the problem of difference,"² the very diversity and heterogeneity of the issues, goals, and strategies in women's organizing now viewed as giving feminism its dynamism and vitality.³ What these new frameworks are attempting to do is develop a political analysis which brings together different struggles through specific attention to the critical structuring relations of gender, class, and nation, race or ethnicity.

II. Feminism as the Cutting Edge

It is necessary for us to understand and appreciate how women's struggles, theoretical and practical, are being played out in the global arena not only so that we can begin to see our "common differences" but also so that we can endow our own movement with a distinct texture and character. Here we take our place beside other women of color⁴ who, involved in progressive movements in their countries, are charged with divisiveness whenever they take up feminism as a slogan. Like them we are accused of diverting precious, limited resources in the wayward direction of peripheral (read: women's) concerns. On the other hand, from another corner our demands for food and housing, higher wages, and an end to military terror are perceived with disdain as "not feminist enough" But with the new global vision that postulates feminism (one in which the needs of disadvantaged women of color take precedence) as "the

most potentially powerful challenge to the status quo" because it aims for "the broadest and deepest development of society and human being free of *all* systems of domination,"⁵ we can declare our alliance with pride. If we take this as our ultimate objective, we would first of all need to contextualize women's oppression; that is, we cannot relate our lived experience as though we were disembodied beings. We would need to situate ourselves concretely in time and place; that is to say we would have to recognize gender, class and race or nationality as determining structures that shape individual character, social experience, and human relations. Note that in this theoretical construct, analytical value is given to gender as a variable equal in weight to class and nationality,⁶ a heresy for class-reductionists.

This mode of analysis contextualizing women's degradation diverges sharply from that which predicates the emancipation of women in the context of national liberation. In the latter view, the full commitment to gender equality is made contingent upon or conditional on the success of a wider struggle,⁷ women's political participation being deemed essential to this goal. It is important to stress here that the feminist perspective would not set a priority on women's issues exclusively defined. To do so, particularly in a nation of the periphery, is to deny glaring problems of uneven development in which Third World economies

are pegged to the requirements of a world market dominated by the metropolis. Instead, in organizing to subvert exploitative structures, feminism would serve as an antidote to a mechanical perspective that stubbornly upholds the determinacy of class factors in the face of a situation or reality that might indicate otherwise. What this approach offers, then, is a refreshing acknowledgment of the enormous complexity found in the interlocking of various forms of oppression and the need for non-reductive tools to unravel their specificities.

While the message ought to be dear that the gender struggle cannot be compromised or put off for some vague future when inequality will be the feminist perspective explicated here does not concentrate on issues central to women alone. Far from it. In utilizing instruments of analysis that attempt to disentangle the intricate interweaving of gender, class and nation or ethnicity underpinning differential access to power, feminism has the capacity for broadening and deepening the movement for social reconstruction. For finally we can engage groups marginal to a productivist perspective—women, tribal minorities, and the religious, for example—in ways that reflect genuine respect for their particular interests, as we cast aside the instrumentalism that further downgrades them. Through this form of analysis we can proceed to examine all structures of power and hierarchy, whether

instantiated by class, gender or race wherever these are found. We can, without apology, critique the necessary realm of human relations in which social practices inscribing class, gender and racial prejudices are daily acted out. We can take the initiative in appropriating for our scrutiny and self-criticism subject matter hitherto relinquished to senate committees or to liberal white men eager to explain our subaltern attitudes and habits of mind.⁸

At a forum sponsored by a progressive group a few months ago, women who were pressing for the inclusion of feminism into the agenda for social change were asked point-blank (as if women should have to make excuses for being alive): "How will feminism help the movement?" Unstated, of course, was the predetermined judgment—a mark of ignorance at this late age of historical development and intellectual ferment—that a call for feminism constitutes a diversionary tactic serving to deflect energies from the "real struggle". What has already been sketched above should clarify for anxious if smug, activists that, rather than representing a detour, feminism provides the concepts and practice requisite to ensuring a political reconstruction process that at all times remains clear-sighted and humane. By projecting a vision of an alternate society free from gender, class and national oppression through a program based on a concrete analysis of experience instead of on rigid,

preconceived ideas, it gives centrality to conscious human agency. It widens the terrain of struggle by accepting the complexity of socio-economic challenges in which oppression takes place in a multiplicity of sites, not merely at the point of production. Finally, it seeks the empowerment of people by insisting on a model of development that guarantees democratic participation and an expansion of choices along with the equitable distribution of resources.

III. Women's Studies Programs

Given this feminist challenge, Women's Studies Programs have a tremendous responsibility in providing the academic impetus for a women's movement built on the authentic fusion of theory and practice, not on a priori arguments or schematic ideas.

It is for this reason that the study of feminist intellectual currents should rank uppermost in the prioritizing of tasks. With the comprehension of feminist paradigms, it then becomes possible to undertake a thorough examination of the literature on women produced by conventional social science in order to evaluate its insights and limitations. It is understanding of theory, brought to bear on empirical data, that will unlatch doors leading out

to new directions. Without theoretical knowledge, we can easily fall prey to research methodologies characterized by gross empiricism and replicate the errors of mainstream social scientists. Put another way, the use of feminist frameworks requiring the passionate application of powers of the mind will help point to modes of inquiry and areas of investigation that will aid in our pursuit of a new understanding of our condition as Filipino women.

Two general categories immediately come to mind: 1) the household and family in which the totality of social relations, among other things, is reproduced everyday, and 2) cultural norm a sanctioning authoritarian or hierarchical relations. I deliberately propose these topics because they have hardly been subjected to feminist analysis in the Philippines. I have also phrased the topics in the broadest terms precisely to allow for the positioning of gender in interaction with other structuring relations as outlined earlier.

If Women's Studies Programs can proceed to undertake these basic tasks and conduct joint activities with organizers in a systematic way, the foundation will soon be laid for the feminist challenge.

NOTES

¹Debbie Taylor, ed. *Women: A World Report*, Great Britain: Oxford University Press, 1985.

²For an explication of this concept, see Michele Barrett, "The Concept of 'Difference'." *Feminist Review*, 26 (Summer 1987), pp. 28-41. For a discussion of some of its ramifications for women of color, see Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Difference: 'A Special Third World Women Issue.'" *Feminist Review*, no. 25 (Spring 1987), pp. 5-22.

³See, for example, Gita Sen and Caren Grown, *Development, Crises and Alternate Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1986; Charlotte Bunch, *Passionate Politics: Feminist Theory in Action*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987.

⁴I deliberately use "women of color" in place of "Third World women" in order to lay emphasis on that distinguishing feature that,

thanks to our colonial heritage and post-colonial status, we Filipinos, alas, are often blind to. The traditional Marxist framework that occludes feminist demands also makes the question of race inconsequential insofar as it can not be directly linked to production. Thus our blissful ignorance of our objectified position as victims of racism.

⁵Sen and Grown, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

⁶Asserting that sexism and racism cannot be seen in purely economic terms, Arthur Brittan and Mary Maynard break away from determinist categories by devising a framework in which they focus on specific mechanisms of oppression to shed light on the interrelationship of these hierarchical forms. Brittan and Maynard, *Sexism, Racism and Oppression*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.

⁷For a documentation of the functionalist commitment to women's emancipation as inherent in the orthodox corpus referred to as "Marxism-Leninism", see Maxine Molyneux, "Family Reform in Socialist States: The Hidden Agenda," *Feminist Review* 21 (Winter 1985), pp. 47-64.

⁸Without a doubt susceptible to the charge of racism, James Fallows' imperious ascription of Philippine culture as "damaged" nonetheless contains observations that seem to have eluded the grasp of dogmatic Marxists.