

## Review Essay

# Working Women and their Abrogated Lives

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*Working Women of Manila in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.* BY MA LUISA CAMAGAY.



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AT THE recently concluded national symposium entitled 'History Makes Women, Women Make Herstory', a common lament of the papers read was the marginalization of women in conventional and/or traditional approaches to Philippine history. If conventional historical accounts were to be believed, Filipino women contributed very little, if at all, to the unfolding of our national life. They got married, stayed home, bore

children, reared them into good citizens, and then died of disease or old age — all outside of the public eye. With the exception of the wives of famous men, they contributed nothing to the revolutionary struggle for liberation from the colonial overlords, and were in fact often the means by which the latter were able to obtain information about the whereabouts and activities of the *revolucionarios*.

### **HISTORICAL WOMEN**

The few women whose names are in the roster of heroines — who, mind you, are often considered only half as heroic as the male heroes — were the wives, mothers, or sisters of generals who served as nurses, couriers, and cooks of the revolutionary forces. Of course, there's the odd *henerala* or two, but that is the exception rather than the rule. More recently, the women whose lives are documented in biographies are educated women who belonged to the upper classes of society. They are women who have succeeded in carving out a space for themselves in a

man's world and so therefore are deemed worthy of inclusion in the historical record.

In short, the relationship between conventional history and women has been pretty much straightforward, which is to say lacking in any kind of complex representation of the role women have played in the national life. Either women are absent from historical accounts or, when present, they are there for all the wrong reasons.

Ma Luisa Camagay's book on the working women of Manila in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is a refreshing departure from this traditional historiography. Camagay documents the working lives of ordinary women — tobacco factory workers, vendors and storekeepers, seamstresses and embroiderers, domestic helpers, teachers, midwives, and prostitutes — and in the process reveals to us aspects of the Filipina character and of 19<sup>th</sup> century Philippines previously unknown or unpublicized.

Take the case of the *cigarreras* or tobacco factory workers. Camagay reports that altogether there were some 17,000 of them in four factories in Manila and Cavite. This fact alone boggles the mind. Even more remarkable was their assertion of their right to better working conditions by means of strikes and other mass actions. As Camagay points out, this shatters the misconception, fostered by friars' accounts as well as literary representations, that Filipino women during the Spanish colonial period were meek and subservient, retiring and religious, with little or no

contribution to the colonial economy except in the informal labor sector. The *cigarreras* were highly skilled, and were able to command wages equal to those of their male counterparts. They formed the backbone of the tobacco monopoly. Hence the power of their threats to strike.

But perhaps a more remarkable sign of their influence on society, albeit unintentional or unpremeditated (unlike the strikes), was their having caused men to assume traditionally feminine occupations. To quote Camagay,

The employment of women in the tobacco factories made the males assume occupations which were usually considered feminine. An American female visitor to the Philippines observed that weaving had been taken up by the other sex. "Into male hands," she said, "have fallen to a great extent the manufacture and embroidery of the gauze made from the long silky fibers of the pineapple plant." According to her, men have assumed the household chores usually assigned to women as the wife became the family breadwinner. The hiring of women as tobacco factory workers made it difficult for households to get women helpers to the point that not a few men were hired to become nurses and maids. Even the chore of doing the laundry fell within the purview of men, hence the presence of *lavvanderos* or washermen. (p. 21)

What happened to these male embroiderers, male nurses and maids,

and washermen? Women continue to work in factories today, especially in jobs requiring manual dexterity such as those in shoe and electronics factories but the males who took over traditionally feminine roles are no longer to be found. Studies of contemporary female factory labor document the phenomenon of the double shift, whereby women find themselves having to do the household chores like washing and laundering and childrearing after they get home from a long day's work.

In the chapter on the *mujeres publicas* or prostitutes, Camagay notes the lack of stigma attached to the profession. Men were not averse to marrying known *mujeres publicas*. Camagay reports several incidents where *mujeres publicas* about to be exiled were saved from this fate by the offer of marriage. The Spanish authorities apparently thought marriage was the cure-all for women's 'disorders'. The reason for the repression of prostitution was not moral either, which is surprising. The goal was to put a stop to the spread of venereal disease. Failing to check commercial sexual activity, the health authorities recommended instead that the *mujeres publicas* be registered so their activities could be monitored and they could be made to undergo regular medical tests.

Also required to register, this time so they could be easily tracked down should they leave their employers without prior notice, were the *criadas* or housemaids. There were many reports, says Camagay, of *criadas* leaving their employers, often bringing with them stolen clothes, jewelry, money, and even a lottery ticket

or two. This prompts Camagay to ask, 'How much were the *criadas* really getting?'

#### VALUABLE SOURCES

Questions and comments of this nature are not uncommon in Camagay's book. In the chapter on the *mujeres publicas*, she wonders 'how these women felt about their profession, what their aspirations in life were, or even how they appeared in public. Was their profession apparent from their manner of dressing or acting?' (p. 111) In the chapter on the *bordadoras*, she wryly comments: 'One is tempted to ask whether the *bordadoras* got a better deal from the nuns than from the Chinese mestizos' (p. 40). Of the failure of the licensed midwives to supplant the traditional *hilot* and *partera*, she asks: '...was the expertise or medical knowledge of the schooled midwives not what the native population needed but rather the skills which the traditional midwives offered?' (p. 87) Similarly, Camagay ends her brief account of the case of a schoolteacher or *maestra* named Doña Vicenta Salonga with the question: 'Was the request (for her niece to be allowed to serve as her assistant) not approved prompting Doña Vicenta Salonga to resign? We do not know' (p. 76). Similarly, the case history of Doña Sabina Pangilinan ends with the sentence: 'By 1896, Doña Nieves Balmori was teaching in Tondo but Doña Pangilinan for reasons unknown to us, never assumed the position of *maestra* in Ermita' (p. 77, my italics).

In making such comments, Camagay calls attention to the deconstructive approach of history-telling that she uses

in this book. This approach considers those which are not said — the gaps and silences, even the contradictions or inconsistencies — to be just as interesting as what is said in the text. The approach reminds the reader that the historical text, like the literary text, is not entirely objective or complete; that it is written from a particular perspective and that the conclusions one may draw from it are provisional upon its degree of accuracy. Paradoxically, in calling attention to the provisional and incomplete character of her reports, Camagay reassures us, perhaps not intentionally, that she is not pulling our leg. We believe her or are predisposed to believe her because she does not gloss over the gaps in her narrative or make conclusions that ignore these gaps.

Camagay's sources are a mix of the conventional and the unconventional: magazine articles, historical accounts, service records, *servidumbres domesticas*, midwives' reports, lists, fee schedules, application forms, letters, photographs, even literary works such as poems and stories. The last three are examples of what Joan Wallach calls iconographic evidences. Feminist historians have repeatedly underscored the need to look beyond conventional sources of historical narratives if the stories of women are to be articulated and included in these accounts. They have called for the use of unwritten or oral sources such as interviews. They have also called for the use of written sources not usually consulted, at least in the case of women, such as letters, diaries, autobiographies, and memoirs. There are also the non-verbal

sources of women's stories such as pottery, baskets, textiles, mats, photographs, songs and rituals.

The value of these sources in the (re)construction of the histories of women is great, especially in the Spanish colonial period. Education at the time was allowed only to men; women had little or no access to literacy. Thus, there is no record of women's lives or what little record there is, is incomplete and written from the point of view of men.

#### IN SEARCH OF CONTEXT

Camagay's account of working women in 19<sup>th</sup> century Philippines also confirms certain things we have known or suspected about the oppression and exploitation of women, for example. She takes note of complaints of abuses committed against the *criadas*, the rivalry between the *matronas titulares* (licensed midwives) and the traditional *hilot* and *partera*, the forcible prostitution of young girls from the provinces, and the fact that *maestras* were paid wages lower than the wages of the male teachers. It is important for these concrete cases of exploitation to be brought to the attention of feminist readers and activists, that they may see how much better, or worse off, is the situation of today's working women. More importantly, such accounts enable us to appreciate the Filipino working women's struggle for economic independence at critical moments in our national history.

If there is a limitation to Camagay's account, it is perhaps the sketchy socio-economic context that she provides to her portraits of Filipino working women. At

one point, she says: 'The documents reveal that a number of prostitutes arrested did come from the provinces. Was this indicative of the hard times in the countryside? From the population sample of 160 prostitutes, 105 came from the provinces.' The question is cogent and should not have been left unanswered. Exactly what was the economic situation in 19<sup>th</sup> century Philippines? Why were women working instead of staying home? What material conditions led to the participation of women in the labor force?

Sometimes there are hints of some answers to these questions. For example, the chapter on *las criadas* ends thus:

On the whole, the Filipina's entry as a domestic or household help enabled her to be gainfully employed in a field or area which did not require any new skill other than the performance of the traditional household tasks. The Filipina, for the first time, received payment for domestic labor instead of working for free — a situation which would have persisted had she remained at home. The economic situation of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, most especially the devaluation of the peso, had much to do with the entry not only of minors in the labor force but the women as well. (p. 59)

Equally problematic in the passage just quoted is the rather facile suggestion that the fact that she got paid for a job she normally did for free in the home was progress of sorts for the Filipino woman. Wages are not enough gauge of gainful

employment. If the wages are so low that a *criada* is driven to steal, what does it profit a woman to work?

There are a number of other similarly facile — because not enough or no evidence is cited — observations in Camagay's book. The last chapter, for instance, closes with:

From the point of view of the colonial authorities, the regulation of prostitution was an important public health measure. However, from the point of view of the native population, this constituted an application of a repressive or dissuasive strategy against sexual freedom. The early Filipinos appeared to have more sexual freedom than the Filipinos of the Spanish period — an observation overly emphasized by the early missionaries since it was a violation of the restrictions imposed on the Spanish woman during the same period.

For the Filipino woman of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the flesh trade was definitely a source of livelihood; whether it was decent or not was immaterial. What counted was that it was an occupation open to women. (p. 116)

There is not sufficient evidence for one to conclude that 'whether it was decent or not was immaterial'. It is true that in the case of some women, their being prostitutes did not seem to deter men from marrying them. But that is all one can say about it. As to whether the restrictions on the activities of the *mujeres publicas* were seen by them as a repression of their sexual freedom, there is no

evidence to this effect, at least in this chapter. As Camagay herself tells us, we do not know what these women thought or how they felt about their work.

Notwithstanding these weaknesses in Camagay's work, it remains an important contribution to the limited body of works on the role of women in Philippine history. Maria Nela B Florendo, in a paper entitled 'Returning Women's Memory: Some Notes on a Gender-sensitive Historical Methodology', has pointed out that 'in Philippine history specifically of the events at the turn of the

19<sup>th</sup> century, the Katipunan has been the favorite arena for the search of (sic) historic women and heroines. But this is not the only temporal and spatial context for women's participation in history.'

Camagay's study of 19<sup>th</sup> century women workers in the Philippines highlights the area of paid labor or gainful employment as an important context for their participation in history. Women's work, like their place in history, is often devalued. Camagay shows us why women should not take this sitting down.