

Philippines: A socialist feminism for these times

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There is an active, strong and militant women's movement in the Philippine. To a large degree the Philippines women's movement is also an anti-capitalist movement, and it has had a significant political impact on the left, the labour movement and on politics in general.

There is an understanding that all issues are women's issues and that there are no artificial divisions between women's issues and issues taken up by the labour movement and the movements of the urban poor, peasants, students and other sectors. With all the issues facing the poor majority in the Philippines, women are the ones who are hardest hit, whether it be poverty, the economic crisis, job losses, contractualisation, healthcare, reproductive health, education, oil prices, corruption, governance, the illegitimate debt, war, militarism, climate change, and other environmental issues. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is a clear illustration of this.

However, the movement tends to be subsumed by 'advocacies', and questions related to systemic change and anti-capitalist alternatives are not seriously addressed today. Precisely because all issues are women's issues, and because we are in this critical conjuncture of capitalist degeneration, questions of how, and in whose interests, societies are organised and who controls the political system and who runs the economy, are literally life and death issues for women.

There are multiple and intersecting crises in the Philippines. The Rodrigo Duterte regime is an extremely authoritarian capitalist regime, with a deepening authoritarian politics. One of the hallmarks of the wave of authoritarianism around the world is its deeply anti-women and misogynistic politics and culture.

President Duterte has repeatedly made statements reinforcing rape culture and he has consciously promoted a culture of impunity in relation to sexual harassment and violence against women. The regime's authoritarian rule has targeted women first. The first liberal opposition leaders removed from power were women – former Supreme Court Chief Justice Sereno and Senator Leila De Lima who continues to languish in jail. Female journalists critical of the Duterte administration have been targeted, such as Rappler's Maria Ressa. Bangsamoro women, under martial law in Mindanao, have suffered particularly, as have those in indigenous communities. Recently, an Anti-Terror Act was passed, which targets the left and defines all criticism of the regime as a potentially terrorist act. It has been accompanied by a "red tagging" campaign targeting the Left. Some of its first victims have been women. A recent example is a young Lumad (Indigenous) medic, Jevilyn Cullamat, who was killed by the military on November 28, and her body paraded as a war trophy.

Of course women were immediately and disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. There has been an increased burden of unpaid domestic and care work. Women workers are over-represented in the informal sector, where lockdown measures have destroyed livelihoods. Women have been routinely arrested just for being vendors desperately trying to make a livelihood under lockdown conditions. Almost 50% of the labour force in the Philippines has been impacted by the pandemic. Already high levels of unemployment are increasing. Women are disproportionately affected by this and there is evidence that more women are relying on sex work to make ends meet.

Women working in the formal sector are predominantly in the service industries. Over 70% of the healthcare workforce is women, with high rates of COVID-19 infection and even death. A large number of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) are also working in the hospital sector. In Britain and the United States, Filipino healthcare workers represented the biggest ethnic grouping among those who died from being infected with the coronavirus while on the job. OFWs comprise 11% of the population, and many have been left stranded overseas without income by the pandemic.

There has been increased gender-based violence during the pandemic, both domestic violence and violence from the state. At military and police checkpoints enforcing the lockdown, women have been routinely sexually harassed and raped for favours. Activists have collected plenty of evidence to show this.

The multiple, intersecting crises in the Philippines are the same as those faced, to differing degrees, worldwide. These include: a public health crisis, due to health systems being routinely dismantled under decades of neoliberal cutbacks and privatization; the economic crisis, with the decimation of the already precarious economic lifelines of workers and the poor; and the environmental crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic needs to be considered as part of the environmental crisis created by capitalism that is threatening humanity with extinction. In this regard, pandemics are no different to the typhoons, fires, droughts and other extreme weather events, whose increased frequency and severity has been the main symptom of the looming Anthropocene apocalypse. These are all products of the rift in the metabolism between humans and the rest of the biosphere under capitalism, as explained by Karl Marx's theory of the metabolic rift. Climate change itself increases the spread of pandemics, reflecting the more general breakdown in the world's ecosystems, and their ability to sustain life, as a result of the capitalist mode of production. The impacts of the climate crisis are gendered, with low-income and poor women being especially vulnerable to disasters and usually marginalized during disaster recovery and rehabilitation.

The socialist alternative

Has the system delivered? For a minority of women, yes. For a majority of women, no. We have formal equality (anti-discrimination legislation, etc.) but no real social and economic equality. The class gap among women increased and is increasing.

To chart a course beyond the current multiple crises, the women's movement needs to place socialism and the socialist alternative at the centre of its strategy and praxis, linking it up to its campaigns. If we don't provide this alternative political framework, especially in this critical conjuncture, the movement will be subsumed in various advocacies, and that could demobilise the movement.

Although a lot of Marx and Friedrich Engels' writing was focussed on production — trying to understand how capitalism functioned, as part of the struggle for an alternative, looking at agency and how to raise class consciousness — their writings did address sex and gender systems and relations as well. In their analysis, whether of capitalism and the class struggle, the state, human alienation, the family or sexuality, they based it on a materialist premise or framework. Engels in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, made a seminal contribution to providing a materialist framework to understanding the origins of women's oppression.

According to Engels: "Production and reproduction of the immediate essentials of life, which is the determining element of social life, is determined by both kinds of production, by the stage of development of labour, on the one hand, and of the family, on the other." Engels argued that the sex and gender system, which introduced oppressive gender inequalities in the sexual division of labor,

was the patriarchal family system. With the development of labor and labor productivity, the patriarchal family system developed as an institution of class rule. The overthrow of matrilineal systems was key to the development of private property and class and property relations. Class remains central to women's oppression. Engels wrote that "the overthrow of the mother right was world-historic defeat of the female sex".

Of course, much of Engels' analysis has to be updated, especially about how this process took place. Technological advances that provide more detailed physical evidence of the earliest stages of human evolution give us a less fragmented and perhaps more accurate picture – remains of early human skeletons in anthropology, evidence of tools, settlements and burial sites, fossil records, etc., in archaeology, the biological evidence of bone matter, genetic analysis, etc. New evidence allows us to reconstruct the stages of human development and the role of women in them. Recent studies also point to the vital role that women have played in human evolution and point to alternative possibilities to the 'man the hunter led the way' explanation of human evolution. Even the notion that women were not hunters is now being contested.

We can also draw from the experience of the major revolutions of the last century and the struggles of the women's movement worldwide. There is a rich history and praxis to draw from. This includes the rise of the anti-imperialist, anti-racist, and environmental movements, the struggle for lesbian and gay liberation and, movements campaigning for broader identities, such as LGBTQI+. These movements have significantly impacted on and contributed to the development and strengthening of the socialist and feminist movements and socialist and feminist theory.

The concept of gender equality has gained increasing political acceptance, along with recognition of the interconnectedness of women's oppression to all other forms of oppression: race, ethnicity, caste, sexuality, disability, etc, and the need, therefore, for inclusiveness. However, it's also important to note that gender equality and gender politics has been coopted into the mainstream of capitalist discourse. There are wonderful international laws that almost every government in the world, including the most repressive and misogynist states that are fundamentally based on women's oppression, have signed up to. There is a lot of rhetoric and therefore we need to put forward an uncompromising gender equality politics. Only a socialist feminist framework can allow us to do this consistently.

Socially useful labour

The links between productive and reproductive labour has been a key aspect of the socialist and feminist discourse for several decades now. There are various theoretical approaches to this. More recently, for example, the Association for Women's Rights in Development has drawn heavily on the feminist economic analysis in a [manifesto for a Global Feminist Economic Recovery](#). Essentially it is an anti-capitalist manifesto. It advocates for the "care economy" and the environment to be at the centre of economic recovery and for wealth redistribution, elimination of structural discrimination and the transformation and restructuring of the global economy. The question is posed — What and how can these changes be achieved? This is the *unanswered* question, and this is what socialist feminists need to address.

From the point of view of capital, large sections of work or labour that is useful and even essential from the point of view of social needs, such as women's 'reproductive labour', are 'unproductive'. There have been various attempts by feminists and socialists to break down this artificial division between productive and 'unproductive' labour by examining the linkages or relationship between them. In the discourse on Socialism for the 21st Century, there have been some important contributions from Latin American theorists and those who were involved in the Latin American revolutions in this regard. A strong case has been put forward to place socially useful labour at the

core of the framework for a socialist alternative.

Popular power

This has been combined with a rejection of centralised top-down economic models that characterised the 20th century's socialist experiments, and moves toward decentralised communal economies. Marta Harnecker, the leading theoretician and architect of this praxis of popular power or 'communal councils', provides a historical perspective. "Historically, there have been other attempts to create a non-bourgeois alternative to the system of political representation, where elected representatives are not detached from their electoral base and, on the contrary, maintain an intimate link to it. This system was put into practice at the time of the Paris Commune in 1871, during the first years of the Russian revolution, in the Italy of Antonio Gramsci, in Yugoslavia during the war of national liberation and afterwards in the period of the socialist revolution. ... This system is not only different from the bourgeois-democratic system of political representation but it also seeks to ensure that the workers, the organised people, that is, the majority of people, and not the elites, are the one who exercise power and participate in the management of public affairs." [1]

There is a much talk about "women's empowerment" in current mainstream discourse. For women's empowerment to mean anything, it must have the perspective of the masses of women actually being in power. You cannot empower a majority of women without them actually being in power. Therefore, I would argue, that popular power is essential to truly enable women's empowerment. It is fundamental that popular power be organised in the workplace, in Workers Councils, where workers take on the role of those who control production and what they produce. Empowering women workers to play a leading role in these Workers Councils is essential.

Inclusiveness and solidarity

A key task ahead of us is framing a socialist feminist alternative linked to our immediate struggles: from ending violence, to social protection, unemployment, revamping the public health system with proper protective equipment and safe working conditions, public transport and reorganisation of production processes. There is also a need to be able to use our traditional forms of struggle, like mass mobilisations, both decentralised and centralised, successfully reclaiming the public spaces that were deprived to us because of the lockdown. However, there is a need to also link this up with a systemic alternative in the face of the massive ideological campaign for capitalist authoritarianism.

The pandemic has highlighted the fact that the critical areas of our economy are the ones where socially useful labour takes place, such as health workers, care workers, service workers, cleaners, food delivery workers and public utility workers. These tend to be areas where women workers predominate (and in the West it is migrant labour — female migrant labour — that predominates). This highlights the interconnectedness of gender, race, ethnicity and class and the need to address them in an interconnected way. The inclusivity of socialist feminism is also based on this interconnectedness. This also means that the core of a socialist feminist alternative must be based on solidarity. This is an absolute necessity for surviving the catastrophe of capitalism.

In putting forward this socialist vision, we must also draw on our own historical experiences and roots, such as '*bayanihan*', the communitarian spirit that fuelled people's relationship during the communal period in the Philippines. Under the patriarchal capitalist system, *bayanihan* was replaced by labour that is paid for by money, by competition among the ranks of workers and community members, by individualism, by venerating capital and private property, and in the later period, by continuously privatising what has remained of public properties and services for the common good of the community. Today, while the term *bayanihan* has been expropriated by the Duterte government, we can reclaim it and promote the original spirit of *bayanihan*, and integrate it to our

description of socialist feminism.

The necessity for solidarity and inclusiveness flows from the reality of the interconnectedness of systems of oppression and hierarchy. Only an inclusive socialist feminism, based on solidarity, can link up with and empower the millions of women around the world who are now on this path of struggle.

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P.S.

Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal

<http://links.org.au/socialist-feminism-for-these-times>

Footnotes

[1] Marta Harnecker: Popular power in Latin America — Inventing in order to not make errors. Closing lecture given at the XXVI Gallega Week of Philosophy, Pontevedra, April 17, 2009. Translated by Coral Wynter and Federico Fuentes