

Women's Education as an Instrument for Change: The Case of the Philippines

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To most Filipinos education represents hope for the future. The farmer in the countryside spends a lifetime working the soil to earn enough money for his children's schooling. The young factory worker scrimps on personal expenses and works a second shift so that she can send money home for her siblings' education. The housewife takes in laundry and sewing or hawks native delicacies, while her child sells newspapers on street corners to buy school supplies. The average Filipino man, who earns approximately three dollars a day, believes that education can elevate him from poverty to prosperity and from a life of menial drudgery to one of challenging employment. And to the average Filipino woman, or "Filipina," education is perceived to be the key to a better life. Why is education so highly valued? Is it truly the key to a better life in the Philippines?

Women's Education in the Philippines

American Public School Education: A Turning Point for Women

Women's educational status changed in many ways with the advent of the twentieth century. Following the triumph of the United States in the Philippine-American War shortly before the turn of the century, the colonial government introduced the ideals of the American public educational system to the Philippines. These were quite different from the Spanish colonial policies that had been in effect. Admission policies were liberalized, enabling men and women from all classes to go to school. Night schools

were opened for working students. Women were accepted by schools of higher learning.¹

These changes were to liberate Filipinas.² A closer look at education during the early years of the century, however, complicates this view. Immediately after the capitulation of Manila in 1898 a U.S. army officer organized schools in the city, inviting other soldiers to exchange their guns for books.³ Thus, the first teachers in the public schools were American soldiers and Filipinos previously trained as "maestros" and "maestras" (male and female teachers). The Filipinos "responded to the schools with astonishing alacrity."⁴ In 1900 night schools opened, in addition to elementary and high schools, and were well attended. By 1903 half of the towns in the islands had American teachers. In 1904, 400 Filipino teachers of both sexes had been trained, and 227,600 children were in school. At least five coeducational institutions, including the University of the Philippines, were established, and institutions exclusively for women were also formed, all of which are still in operation.⁵

Higher education for Filipinas helped them break out of the roles imposed by four hundred years of Spanish colonialism. Under the Spaniards the average Filipina was semiliterate; she could read prayers and write simple letters. Moreover, she was expected to be content with her lot. The advent of public school education gave women the means to look beyond their homes, prayers, and church. Eventually, they saw the gross inequality in Philippine political life and began a successful struggle for political suffrage.

Quite apart from these positive effects on women, it is equally important to understand the context of educational policies during the American period. Many of the philosophical underpinnings of education at that time still apply today.

The Colonial Context of Philippine Education during the American Period

The decision of the American government to educate the Filipino masses was not an act of magnanimity. Education was correctly perceived to be the most effective way to pacify the nation. The network of public schools established throughout the islands helped the American colonial government achieve the following

ends: (1) the development of a new generation of Filipinos educated on the economic and political values of American society; (2) the suppression of independence and nationalism, which had previously been ignited by the Philippine revolution; and (3) influence over the minds of educated men and women (including educators, entrepreneurs, bureaucrats, and politicians), through the adoption of English as the medium of instruction, which introduced them to Anglo-American ideals.⁶

As a result of these policies, the twentieth-century Filipino became the caricature of the "brown American." Through America's hold on Filipino ideas and ideals the Philippines was transformed into the "strongest ally of the United States in Asia," and most of its people aspired for "the American way of life."

Consequently, Filipinos became producers for American-controlled firms. They also became consumers of its products. Industrial and agricultural development in the Philippines was geared toward benefiting the United States, and preferential trade and property agreements were made with the United States. In politics American-educated technocrats and bureaucrats applied the visions of the West to the problems of the Philippines, often inappropriately. Filipinos became convinced of the Communist threat, and the resulting hysteria facilitated the ratification of a long-term U.S. military bases agreement, which has recently been canceled.

The Americanized character of Philippine education affected the thinking and aspirations of educated Filipino men and women alike. It also had an impact on the nature of economic, political, and sociocultural life in the islands. Gender roles and relationships were likewise affected.

Gender Ideology in the First Period of Feminism

Even while public school education opened the eyes of Filipino women to worldly affairs, it did not sufficiently intrude on the value of male *machismo* nurtured during the Spanish period. In fact, the educational system under the new colonizers served to reinforce gender-role differentiation. Discrimination was obvious not only in the home but also in the workplace.

The sanctity of the family was upheld by formal training, and women were inbred with the idea that they (not men) play the

pivotal role in the home. Education for homemaking became formalized as "home economics," and education for women was deemed important to the extent that they could use their knowledge to impart societal values to sons and daughters. Nevertheless, major decisions remained the prerogative of men. The male was supreme even in the home, and the female assumed a subordinate albeit caretaker position.

Feminists during this period also subscribed to a traditional division of labor, even as they espoused political equality through suffrage. They admonished Filipinas to give their homes and children as much attention as they would to the women's cause, reminding them that their responsibilities in society principally involved the family.⁷

Gender stereotypes are likewise evident in the occupational patterns among women during the early years of this century. Although a few completed courses in medicine, law, dentistry, optometry, and business, most women studied teaching, nursing, and pharmacology. Although equal opportunities for both sexes existed in higher education, society propelled most women into traditionally feminine professions, those that called for caring and nurturing others.

In the budding industries of the period the majority of women worked in cigar and cigarette factories and in the garment industry. While cigarette manufacturing may have been considered a novel enterprise, women had long participated in harvesting and rolling tobacco. Factory work merely streamlined the procedure according to industrial standards. Sewing, similarly, was a traditional skill, usually associated with women's domestic tasks. Thus, work in these enterprises capitalized on the existing repertoire of Filipina's skills and fit them to new jobs.

Besides these jobs in the manufacturing sector, women continued to work as retailers, hawkers, and microentrepreneurs. New positions included work as cashiers, clerks, secretaries, and saleswomen—all of which are classified as service-sector jobs. The majority of these paid inferior wages in comparison to jobs held by men.

The educational trends that were apparent during the early part of the present century indicate that:

1. public school education based on the American model opened the way for women's increased participation in education, politics and industry;
2. alongside this development a traditional gender division of labor was reinforced by formal education and occupational opportunities; and
3. the educational system helped entrench pro-American ideas among the educated classes, with far-reaching effects on Philippine society.

Contemporary Educational Profile of Women

In the three generations that have passed since the start of the century the educational profile of the Filipina has changed in some, but not all, areas. Moreover, the Filipino pattern of female achievement reverses trends found throughout much of the developing world.

While overall literacy rates rose from 72 percent in 1960 to 83.3 percent in 1980, the literacy rates of males have remained slightly higher than those of the females. In 1980 male literacy was estimated to be 84 percent, while female literacy was 83 percent. Younger Filipinos (between fifteen and nineteen years of age) of both sexes, however, have higher literacy rates. Furthermore, women in this age group are slightly more literate than men, 97.1 percent and 89.9 percent literacy rates for urban and rural-based females, respectively, versus 96.8 percent and 88 percent literacy for males. Therefore, younger Filipinos and Filipinas are more literate than their older compatriots, and young girls tend to be more literate than boys.

Most Filipinos finish elementary school (more than 56 percent). About one-fourth of them complete secondary school, and less than 10 percent finish a tertiary course. More students drop out of high school than out of elementary school, and, of the drop-outs, more are boys: 3.3 percent of all males as compared with 2.3 percent of all females dropped out of elementary school in 1982-83, while 9 percent of all males and 6 percent of all females left high school. Boys also had higher failure rates.⁸

Of the very few students who enter college the majority are women. Fifty-four percent of the students enrolled in tertiary

courses in 1977-78 were women. They also made up 64 percent of the student body in graduate schools, and 65 percent of those students pursuing postgraduate degrees.⁹ In contrast, more men enrolled in public vocational schools and studied agriculture, fisheries, and trades (approximately 60 percent across all courses). Women tend to dominate certain kinds of courses. In 1977-78 most studied food and nutrition (99 percent), medical science, including nursing (87 percent), and commerce (67 percent). Fewer women studied liberal arts and sciences (47 percent), music and fine arts (27 percent), engineering (14 percent), law and foreign service (9 percent), and maritime education (0.9 percent).

This profile is not unlike that observed in earlier years. Women are still heavily involved in work involving nurturing, caring, and trading. This attitude reflects the continuing importance of their roles as homemakers. Traditional sex stereotypes are also evident in women's choices of vocational courses. Lucita Lazo reports that in 1976 most women in vocational programs chose courses related to the garment industry, embroidery, secretarial work, food and nutrition, and food preservation and processing. Men, on the other hand, enrolled in instructional techniques/supervisory courses, electricity, agriculture, and automotives/TV-radio mechanics.¹⁰

By 1980 some courses offered by the National Manpower and Youth Council (NMYC) had attracted a few women. These included skills training courses in welding, electricity, drafting, and silk screening.¹¹ Nonetheless, the biggest female enrollment continued to be in those programs that tapped traditional skills. Only about 30 percent of all female students studied agriculture, and only 9 percent enrolled in industrial skills training programs.

In nonformal educational programs sexual stereotyping is also evident. In 1982 the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sports reported that, out of the more than 1,250,000 young people who completed its nonformal education courses, two-thirds, or some 938,000, were women. This high proportion is linked to the kinds of courses offered: dressmaking, tailoring, cosmetology, culinary arts, handicrafts, embroidery, and typing. Functional literacy classes also attracted more women than men, because it is widely believed that men are more reluctant to admit their illiteracy.

Gender Profile of Educational and Occupational Opportunities

The educational profile of the Filipina is more meaningful when it is examined within the context of the labor market: What skills and qualifications are in demand, and how have women fared in the job market? To begin with, more than half of all unpaid family workers in 1983 were female (54 percent). By way of contrast, more than two-thirds of self-employed workers and salary/wage workers were male.¹² This comparison accurately reflects the marginal status of women in the labor market. Their work goes largely uncompensated, be it in the home or as partners of men on farms, in small businesses, or in the informal sector.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the labor force participation rates (LFPR) of women in 1983 lagged behind those of men. Across all age groups the employment rates for women were also lower than those for men during the same year.¹³

Differences in the LFPRs among women were linked to their educational attainments. Women who completed college had the highest LFPR (85.6 percent), and 8.5 percent were unemployed. Those who finished elementary school had an LFPR of 46 percent, and only 7 percent were unemployed, and female high school graduates had an LFPR of 39 percent, but 15 percent were unemployed. Female undergraduates had an LFPR of 32.5 percent and a relatively high unemployment rate of 17.2 percent. Women without any education at all fared best in the labor market: their unemployment rate was only 4.8 percent.¹⁴

While these figures imply that jobs are available for either highly educated women or for women with little or no education, the labor market for high school graduates and college undergraduates was actually relatively low in 1983. This may have been because many garment and textile manufacturing establishments, which usually hire women with some education, closed during this period.

Since women usually seek training in female-oriented courses, they most often find employment in occupations that require gender-stereotyped skills. In 1983 women worked in the wholesale and retail trades (66 percent), as professional/technical workers (63 percent), service workers (61 percent), and clerical workers (50.3 percent).¹⁵ Administrative positions and executive and managerial

work are dominated by men (75 percent), as are occupations in agriculture, production, and transportation.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this review. To begin with, there is no apparent bias against women participating in the Philippine educational system. They may even be at a small advantage. There are, however, sex preferences for particular training programs in both the formal and nonformal educational sectors. Women's career choices veer toward fields that capitalize on their homemaking talents. The educational system has reinforced this tendency by offering courses geared toward these talents. Even secretarial courses are gender stereotyped because, in many cases, a female secretary works for a male boss.

Furthermore, the number of women who are educated does not correspond to the number who have jobs. If it did, the number of women classified as "unpaid family workers" would be minimal. Moreover, the relatively high employment rates of poorly educated women and the low numbers of women with at least a high school education indicate that the demands of the labor market are independent of educational attainment.

Sociopolitical Forces Influencing Women's Educational Profile

Developments in the Philippine educational system have largely been influenced by the same political and economic circumstances present during the colonial period. The continued use of English as the medium of formal instruction, accompanied by the adoption of textbooks from the West, perpetuated the "Americanization" of schooled Filipinos. Thus, science, literature, and social science curricula and materials have been patterned after those of the American universities in which our educators obtained higher education.

Second, neocolonial control of the Philippine economy in the post-World War II period led to policies geared at the development of skills necessary for servicing American-controlled big business. In the mid-1960s and 1970s this meant meeting the needs for servicing the labor, financial, and managerial requirements of transnationals.

Third, the political scenario, especially during the period of the cold war, propagated the idea that the American democratic system was unquestionably moral and humane and that it could do

no harm where the Philippines was concerned. To have thought otherwise was deemed subversive, and most students went through school equating nationalist sentiments with treason.

Education under the martial law government of Ferdinand Marcos (from 1972 to 1986) continued to serve neocolonial interests. By this time the economy had shifted away from being merely the producer of raw materials for industrial products to being an industrial subordinate in "the global labor partition" through export-oriented light industrialization. In turn, the educational system became "a factory producing individuals with the ideology and technical skills needed by the giant corporations and whose consumption habits are attuned to their products."¹⁶

The features of the educational program deemed appropriate to support the economic policy of this period were designed by the World Bank. In its analysis it was suggested that priority education in the Philippines should be oriented toward producing trained manpower needed to promote economic development and should concentrate on vocational, technical, and secondary education.¹⁷ The industrialization envisioned for the country would not necessitate the use of modern technologies nor of highly specialized human resources. Rather, semiskilled and unskilled labor were going to be more marketable. This thrust provides the explanation for the puzzling profile of LFPR among women of different educational attainments. The women earmarked for absorption by the economy were those who had little or no education, rather than those with advanced training and specialized skills.

Congruent with these plans, vocational and technical courses mushroomed in the late 1970s. Emphasis on short-term training courses, which drew women into the garment trade, embroidery, and handicrafts, was not accidental: among the principal exports of the country were garments, embroidered materials, and cottage industry products. At the same time the government's program to export labor had become successful, and replacements for skilled workers were badly needed.¹⁸ By 1981 the NMYC had adapted an aggressive program to enroll young people into its courses. Instead of offering programs that would bring dropouts into the formal educational system, however, the Marcos government chose to give nondegree vocational training to these disadvantaged youths.

Apart from light manufacturing concerns, the government also emphasized the development of the service sector in two ways: through the expansion of international tourism and by encouraging overseas contract employment. The emphasis on tourism had a tremendous impact on the status and image of the Filipina. The hotel boom in the late 1970s led to the institution of collegiate courses on hotel and restaurant management, and college-trained men and women became front-desk managers, food and beverage managers, and entertainment managers. On the other hand, the influx of foreigners "out for a good time" (in a country where dollars are worth a fortune) enticed a growing army of impoverished and poorly educated Filipinas to seek employment in bars—as hospitality girls, nude dancers, and prostitutes.¹⁹

Filipinas were also lured to foreign lands.²⁰ Nurses and midwives lined up at recruitment offices to seek placements in North America or Europe. Teachers, secretaries, high school graduates, and other poorly paid women exchanged their professional tools for aprons and brooms and became domestic servants in Hong Kong, Singapore, Europe, and elsewhere. Lissome young women danced and sang their way through Japan and the Middle East, hoping to earn money for home and also to "catch a husband." In the process many also lost their dignity.

Effects of Educational Trends on Gender

While the Filipina has to some extent profited from the educational trends of the past decades, her status and standard of living were not elevated in the process. Although they may have jobs, Filipino women are among the lowest paid workers in manufacturing, principally because their jobs are considered to be semi-skilled in nature. As domestic contract workers, women earn mere pittance on a piecework basis. Worse, domestic outwork provides no avenue for labor organizing, and, hence, pay raises and better work conditions are difficult to achieve.²¹ The situation of female entertainers and prostitutes is even more pathetic. While they may earn a great deal (\$10 to \$150 for sex services), they also endure frightful risks, including the threat of rape, abuse, AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases.²²

Filipina wives measure their self-worth by their husband's approbation. Femininity is equated with correct manners, which en-

hance interpersonal relationships, while masculinity is associated with strength and integrity. Working wives are generally frowned upon, both by men and unemployed women. Women enter the labor force because of economic necessity and not for self-fulfillment. In addition, the Filipina unquestioningly carries her "double burden"; it is unthinkable that she should neglect her home and children for her responsibilities at work. Such perspectives probably make it easier for women to accept the iniquitous conditions of domestic outwork, because such work allows them to remain at home. These perspectives also motivate women to obtain further skills in food and nutrition, food processing, and the like: if the skills are not applied to trades, at least they will be beneficial to the family.

Thus far, then, it appears that education in the Philippines has not been a truly liberating force for women. Past and present circumstances have largely sidestepped the Filipina's aspirations for social mobility, dignity in work, and self-fulfillment through education.²³ The essential question—how can education be transformed to enhance the status of Filipino women?—has still to be answered.

An Alternative Education Strategy for Women

A Framework for Feminist Education

Since both societal influences and traditional perceptions of gender roles have been identified as retarding factors for the awakening of the Filipina's latent potentials, an effective feminist educational strategy should deal directly with these obstructing forces. The philosophy of Philippine education must be examined and redefined. Education must become a force that builds the nation by promoting nationalist aspirations, scientific thinking, and popular participation.

To translate such a philosophy into action, curricula, syllabi, and textbooks at all levels should emphasize the necessity of progressive and self-sufficient economic and political institutions. Education should transmit concepts, perspectives, and skills that respond to the needs of people for good-paying and self-fulfilling jobs, for democratic processes, and for peace and security in their daily lives.

School curricula should accurately portray the contributions women have made to national progress. For instance, the Filipina's contributions to agriculture, as farm worker and helpmate of the men, as well as her work in industry have been trivialized. Textbooks should fully describe how women, both as participants in the labor force and as homemakers, have contributed to national economic figures. The motives and outcomes of work in factories, bars, and even overseas should also be portrayed, so that students understand the sacrifices made by women on behalf of their families and recognize how oppressive the outcome of such "obligations" can be.

Schools should also teach students that the stereotype of the passive and unproductive Filipina applies, when it does, only to the privileged classes. Throughout history the poverty-stricken Filipina has been hard working and enterprising.²⁴ She has managed affairs at home along with producing food and income by raising livestock, tending vegetable gardens, selling food, weaving, embroidering, and trading wares; or by working as a laundry-woman or a domestic helper. Furthermore, she has always been a critical force in the household economy, always expected to make "ends meet."

Efforts to redefine womanhood must extend to the mass media, because present life-styles make these institutions potent educational instruments. Instead of portraying Filipinas as beautiful and sensual objects, stories and scripts should emphasize the contributions women have made to their families, communities, and nation. Women should be depicted as intelligent, decisive, and circumspect human beings—not as the passive, incompetent, and neurotic housewife of the soap operas.²⁵

Despite their essentially palliative nature, adult education programs are still sorely needed by Filipino women, especially after the dismal failure of past educational programs. Functional literacy programs, technology training, and management training for small businesses should replace courses on cosmetology and embroidery. Literacy programs can also serve to reorient women's values and to awaken their latent potential. Many women never look beyond their families in molding their futures. Surely, they have as much right as men to define their goals as individuals—not just as wives, mothers, or daughters.

Conclusions

Education should be redirected toward goals that will make the Filipina blossom. Since many of the problems faced by women are rooted in exploitative global relationships, it should be both nationalistic and nonsexist. Dialogues between educators and women from various walks of life should continue, so that women's education remains relevant to the lives they lead.

Reformed nonsexist education will not only improve women's situation; it will redound to the development of Philippine society as well. First, alternative educational strategies will give life to the Philippine government's commitment to enhance equal opportunities for men and women in the country. As has been seen, education in the past has not benefited women in terms of occupational advantages as much as it has for men. Even relations in the domicile have been characterized by women's subordination to men. It is hoped that nonsexist education will change the perspectives of the whole society toward nondiscriminatory practices.

Second, the participatory character of the educational approach proposed here makes it easier for government to reach out to the citizenry, so that steps can be quickly taken in response to problems. The rapprochement slowly being built up between women in government and those in various women's groups will facilitate the development of linkages with the grass roots that will, it is hoped, reach across the whole community.

Third, mobilizing women's participation in the economic life of the nation through skills training courses (especially nontraditional ones) will help hasten economic recovery. Present plans call for labor-intensive industrial developments, and women may very well account for half of this labor force. All they need at the moment are skills and technological knowledge.

Fourth, nonsexist education that stresses nation building through self-reliant economic, political, and cultural approaches will help future generations of Filipino women and men to build partnerships for the forward movement of Philippine society—partnerships focused on the concerns of the local people rather than tailor fit for the dominant forces in the global economy.

Given these conditions, there is no reason why the Filipina cannot emerge as a strong, decisive, and self-fulfilling citizen who

can hold up her head to the world with dignity and grace. Such changes also portend the blossoming of a new quality of relationship between men and women in this nation.

NOTES

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