

gender advocates on poverty and economic issues at the macro level have yet to be effectively linked to the organizing of women workers and the reactivation of the movement of workers in the country. The concentration of feminists in the key urban centers and their lack of presence in areas where rural and urban groups of workers are resisting is a situation that is not applicable only to the Filipino women's movements. It is rather a general situation that has to be assessed more fully and addressed by all social movements through a dialogue that can encompass political and ideological differences and in which the respect for the equality of women and men and the contribution of feminist perspectives are recognized and valued.

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Women's Labor Activism in Indonesia

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In her discussion of working-class women's labor activism in Thailand, Mary Beth Mills argues that an understanding of the "diverse ideological effects, structural constraints, and contested identities within women's labor struggles requires close attention to participants' own gen-

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dered and place-based politics” (2005, 140). In the Indonesian context, geography and life experience are indeed important, but class remains a major determinant of women’s approaches to gender politics within the labor sphere. Labor became a strong focus for middle-class feminists in Indonesia in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when women’s groups began to organize campaigns around issues concerning female industrial workers and international labor migrants (Ford 2002). More recently, however, there has been a dramatic increase in women workers’ activism on their own behalf. This new wave of activism presents a dilemma for feminists because it is not always framed in feminist terms. In contrast to middle-class feminist activists in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), who regard female factory and migrant laborers as women first and then as workers, many union women believe the international feminist agenda is secondary, or even irrelevant, to their struggles for better conditions at work.

Critiques of an undifferentiated sisterhood (see Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1983) are well established in the feminist literature and in the rhetoric of transnational feminism. Yet as Valentine Moghadam (2000, 61–62) reminds us, “feminist groups and organizations remain rooted in national or local issues, but their vocabulary, strategies and objectives have much in common with each other and have taken on an increasingly supranational form.” Transnational feminism provides moral and material support for feminists in countries like Indonesia. But, at the same time, the process of transnationalism promotes a tendency toward assimilation in feminist discourse, in which difference serves as “a euphemism for women who differ from the traditional norm” rather than a valid alternative (Zinn and Thornton 1996, 323). As a result, transnational civil society networks and international bodies, such as aid organizations, that promote feminist frameworks of analysis and practice remain largely insensitive to nuances of culture and also of class. This is nowhere more evident than where international activists have sought to help Indonesia’s working women achieve gender equality in the workplace, the community, and the home.

In the decade leading up to the fall of President Suharto’s authoritarian regime in 1998, NGOs such as Kalyanamitra (Good Friend), Yayasan Perempuan Mardhika (Free Women’s Foundation), Yayasan Annisa Swasti (Independent Women’s Foundation), Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Asosiasi Perempuan Indonesia untuk Keadilan (Legal Aid Bureau of the Indonesian Women’s Association for Justice), and Solidaritas Perempuan untuk Hak Asasi Manusia (Women’s Association for Human Rights) promoted community-based worker organizing and provided services for their working-class constituencies. They were also successful in raising national and in-

ternational awareness of the problems that Indonesian women workers faced at home and abroad. Transnationalism was, and is, a key part of these Indonesian feminist NGOs' strategies in the labor sphere. Their discourse and practice was heavily influenced by their frequent engagement with feminist groups beyond Indonesia's borders, and in the 1990s they used their international contacts—and the resources that flowed from them—to build up international pressure for local change. This was possible since the majority of women involved in these organizations came from middle-class, often quite privileged, backgrounds. They were comfortable with the discourse of international feminism, as refracted through a secular or Muslim feminist frame, and had the wherewithal to operationalize feminist principles in their homes and in their immediate community contexts.

Working-class women have a very different trajectory of labor activism. Many female factory workers engaged in labor activism before 1998 through informal workers' groups and the unrecognized alternative trade unions of the last half-dozen years of Suharto's rule (Andriyani 1996; Athreya 1998). These included the worker-martyr Marsinah, who became a labor movement icon after she was raped, tortured, and murdered for her labor activism in 1993 (Ford 2003). However, the rapid expansion in independent trade unionism from mid-1998 onward created new, more structured spaces for working-class women's labor activism (Ford 2007). Unions may seem an unlikely site for opportunities to expand working-class women's understanding of feminism since even many of the most progressive unions remain fortresses of patriarchal culture. But in recent years there has been increasing overlap between transnational feminist networks and the international labor movement, as the global union federations and nationally based unions' international wings have become more concerned about gender issues.

This concern has led to an enormous number of education and training programs on gender and to other attempts to improve women's participation in union activities and representation in union structures. In Indonesia, the vast majority of these have been facilitated, and in many cases driven, by international union bodies or the International Labour Organization. Global union federations and other international labor donors argue that, while they cannot force change upon Indonesian unions, they can provide women with the skills, strategies, and self-confidence required to change practices from within.¹ Strategies to increase women's union

¹ Interviews were conducted by the author with representatives of the global union federations in Jakarta, Bogor, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Manila, Singapore, and Sydney during

membership and participation in union decision making have included the hiring of national coordinators, campaigns to raise awareness of women's labor rights, leadership training and capacity building for women trade unionists, training of trainers, the formation of women's committees, campaigns and lobbying, attempts to place women in decision-making positions in trade unions, gender awareness training for men, attempts to influence trade union policies and agendas, and collective bargaining negotiations and agreements.

In some ways, these internationally sponsored union gender programs have helped working-class women to leapfrog the inherent biases toward well-established, more professional (English-speaking) women's groups and NGOs in transnational feminist networks. In other ways, however, many of these resource-intensive programs have had little effect and have sometimes created new obstacles for women's integration within union structures. The question is, then, how important are international feminist principles concerning gender equity for achieving women's goals as labor activists?

It is difficult to see how working-class Indonesian women can progress without internationally sponsored gender equity programs, given the extent to which these women are marginalized in union structures and decision-making processes. Even in unions where the overwhelming majority of members are women, union officials are most often men. Under international pressure, many Indonesian unions have introduced separate structures (such as a women's directorate). Some unions have even imposed a quota for women in elections for leadership positions. In a number of cases, particularly in smaller unions with NGO connections, these initiatives have given women considerably more voice and influence in union structures, which they have used effectively to raise women's issues and to have those issues incorporated into core union concerns. Separate structures for women have also been developed in almost all the larger unions with strong international union connections, although leadership positions have been harder to secure. Where women are represented in the leadership, they tend to be assigned to positions that have little influence on decision-making processes, such as deputy treasurer or deputy secretary, whose duties revolve around tasks such as greeting guests and organizing catering. In the words of two women from different unions (interviewed

a number of periods of fieldwork in January–June 2005, August 2006, and May 2007. These interviews complemented fieldwork and interviews with Indonesian women workers, unionists, and other labor activists carried out periodically since 1999.

separately), women are often “just the accessories of democracy” or “symbols to demonstrate that unions are democratic.”²

However, overt espousal of Western feminism not only creates tensions among women and their families and communities but can be counterproductive in activist women's attempts to improve their position within the union movement and in the workplace. Many union women reject international feminist principles on religious or cultural grounds or simply because they do not believe that those principles apply to their own lives. Others cannot see how Western feminist principles promote their agenda as workers. Those who do embrace them are often uncompromising in their espousal and change their behavior dramatically. As a member of the women's department in one major national federation observed, women activists are not always appreciated by their male counterparts because once they become “brave,” they are considered a threat.³ This can create difficulties in pursuing a gender equity agenda, as male unionists react emotionally to women who adopt what is seen as a culturally inappropriate role. As a result, many of the most successful feminist union women invoke their feminist principles strategically rather than consistently, playing to different constituencies and audiences and constantly making decisions about how they frame their advocacy for change. They thus perform poorly against the feminist criteria applied by many transnational feminists and the feminist middle-class elite. But the advances they achieve for their female constituents as workers and as women suggest that these strategies have succeeded.

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² Confidential interviews with Indonesian women unionists in Jakarta, July 4, 2005, and July 21, 2005.

³ Interviewed by the author, Bogor, July 6, 2005.

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Women's Labor Activism in China

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Chinese women laborers have not returned to their roles as housewives in the process of China's rapid industrialization and globalization following the transformation from a planned economy to a market economy that has been underway since the end of the 1970s. Instead, more women have entered the labor market, as is shown in two respects: first, since many women have been laid off from state-owned enterprises, more urban women laborers are employed in the informal sector, where they can find only temporary or part-time work and where there is low pay and no security for their work. This kind of labor cannot be incorporated into state statistics and therefore effectively becomes invisible. Second, rural women laborers, especially young unmarried ones, have swarmed into urban areas to become the main laborers in China's manufacturing industry. Statistics show that the number of women laborers in manufacturing positions in China reached 31.921 million in 2000, accounting for 85.7 percent of the total number of women laborers in China (Li 2004). Among them, those with registered permanent residence

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