

Rosario del Rosario



Life on the Assembly Line

An Alternative Philippine Report on
Women Industrial Workers

PHILIPPINE
WOMEN'S
RESEARCH
COLLECTIVE

The Author

Rosario S. del Rosario is a social anthropologist by training and a faculty member at the Institute of Social Work and Community Development at the University of the Philippines.

As a member of several grassroots women's organizations, she has been involved in a just-concluded research on Filipino women workers in export-oriented industries. Some of the findings in this research are included in a paper jointly authored with Rosalinda Pineda-Ofreneo, titled "The Struggle of Filipino Women Workers in Export-Oriented Industries." She is also co-author (with husband Rody del Rosario) of a manual on trade unionism for Filipino workers titled Unyon, published very recently.

Since 1976, she has been involved in grassroots' women's education, training and research and has worked for the establishment of community day care and women's centers. In 1979, she prepared a primer on Filipino women in soundslide form.

Ma. del Rosario is currently involved in the development of courses on Women and Development, and is into research on Child Labor.

The Artist

Marcy Dans-Lee is an instructor at the College of Fine Arts of the University of the Philippines. She serves as an art consultant for the Phoenix Publishing House and is an illustrator of children's books.

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INTRODUCTION

They hailed from various fields and disciplines, these women who heeded the call of PILIPINA, a national women's organization, to discuss an issue that has been haunting them for sometime: what exactly is the women's question and how did it affect, or was affected by, the UN Decade for Women?

The two-day workshop held at a Suburban university in late 1984 bristled with insights and analysis as the participants groped and waded through their own experiences and perspectives on the issue. Thus, while the main task was to prepare the Alternative Country Report for the Non-Governmental Organizations' Forum in Nairobi, the workshop likewise resulted in the growth of perception and clearing of doubts among the women present.

Among the points the women agreed upon early on was that (1) the report would document the experience of women from the grassroots as they comprise the majority and most disadvantaged, and would ultimately be the measure of the Decade's gains; (2) it would have a feminist framework; and (3) it would consider as fundamental and integral the three dimensions of women's oppression:

a) national oppression since women comprise half of the Filipino people still victimized by imperialist powers in the economic, political and cultural spheres;

b) class oppression, because women bear the brunt of an exploitative system dominated by foreign corporations and the local elite, as industrial and agricultural workers, as peasants, landless poor and other marginalized sectors; and

c) gender oppression, because cutting across class lines is inequality between the sexes which intensifies the sufferings of grassroots Filipino women.

and industrial sector, and how it has pushed women to seek employment abroad as migrant workers or as prostitutes drafted into the trade by aggressive tourism policies, are probed in this Alternative Report. The influence of media's stereotypes of women, the inadequacy of government initiatives especially in the area of health services, and the lack of feminist consciousness even among organized women are other factors that mark the Decade as particularly harrowing for the Filipino women.

This report hopes that by tracing and exposing the roots of the Filipina's particular oppression and exploitation in the past ten years, solutions and strategies can be effectively shaped and mapped out.

For the purposes of fuller treatment and accessibility, the entire report is being serialized into a pamphlet series that would tackle each section separately. The consolidated of complete version is also available at the PILIPINA office at No. 12 Pasaje de la Paz, Project 4, Quezon City.

Early Beginnings

Filipino industrial women workers, have their early beginnings in the nineteenth century under Spanish colonial rule, as Cigareras in tobacco factories.¹

Their cheap and docile labor was later tapped for the embroidery industry launched during the early part of American colonial rule.²

By 1913, the extreme exploitation experienced by Filipino workers provoked a series of strikes in which one of the main issues was the legal protection of women's and children's labor. Strikes in 1920, in reaction to mass lay-offs and the lowering of wages, forced the US colonial government to legislate in favor of the protection of women's and children's labor³ and to establish the Women and Child Labor⁴ Section under the Bureau of Labor Inspection Division in 1925.

During the Japanese occupation, when most industrial establishments were closed down, many Filipino industrial women workers found themselves unemployed. Inflation was uncontrollable, wages low, hours of work long, and all of the workers' rights were suppressed.⁵

Despite the revival of some of these industries in post war years, the relative stagnation in industrial growth did not provide opportunities for the greater participation of Filipinos in the labor force. By 1967, 39% of the female force was completely unemployed, 15% from lay-offs and 24% never having had any work experience at all.⁶

Findings of a study in 1959 showed that it was mainly pressure from economic necessity which prompted Filipino women to work; thus the most motivated were lower income women.⁷ Nevertheless, because of traditional values and official stereotyping on job opportunities open to women, most Filipinas wanting to work, found few employment avenues. From a 1976 Department of Labor (DOL) listing of 15 job opportunities open to women, only 2 items - dressmaking and cook - were within reach of lower income women in terms of DOL training and experience requirements.⁸

Because of the lack of employment for the majority of Filipinas which reinforced prevailing traditional values about women

being mainly for the home, women workers tended to view income from employment as supplementary to their husbands' income, were more willing to accept lower wages, viewed work as temporary, and were less inclined to join unions.

Thus, around the time of the UN Declaration of the Decade for Women, Filipinas represented only 5,168,000 or 34.31% of the total Philippine labor force of 15,161,000. Of these, only about 348,000 women workers, engaged in production (in mining, crafts and other related work), could be considered industrial women workers.⁹

- Export Oriented Industries Within the Decade -

Within the capitalist perspective of a system of internationalization of labor; industrialized capitalist countries have monopolized the development of modern technology and production of capital goods while Third World Countries have been given the role of engaging in non-basic consumer industries, like the manufacture of cheap goods for export.¹⁰

In the seventies, the Philippine government adopted this global scheme promoted by Transnational Corporations (TNCs) and officially set off the mechanisms leading to an export drive in the garments, electronics, handicraft, and footwear manufacturing,¹¹ necessitating massive borrowings from the World Bank and other lending agencies.¹²

Among its many investment incentives to attract foreign investors were the promise of very cheap Philippine labor (10-20% less than labor counterparts in advanced industrial countries like U.S.A., Japan, and Western Europe where these TNCs were based),¹³ especially that of Philippine women who make up the bulk of the work force in most of the above-mentioned export-oriented manufacturing industries.¹⁴

*The Garments Industry

Ever since its beginning in the early nineteenth century, the garments industry has been a subcontractive industry,¹⁵ in which imported raw materials are processed (cut, embroidered, sewn, trimmed, finished) and then exported. Only part of the garments production goes on in the factory, the bulk of work is subcontracted out to home workers in both rural and urban areas.¹⁶

Since this industry is highly dependent on market demands, it is a very unstable one: In 1982, for example, due to a decrease in the foreign demand for Philippine garments, garment export earnings dropped by almost 20% from total earnings of \$ 685 million in 1981.¹⁷

The immediate result of such a decrease in demand was the folding up of many factories and massive lay-offs or rotation of thousands of workers. The textile and garments industries were among the hardest hit. 1983 lay-off figures indicate an increase of 44% from the 1982 total of 49,557.¹⁸

Protectionist measures on the part of importing countries like the United States and Great Britain are factors which may also have adversely affected the good export performance of the garments industry since 1983.

The garments industry is unstable also because most garments firms which may be Filipino-owned, are actually controlled by foreign principals who provide the raw materials, technology, credit and market, and who, when better opportunities for profit present themselves, have no second thoughts about dropping their dependent local tie-ups.¹⁹

The garments industry hires mainly the labor of women as full-time factory workers (the smaller portion of 214,000 workers), or as cottage industry workers who are either directly employed by the garments firms or are indirectly hired by subcontracting agents or cottage enterprises connected to these firms.²⁰ These women do monotonous, tiresome work requiring finger dexterity and visual concentration.

In garments factories, women workers are subjected to a rigorous quota system in which workers for example, are made to produce 500 collars or 50 dozen pairs of gloves a day.²¹ To meet such quotas, women workers have to work overtime or they risk a reduction in wages and future lay-off:

After producing 30 pairs of gloves a day, women workers would get a daily maximum wages plus allowances of about ₱ 54 while the retail price (at \$ 15 per pair of gloves) in American Department Stores is roughly ₱ 5,400.²²

Garments workers in certain firms work as long as 12 hours a day, sometime with no rest day throughout the week.²³ They often complain about being shouted at by their supervisors and management and about being cheated of their just wages and allowances. With the recent economic crisis, women workers are bewailing being put on rotation to work for 2 instead of 4 days.

Extreme heat, overcrowded and insufficiently illuminated work rooms, dirty and unventilated surroundings, and pollution from fabrics, had led to a high incidence of tuberculosis and other respiratory diseases among garments workers.²⁴

The fact that the garments like the textile factory is a veritable sweatshop, is one of the triggering reasons why the garments and textile industries are outstanding in the number of strikes they have engaged in (65 in 1981, 34 in 1982, and 23 in 1983). Notable are the pickets by garments workers of a Korean firm in the Bataan Export Processing Zone where workers were forcibly and bodily dispersed by the Zone police.²⁵

Company B's garments workers struck for more than 2 months in 1982.

Its workers couldn't take it anymore. Wages were always delayed, and management was trying its best to bust the union by terminating its officers. Workers were expected to work like slaves and the old women workers, who could hardly walk to work unless assisted, couldn't even retire, as they would then not be receiving their separation pay retirement benefits.

Some women became really outspoken, and soon, the strike was on. Management on several occasions tried to bust the strike by hiring goons and using the police, creating violence in the picket line resulting in many casualties.

Picketers could hardly sleep at night, fearing their picket line would be busted, and that they would be run over by a management truck (as almost happened once).

During one of the more violent encounters with

management even pregnant women fought with police, were dragged and got hurt.²⁶

Domestic outworkers engaged in the manufacture of garments are even worse off than their counterparts in garments factories, earning much less and with little or no opportunities (due to the nature of their dispersed situations) for organizing themselves for better wages and working conditions.

Cottage industry workers are actually being used as scabs by capitalists against their sisters in the organized manufacturing sector during strikes, as reserve labor when needed to avoid raising the wages of regular factory workers, and as signatories to company unions vying for recognition with genuine workers' unions.²⁷

*The Electronics Industry

Carried away by the boom in the international demand for semi-conductors (which are the basic components of computers and other electronics equipment now revolutionizing production, communication and service in the developed countries), President Marcos issued Executive Order No. 815 in July, 1982 in favor of the development and expansion of the semi-conductor industry.²⁸ By 1983, electronics products were at the top of the list of Philippine exports.²⁹ Trade sources indicate that foreign electronics semi-conductor firms have already readied their plans to expand their investments in the Philippines up to 1988.³⁰

The semi-conductor firms in the country are highly dependent on the foreign market and on the importation of necessary raw materials (silicon wafers) from foreign companies with whom they have tie-ups, thus 35-60 percent of inputs used by non-traditional exports like electronics are imported, and only 25% of the total export earnings are actually realized.³¹ •

As the semi-conductor industry is highly dependent on market demand, it is also very unstable and with its mass production, which contributes to the assembly of computerized devices, automation in industrialized countries may become cheaper than Asian labor, which will eventually lead to the phasing-out of semi-conductor firms in Third World countries.³² Already, more than a thousand workers have been laid-off by Dynetics, a Philippine semi-conductor firm with a U.S. based marketing agent - Interlek.

Silicon, another electronics firm, has also laid-off about 240 workers. There are definite trends showing that US electronics firms like Motorola are turning to the local work force in their own home bases.³³

According to the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) electronics firms belong to one of the most dangerous industries in terms of how they can expose their workers to hazardous substances like benzene, cadmium, chloroform, epoxy resins, various acids, lead, etc.³⁴

Thousands of young electronics women workers in uniforms and caps labor behind glass-panelled rooms, in danger of these chemicals. They often complain of itchiness, skin rashes, headaches, nausea, red, cracking skin and blisters as a result of exposure to solvents like petroleum naphtha, methychloroform and trichloroethylene (TCE), a solvent constantly touched by workers for cleaning purposes.³⁵ They are not aware of these dangers as management does not warn them about them. Elfreda Castellano after three years of work in an electronics firm was diagnosed a terminal case with aplastic anemia due to chemical exposure.³⁶

Besides working in an extremely cold room (a requirement for maintaining microchips free of dust and moisture, to which they are very sensitive), electronics workers must work in an assembly line eight hours or more a day, in rhythm with the machines, not allowed to talk, and pressured to meet very high quotas. After 5-6 years of constant peering into microscopes, concentrating on piecing minute things together, when workers start complaining of poor vision, dizziness, headaches and mental strain, and their fingers are no longer nimble, they are considered by management too old for the job. At 25-27, they may find themselves discarded to make way for a batch of younger and faster workers.³⁷

Behind the glamour of a modern industry, and the streamlining of space age technology, electronics workers are like workhorses, kept at the limits of their concentration by performance appraisals. Because of such tension, workers even refrain from going to the toilet, thus many have developed urinary tract infections. In a certain watch firm, it is not unusual to have women faint on the production line. In some firms, the normal symptoms of dysmenorrhea may even be disallowed as a reason for paid sick leave.³⁸

Electronics managers are especially wary of married women. Take the case of Jenny, an electronics worker:

Jenny who was already a mother of a baby boy had to lie about her civil status in order to land a job at Company A. A medical exam failed to establish her marital status because she had never breast-fed her baby.

Now that management knows Jenny is married, it will not promote her on the basis of their "not married" policy.³⁹

In addition to such discrimination, the work norms imposed in electronics firms can lead to really serious conditions for married women whose home burdens are an additional source of tension. Married women workers are noticing repeated miscarriages, irregular and painful menstrual periods (this is true also for single women) and inability to conceive.⁴⁰

The following is a description of a typical married electronics woman worker:

"Life is extremely difficult for a working mother," says Ditas, "especially if one's husband is likewise employed."

Ditas' problem now that she is on the second shift, is to find someone who can take care of her two children while she and her husband are away from home. She says she cannot hire a maid because no one will be willing to work for her under the cramped conditions of her household. She is thankful that her sister-in-law, who is temporarily separated from her husband, is kind enough to mind the kids and do the household chores while she and her husband are working. Ruben, her husband leaves the house at 6:30 a.m. and arrives at 6:30 p.m. Ditas goes to work at 2:00 p.m. and is off at 10:00 p.m., when Ruben fetches her to make sure she doesn't slip on the stony path to their home.

As soon as Ditas arrives, she takes her meal and then goes to sleep. She wakes up at 4:00 a.m.

to cook breakfast and Ruben's lunch, while Ruben fetches water. After eating, she starts cleaning the house, bathing her children and washing clothes. While she is doing the laundry, she keeps an eye on her children who play on the ground as long as it is not raining. At about 11:00 a.m., she starts cooking lunch and at 12:00 noon, she and her children have their meal. At 1:30 p.m. she packs the food she will take with her to the factory, and waits for her sister-in-law who will mind the children while she is away.

Ruben does the marketing in the afternoon and cooks dinner. (His sister leaves as soon as he arrives.) He feeds the children and puts them to sleep. At about 10:00 p.m. he leaves the house to fetch Ditas.

While electronics workers on the whole seem to record higher take-home pay, the reality is that due to such strict work norms in electronics firms, they are in effect actually just as, if not more exploited than other women workers.

Electronics firms are noted for their sophisticated and effective union busting techniques, which range from incentive promises (sometimes not kept), to socials, like beauty contests and plush parties, to giving of expensive gifts to key workers, etc.⁴²

Of the 38,700 work force in the Philippine semi-conductor industry reported in March 1984, 85% are women, usually unmarried, between the ages of 16-25 young women, inexperienced, and easily manipulated and disciplined by management. Their youth keeps them docile and uninvolved in union activities. In fact, women workers in the electronics industry are noted for not having been very active in strikes and other forms of concerted mass action because of their low level of unionization and because of the yellow type of unions encouraged in this industry among the unionized.⁴³

It is said that to be employed in a semi-conductor factory is to be programmed for unemployment after a few years. This is in fact the harshest reality facing an electronics worker, because

when she is thrown out of work, she will hardly be able to find a job where the same skills may be applied.⁴⁴

*In The Export-Processing Zones (EPZs)

Export processing zones (EPZs) (also called free trade zones) have been built to attract foreign investment and generate employment. They are developed by a host government to make conditions suitable for the smooth flow of operations which include exemption from taxes and customs duties on exports and on imported machinery, raw materials and supplies; low rent and utility rates; full repatriation of profits for foreign investors at any time; and assistance from the zone authority in recruiting cheap local labor and keeping workers docile.⁴⁵

Four EPZs are at present in operation in Bataan, Mactan, Baguio City and Cavite. Two special zones have also been opened in Batangas and Leyte; and several others have been targetted within the next ten years.⁴⁶

The EPZs have concentrated their recruitment on young, single women below 25, who comprise 70% of the total workforce. This practice is referred to as "cutting in on a loop" in the working lives of women after they leave school and before they marry, then discarding them.⁴⁷

Another common practice in the EPZs is to hire women on "apprenticeship" contracts for a protracted length of time, paying them lower rates and not providing benefits usually given to the permanent workers. This practice not only lowers wage standards below minimum but also keeps women workers constantly insecure about their jobs, opening them to sexual harassment by male supervisors.⁴⁸

Almost all industries in the Bataan Export Processing Zone (BEPZ), for example, pay wages lower than the national average in each industry, and often below subsistence. Major female-dominated firms in the BEPZ, especially those in electronics, give wages below rates normally paid outside for the same type of work. A comparison of EPZs in different Asian countries shows the Philippines having the lowest average hourly earnings in electronics (30 US cents) and the second to the lowest in garments (17 US cents).⁴⁹

There is a very high turn-over rate in the EPZs. The average length of stay of a worker in the same company in BEPZ is about three years. EPZ workers, especially women have to leave work after only a few years of service because of a deterioration in their physical and mental status brought about by occupational diseases and hazards. Furthermore, work norms are so high that workers develop a number of stress symptoms and disorders just trying to meet them. Such norms are enforced by fines and incentives.⁵⁰

Women develop urinary tract infections as they are not allowed to visit the toilet except during main breaks and sometimes keys to the toilet are kept by supervisors.

Most common work-related illnesses reported by management were skin allergy, headache and dizziness. In the electronics industry, the most frequent complaints were eye irritation and hypertension; in plastics and metal fabrication, conjunctivitis; in garments and food, upper respiratory tract infections and dermatitis; and in leather products, sinusitis.⁵¹

Many EPZ firms insist on overtime and any worker who refuses to comply gets a demerit which decreases wages and increases the risk of dismissal. Thus, working hours in the BEPZ, for example, are very long, about 53 hours per working week, when the limit according to existing labor legislation is 48 hours per week.⁵²

Women workers in the EPZs hardly ever get promoted. Men even fill supervisory positions in female-dominated industries.⁵³

There is hardly any training program to upgrade skills reported in the EPZs.⁵⁴

The long list of serious problems women workers face in the BEPZ includes: violation of labor standards (e.g. underpayment of wages); illegal dismissal and other forms of unfair labor practices; imposition of disciplinary actions such as forced overtime, underpayment of wages and allowances and unrealistically high production targets; sexual harassments, intimidation of those engaged in forming unions; and lack of social amenities such as adequate, clean and decent housing.⁵⁵

- THE PRESENT CONDITIONS OF
FILIPINO INDUSTRIAL WOMEN WORKERS-

Justifying the adoption of export-orientation, the National Economic Development Authority (NEDA), promised the Filipinos the prospect of more employment and a larger female participation in the labor force.⁵⁶

Sure enough, NCSO reports for the 4th quarter of 1983 placed women's labor force participation at 8,094,000.⁵⁷ Exact figures for the number of industrial women workers are not available, but females engaged in manufacturing in the garments and electronics sectors alone total about 752,700,⁵⁸ as a whole, constituting 20% of the total workers in manufacturing.⁵⁹ These figures represent a jump from pre-1975 levels. In fact, 1981 second quarter employment reports submitted to the MOLE by private establishments in Metro Manila, indicate that majority of the workers were from the manufacturing sector which was 41% female.⁶⁰

*More Unemployment and Underemployment

Since the 1980's, however, as a result of the intense competition over the relatively few existing jobs, unemployment and underemployment stand at 39.9%.⁶¹ 1984 first quarter data show that 73.48% of all lay-offs, or a total of 76,645 workers occurred in the manufacturing sector which hires the labor of a lot of women.⁶² There are labor forecasts that employment levels by 1987 will decline by about 1.5 million, given employment and output relations prevailing since 1980.⁶³

Another dramatic example of massive and sudden lay-off has been the case of the garments workers of Sewn Products Incorporated (SPI), in Cainta, Rizal. SPI, an American-owned firm, just decided to run away with several months' union funds, and without paying its 1,600 women-dominated workforce their pending wages, 13th month pay, unpaid allowances and leave payments, as well as termination pay. To the present, these workers (who picketed for months), are still fighting to be compensated. Many of them remain unemployed.⁶⁴ There are rumors that Triumph International intends to transfer its operations to the People's Republic of China, and its recent lay-off of about 500 workers is the beginning of a phase-out.

Many firms, no longer able to cope with the high cost of im-

ported inputs, have put their workers on a 2-day a week rotation, forcing others to resign or to go on leave.

*Lower Real Wages and Substandard Living Conditions

A woman garments worker in a factory today, would have to work 50 hours and 52 minutes (or about a little more than 4 days) in order to buy a pair of pants she makes for the employer, costing about ₱ 200.00. Her daily take-home pay (minimum wage plus allowances would only amount to ₱ 54.00.

Workers in a footwear company all get wages not exceeding ₱ 1,500 a month, which after deductions would amount to much less. Some would get about ₱ 800 - ₱ 1,000. Betty, one of the workers says that the majority of her co-workers cannot make both ends meet with their present wages. Thus, they are forced to borrow money at the usurious rate of 5:6 (paying ₱ 6.00 for every borrowed ₱ 5.00, after a week.)⁶⁵

While the same minimum wage stands for all Filipino workers regardless of sex, studies on earning differentials show that, on the average, men earn ₱ 1.50 for every ₱ 1.00 of a woman. Women production workers in particular, on the average, earn only 61.3% of what their male counterparts earn.⁶⁶

In a study of Mindanao women workers, data shows that 35% of the respondents complained about low pay and the casual nature of their employment. These women workers in transnational agribusiness corporations, local manufacturing and service companies from five provinces in Mindanao claim they receive less pay than the male workers, even if the work they do is equivalent or even more strenuous.⁶⁷

Industrial women workers, because of such low, sometimes incomplete, and thoroughly inadequate wages, are forced to live in squatter areas under harsh conditions. Their children are malnourished, they cannot avail of higher education, and are not reached by social services. Take the case of an electronics woman worker:

The Abads are renting a small room at Village 2 for ₱ 170/month. This serves as their living room, kitchen, dining room and bedroom rolled into one. The toilet is a common one for all four families.

residing in the same place. The small children just urinate or defecate anywhere.

The Abad's light comes from a small fluorescent lamp and tiny bulb for their holy statues. Payment for the electricity is included in the rent and so they are constrained from ironing their clothes.

Water is inaccessible and expensive. The pay is ₱ 0.80 per container; their daily consumption is from ₱4.80 to ₱8.00 and for them to be able to save on this, husband wakes up at 4:30 a.m. to fetch water from a far away faucet free of charge. This is about 400 meters away from their home and the path is stormy and hilly. If he gets water in the afternoon, he has to line up and watch his containers for as long as two hours.

The Abad's residence cannot be reached by public transport. The pathways are muddy and stony during the rainy season and dusty during the dry season. The odor there is very unpleasant because of the primitive toilets and the dirt and waste from surrounding factories.⁶⁸

Money wages of Filipino workers, especially of women workers, are much lower now in terms of their real wage value than in 1972. Between 1972-79, we find the greatest real wage decrease occurring. Even effective wage (minimum wage, COLA and 13th month pay) amounting to ₱ 57.08 daily for Metro Manila non-agricultural workers is already 25% below minimum estimated daily food expenses.⁶⁹ Organized labor is fearing that the government has made a "wage restraint commitment" to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as part of the conditions for the financial bailout package sponsored by the Fund.⁷⁰

*More hazardous and Oppressive Working Conditions

Mindanao women worker-respondents of an interview cited conditions of work as the main problem of women workers:

Working under strict factory conditions, the women workers complain about increasing work quotas. For example, field workers in an agribusiness corporation are asked to plant one hundred and twenty seed-

lings per hour. They work in areas far from comfort rooms and drinking facilities. They are allowed very short breaktimes. The women complain that the heavy work usually done by men in the past, such as hauling jobs are now increasingly done by women, and by less women than what it took the men to do the work before. The women also said that they work in hot, unventilated rooms and under hazardous conditions. One worker claimed she has to climb nineteen steps two hundred times in one day carrying trayfuls of products. Many incidents were reported of a worker losing a finger or getting hurt while working with assembly-line machines. In most cases, adequate compensation and hospitalization are not given, only first aid."⁷¹

Based on a sample survey, it was found that majority of complainants filed at the Docket Section of the National Capital Region Office of the Ministry of Labor and Employment (MOLE) are women workers, 35% of whom come from the manufacturing sector. Most of their complaints were wage-related (non-payment of emergency allowance, non-payment allowances, overtime pay and legal holiday, endeminity, service incentive leave and commission pay). Other complaints were about illegal dismissal or lay-off.⁷²

A study of married women workers in 3 export-oriented industries shows manufacturing women workers complaining about strict quotas, monotonous and repetitive work, intense cold in electronics firms, unbearable heat in garments and footwear factories, forced overtime, short or no breaks, and management's abuses (shortchanging workers on wages and allowances, on leave payments and maternity benefits, and among still others, sexual abuses.⁷³

Women workers commonly report that sexual exploitation is rampant as many of them are offered jobs and promotions in exchange for sexual favors.

Women workers of a certain garments factory in Marikina complain that they are made to wear shorts and flimsy attire for two reasons: because they are suspected of theft and because male managers enjoy seeing them that way.

Male supervisors are reported as using their positions to

recommend for promotions or dismissal, to decrease or increase quotas, to allow or prevent breaks and as leverage in getting satisfaction for their sexual advances. In not a few cases, they use outright force in doing so. Some managers have been quoted as giving their female employees two seconds to decide whether it is "lay down or lay-off."

The following are the opinions of some women workers of their working situations: Lily a garments worker says: "Management is a cheat, it is inhuman in its treatment of workers. Manager X, for example, always belittles workers and calls them stupid and dense. He wants us to work like slaves."⁷⁴

Tita, another garments worker says: "Even pregnant women are forced to remain standing and to carry heavy loads, resulting sometimes in miscarriages."⁷⁵

Bel, an electronics workers says: "To be able to comply with the quota, we have to maximize all available time; we even have to take turns for breaks. Material incentives are offered workers able to meet their quotas, but when out-put is about to reach the quota point, management holds the raw materials by claiming shipment from abroad has not arrive, thus, we are unable to avail of the incentives stated in our Collective Bargaining Agreements."⁷⁶

Tina, a worker in a footwear company says: "Our working conditions are unhealthy. The smell of chemicals is very bad, while inadequate ventilation makes us sweat all day. Many of the workers have already contracted various illnesses - tuberculosis, allergy, headache, backache, etc. Not even a single electric fan can be seen inside the workplace."⁷⁷

*Multiple Barriers to Union Participation

Because of such exploitation more and more women workers have joined unions and strikes, but their double burden of home and factory work, leaves them with little time and energy to actively pursue union meetings or join picket lines. Other barriers exist to make it very difficult for women to become active and militant. Within some firms with unions, especially in electronics firms, there are concrete bases for conflict between the union members and the non-unionized ones (e.g. casual workers) who do not receive benefits. There is also conflict between various categories of workers (daily paid and monthly paid), between rival factions

wishing to retain or capture the union leadership, and between male union officials and predominantly female rank-and-file.

It is rare to find a women union president for many women workers still feel that unionism is a man's domain, and this is strengthened by her double burden and the overall labor atmosphere in which there are laws that virtually put a ban on unions and strikes. According to a study by the Bureau of Women and Minors (BWM), only 11.3% of the 968 reporting local unions were headed by women, while women union officers accounted for 4.1% of the total 48,984 women union members.⁷⁸

Let us take the case of Elly, a garments worker:

Elly's husband doesn't like the union and doesn't like Elly to join it. He says it will just court trouble; "It's all meeting and talk and nothing will happen." Elly and her husband always quarrel about her coming home late from union meetings. During their strike, she would sneak away to join the picket line so her husband wouldn't find out.⁷⁹

and the case of Zeny, a worker in a footwear company:

Zeny is an active participant in all union activities inside and outside the factory. She believes that women influence the union decision-making process through active participation. Her only obstacle is her husband who understands nothing about trade unionism. She says: "His objection is based on his fear for my physical and job security."⁸⁰

The existence of discriminatory attitudes hampering women's participation in the labor force and in the organized struggle for better working conditions, coupled with a high rate of unemployment, ever-soaring high prices and the current labor laws and policies supporting the TNC's unhampered exploitation of workers, have all contributed to the creation of masses of insecure and anxious women competing with each other over the few existing and unstable jobs as they retain the double burden of their traditional responsibilities.

Eva, a garments worker who is beginning to get cold feet about being active in the union, despite the fact that she is an officer,

has this to say:

I cannot think of looking for a better job. What have I studied? What I really don't want to happen is for my children to experience the hard life I knew as a child, when, often, we only had rice to eat, and sometimes not even enough of that!⁸¹ She is in constant fear of lay-off.

Rose, an electronics worker almost suffered a miscarriage due to the violence that ensued during their third strike, when most of the union officers including her husband were arrested and put in jail. She now works as a clerk-typist for her union, but she constantly worries about the minimal salary she received from it, especially now with her husband unemployed.⁸²

Military and police violence directed at women workers is a common occurrence during strikes. The terror that this can sow (as these agents of the law uphold management's position), indeed creates another formidable, though not insurmountable, barrier in women worker's participation in organized struggle.

- DECADE RESPONSES -

*The Philippine Government's Response

Government's immediate response to the declaration of the Decade for Women was the creation, in 1975, of the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women (NCRFW) "to review, evaluate and recommend measures, including priorities to ensure the full integration of women for economic, social and cultural development at national, regional and international levels and to ensure further equality between men and women."⁸³

The Review and Appraisal of Progress Made in Attaining the Objectives of the United Nations Decade for Women prepared by the NCRFW for the UN ESCAP in November 1979, states that "Achieving for women equal treatment in the law has yet to be fully realized." Advances recorded in this line are the following:

The law making marriage a cause for automatic termination of employment of women in the armed forces has been amended, and married women in the service enjoy maternity benefits under stated conditions.

The labor Code provision making stipulations against marriage unlawful has been applied to nullify conditions in collective bargaining agreements providing for termination of women's employment in case of marriage.

Maternity benefits have been integrated in the Social Security System for the better protection of the health and welfare of women.⁸⁴

The revisions on the law on marriage as cause for employment terminations, however, have had minimal effects on the majority of women workers who continue to be laid-off, or are forced to resign because of marriage.

While maternity benefits have been integrated into the Social Security System (SSS), data from the study of married women workers mentioned above, shows women workers complaining that their employers do not immediately (sometimes not at all) remit their already paid SSS premiums, so when delivery time comes around, they cannot avail of these benefits right away, forcing them to frantically look for loans (often at usurious rates) to cover maternity expenses. In case none is available, this may even have dire consequences on their delivery.⁸⁵

In 1977, the NCRFW launched its action arm, the *Balikatan sa Kaunlaran* (BSK) (meaning shoulder-to-shoulder cooperation in development), among whose main aims is the "attainment of the fuller integration of women in the total development efforts of the country."⁸⁶

In 1980, *Balikatan*, in a report of its "Achievements and Accomplishments" stated its commitment to "...promote women's dignity through economic uplifting", sponsoring various income-generating activities (mainly in handicraft, recycling, sewing, cosmetology, furniture making, food processing, vermiculture, ceramics and pottery, horticulture, etc.) among women and their families. It reported that 649,718 persons were benefitted at an estimated cost of ₱ 5,529,010.⁸⁷ NCRFW proudly reported for *Balikatan* that throughout the country, one of the most popular income-generating activities was scrap-recycling. "The women converted discarded materials of cloth, cartoons, bottles, bottle-caps, tincans, etc. and made them into stuffed toys, underwear,

dresses, household items and others. These items were made available to the community at very low prices. In addition to producing low cost products, the women who made the items, earned an additional income ranging from ₱ 8.00-₱12.00 per day depending on the skill and time spent on the undertaking."⁸⁸

In An Assessment of Women's Participation in Development Projects: The BSK experience, finalized in 1984 by UP Sard-ISWCD-NCRFW, in its "Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations," it is stated that "With regard to their participation in the activities of BSK, the survey findings reveal the low rate of participation of members from both councils (active and inactive) in planning and decision-making."⁸⁹ Further down it says that "BSK may be regarded as enormously influenced by politics, having been initiated and organized by the nearest kin or relative of prominent and affluent politicians ---Political affiliations may therefore cause the participation or non-participation of people in certain organizations..."⁹⁰

The Assessment concludes that "... BSK has proven its viability in some councils, but factors both internal and external to the organization led to its failure to achieve most of its objectives."⁹¹

The Assessment's conclusions are quite self-explanatory, but it should be added that, with regards to industrial women workers, given that job security is one of the harshest problems facing them, Balikatan projects like recycling and other such unstable income-generating activities promoted at the grassroots level, are mere palliatives, not solutions, and are even misleading. In fact, the encouragement of such precarious activities does not contribute to the realization and search for more viable and more long-lasting employment policies and strategies for women.

The 1980 UN Questionnaire on Employment (and Related Economic Sectors) responded to by the NCRFW shows that the government has not adopted special policies, strategies or measures to enhance women's access to technical and vocational education and training for preparation for an occupational field, which would be a step towards the promotion of equality of opportunity and treatment for women workers and that no retraining facilities have been organized to enable women who have interrupted their education, training or occupational life to reenter the labor market.⁹¹

With regards to training, the 1981 ESCAP study entitled Young Workers in Export-Oriented Manufacturing Industries: Reports and Studies on Singapore, Sri Lanka and the Philippines shows that the various training programs (of the Ministry of Labor and Employment (MOLE), of the Ministry of Education (MOE) and of the National Manpower and Youth Council (NMYC) which had been the intention of upgrading women's workers' access to employment, have been limited.⁹³

In her book Work and Training Opportunities for Women in the Philippines, Lucita Lazo (Deputy Executive of the Institute of Labor and Manpower Studies) states that "National Planning has not reflected explicit attention on women's training."⁹⁴

Findings of the study of married women workers, already mentioned, indicate that for the garments industry, most women workers feel they can learn the job within one day to two weeks.⁹⁵ Indeed, given the simple kinds of skills Filipino industrial women workers are required to do for export-oriented industries, efforts at training become superfluous.

In fact, employers take advantage of the requirement of apprenticeship to postpone, sometimes indefinitely for years, the tenure of a woman worker, or to benefit altogether for lower than minimum wage cost, from the apprenticeship services of women workers, after which they are dismissed, with no liabilities of illegal dismissal charges on the part of the employer.

Training can only benefit women workers, if the employment strategies really require them, and if they are geared towards assuring that women will remain in the labor force with employment.

Answers to the UN Questionnaire also report that at present, there are approximately 11,000 day care centers operating throughout the Philippines, but only 55% are government sponsored, 25% are privately sponsored and 4% jointly sponsored by parents and non-government entities.⁹⁶

With regards to the support system for child care, very crucial in lightening women's workers' double burden, it is obvious that the different government-sponsored day care centers set up throughout the country are hardly tailored for industrial women workers' needs. For one, they do not operate according to industrial women

workers' schedules of work, as they have less than eight hour (only 2-4 hours) shifts per batch of children. Let us take the example of Fely, an electronics worker:

Fely's problem (as a mother and as a worker) multiply whenever there is a change of shift (6 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.) or second shift (2 p.m. - 10:00 p.m.) With this schedule, Fely has to rely on other people to take care of her small daughter and to prepare for the food. In most cases, she opts to leave her small kid with her in-laws who are located not too far from their place of (½ km. of relatively rugged terrain). Her other alternative is to ask her husband to absent himself from work (that is, if he is employed). Because of such problems, Fely is inclined to accept her sister's offer to take care of her child. But her husband is opposed to the idea as her sister is in the province.⁹⁷

The day care program is beset with the problem of inadequate funds to support it (to pay for building, furniture and the services of the day care worker), and there is no move on the part of the government to put pressure on employers to shoulder the responsibility of child care (during the day and at night) while the working mothers are at work in their factories.

In 1981, the NCRFW, through its vice-chairman Irene Cortes, stressed women's unemployment as one of the major problems facing Filipinos in general.

By virtue of Executive Order 797, the Bureau of Women and Minors (BWM) was organized in 1983. The BWM acts as central coordinating body for efforts directed towards employment and protection of women, and assists the MOLE in areas pertaining to the general welfare of all working women: Subsequently, the BWM conducted studies on women workers in the Export Processing Zones, on women's participation in labor unions and on the effects of certain labor standards on health and the productivity of women workers in textile and electronics industries.⁹⁸

Dr. Leticia Perez de Guzman, chairperson of the NCRFW, in a Panorama interview in March 1985, was described as "particularly proud of the Commission's research and documentation arm, which

has been able to come up with significant studies on such all important questions to women as the measurement of women's housework, the attitudes of Filipino women towards female lawyers, and women's contributions to science...". and of "the clearing house and information center which recently completed a bibliography of materials on women.."⁹⁹

Once can say, therefore, that the efforts of the government towards the improvement of the status of industrial women workers have hardly scratched the surface of their many basic problems.

Without changing or amending the different provisions in the Labor Code which discourage trade unions and strikes (like BP 130 and 227),¹⁰⁰ any steps by government to improve industrial women workers' leadership participation in particular, and her conditions in general, will be ineffective.

It is also only by lightening industrial women workers' burden in the home and in the community, and by releasing them to take active part in unions to improve their conditions as workers, that the government can truly show its sincerity in improving their status.

*The Non-Governmental Organizations' (NGOS') Response

Subsequent to the declaration of the Decade of Women, up to about 1979, no non-governmental organization (with the exception of certain labor organizations) ever focused on Filipino industrial women workers.

Around 1979, the grass-roots organization Samahan ng mga Kababaihang Manggagawa sa Pilipinas (SKMP) was formed and started conducting seminars for women workers. Together with another grassroots organization (established in 1975 in response to the declaration of the Decade for Women) composed mainly of rural women members - the Katipunan ng Bagong Pilipina (KBP), SKMP was instrumental in forming a Trade Union Coordinating Committee for women workers in 1980. Its output became a Working Women's Charter, which together with SKMP's translation into Pilipino of the UN Convention document on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the Charter of Working Women's Rights, was used in its regular and on-going women workers' education seminars, and disseminated among other women workers.¹⁰¹

In 1980-85, KBP developed a sound/slide presentation on Filipino Women (which also focused on women workers), published the results of its research on women domestic out-workers, and conducted researches among industrial women workers in factory and subcontracting situations.¹⁰²

Both KBP and SKMP members claim to have been active in strike solidarity since 1982, when the strike fever among women was on the rise.

A 1980 survey of NGOs (majority of whom are members of the Civic Assembly of Women of the Philippines (CAWP), regarding their "Participation and Contribution to National Development for the Decade for Women", showed that little focus had been given to industrial women workers as such. They only relevant projects to the situation of industrial women workers that can be cited are: income-generating projects through cottage industry production (particularly for the disabled); job placement schemes for service workers (like nurses); and projects aiming to solve job-related problems for service workers (hospitality girls and nurses abroad).¹⁰³

1984 marked a year of heightened focus on Filipino women, especially women workers. The The Kilusan ng mga Manggagawang Kababaihan (KMK) and the Makabayang Kababaihan ng Masa (MAKAMASA) (a multi-sectoral women's organization) were added to the list of organizations directly focusing on women workers.

Women's centers for research and dissemination, also focusing on working women's problems, like the Center for Women's Resources, Pilipina, the Philippine Women's Research Collective, the Metro-Manila-based Women's Center, WATCH in Mindanao, Third World Women Against Exploitation, etc., were all formed within the last two years.

Increased interest in industrial women workers' conditions throughout the country has also been manifested in articles, news items and other publications with topics on women workers in the Export Processing Zones, in agribusiness corporations, in garments, textiles, electronics, footwear and food processing industries, and in women domestic outworkers.

*Industrial Women Workers' Strikes

The direct and coordinated exploitation of Filipino industrial women workers makes of them the most exploited of Filipinas but at the same time the most likely vanguard against such exploitation.

Dramatic are the recent strikes of thousands of industrial women workers at the Bataan Export Processing Zone, where strikes are virtually prohibited: In January 1982, women workers of the Viron Garments Manufacturing Corporation stopped working and launched a picket to protest union-busting and other anti-labor practices of management. The following months, strikes likewise hit neighboring Ricoh Watch and Mccoa Industries.¹⁰⁴ The increasing temper of protest led, in June 1982, to the mass walk-out of thousands of Zone workers in sympathy with picketers at the Inter-Asia Container Company who had been bombarded with water from the BEPZ fire truck, and were later arrested and detained.¹⁰⁵

The BEPZ women workers' militance amidst the repressive conditions in their work environment, culminated, in mid-1984, in a defiant stand at the picketlines by the employees of Lotus Export Specialists (a Korean Firm) who were, however, forcibly and bodily dispersed by the BEPZ police with water hoses and brute force. The lawmen were enforcing an order by the National Labor Relations Commission to allow ingress to and egress from the premises of the factory.¹⁰⁶

This series of protests has prompted Mattel Philippines (local subsidiary of the US Barbie Doll maker, projecting a \$31 million export sales in 1984,) ¹⁰⁷ to move a big chunk of its 5,000 female-dominated workforce out of BEPZ to Rizal and Metro Manila. Harboring similar fears, the Export Processing Zone Chamber of Exporters and Manufacturers (EPZCEM) has asked President Marcos to ban, through an executive order, "...sympathy strikes, walkouts, and any form of work stoppage" at the BEPZ.¹⁰⁸

Also notable are the strikes conducted by women workers in garments, food processing, electronics and footwear firms in Metro Manila, Rizal and Laguna.

The number of strikes in 1984 (278 strikes) marks an increase from 260 strikes in 1981, 158 in 1982 and 155 in 1983. Over 60% of the strikes during 1981-84 took place in Metro Manila, and over 60% of labor walkouts throughout the country in that same period

occured in the manufacturing sector.¹⁰⁹

In Mindanao, women workers have cited slowing down as the activity which "can alleviate difficult work conditions. In addition women workers are starting to study principles of unionism, working for new Collective Bargaining Agreements and are participating in activities for sharing experiences and deriving learnings from these among workers."¹¹⁰

The following are some women strikers' experience and reactions:

Lilly was at the picket line day and night. She never told her husband about it. "It's difficult to strike with no funds, but the strike is the only way for the workers to get their rights. One day, there was trouble at the picket line. Management was forcing a cargo truck to get through even if it meant running over the strikers, among whom were even pregnant women. The picketers did not budge an inch, Lilly was hurt, so she started biting the guards. She climbed up on the truck and tried to prevent the driver from continuing. One of the guards pulled her down, but she kept on fighting. One of the lady guards tried to strangle her and covered her mouth, but Lilly dug her nails deep into her skin. She got all bruised."¹¹¹

Findings from in-depth interview show that when women workers are not prohibited and instead are encouraged by their husbands to participate in union activities, they tend to be more militant in strikes, more outspoken against management and more active in their struggle for better wages and working conditions. Findings also show that when women workers are more exposed to workers' education of the progressive sort, including curricula that focus on women workers' problems. They tend to be more active and militant.¹¹²

Despite the fact that other women workers tend to vacillate in their struggle as women workers, 90% of the women workers interviewed by the just mentioned study expressed no regrets over having joined their strikes. Majority believes that the strike is their main weapon to force management to give in to their demands.¹¹³

According to them:

The strike was a difficult experience, but it brought us together.. The strike is the workers' main weapon.

Mely learned the importance of unity during the strike and says: "Together, we bewailed the fact that other workers broke the picket line. I learned that one must fight for workers' rights."¹⁴

The similarity of their problems, their historical as well as work experiences, their togetherness in work places, are all factors which, in their desire to survive, have set the stage for their protests and demands as workers.

- THE STRUGGLE AHEAD -

As the decade for Women comes to an end, the problems of the Filipino industrial women workers become more and more apparent; unemployment, underemployment, lower wages due to inflation and acute competition over low-skilled, export-oriented jobs, more exploitation in the work places, no alleviation from childcare and housework, no real opportunities for self-development nor for meaningful involvement in trade unions, more dislocation (particularly for workers in the EPZs), and an overall decrease in the standard and dignity of living.

While there has been more official as well as silent recognition of women workers' equality to men, and while more and more women are seeking employment, and going out of their homes, many conditions remain to maintain Filipino working women's status at a level not too far from what it was in 1975. If at all, because of the low wage policy and massive unemployment, Filipino industrial women workers are even more exploited today.

The problem of the Filipino industrial women workers cannot be isolated from society and the world as a whole. Their demands for equality, for full employment, better wages, for the right to organize and join unions, and for social conditions which would help lessen, if not altogether abolish their double burden, have to do with discriminatory laws and law enforcement, unfavorable government socio-economic policies, and, above all, an economy which allows exploitation, especially foreign exploitation and

foreign domination.

The nature of labor-intensive, export-oriented, TNC-controlled industrial production carries within its very core the danger of lower and lower wages, and massive unemployment due to overproduction, decrease in a demand for these non-essential goods (and the consequent collapse of their markets) and capitalist competition with its drive for cheaper labor, bigger markets, in short, more profitable opportunities for TNC's wherever they can find them, leading to the collapse of industries in countries they have withdrawn from.

Frightening is the spectre of masses of Filipinos without jobs (foremost among them women who are always the first to be fired). Already TNCs are laying-off hundreds and thousands of Filipino workers, especially women workers in the garments and electronic sectors, and moving out, for example, to other countries like the People's Republic of China where labor is not only more organized and skilled, but cheaper, and where a vast market for non-essential goods exists. Filipino handicraft exporters also are often heard to bewail the fact that China is edging them out of the basket market implying unemployment for handicraft workers.

There are indications that the rapid pace of scientific and technological developments in the electronics industry will have dire consequences on Philippine labor and industry. The extensive use of robots and other microelectronically controlled machines which displace people who are less skilled, like women, will tend to discourage the transfer of operations of foreign electronics manufacturers to less developed countries endangering jobs and leading to the collapse of economies like that of the Philippines.

In a keynote address at a Seminar Workshop on "Fuller Integration of Women in National Development Towards Unity and Progress", held in October, 1980, Ambassador Leticia Ramos Shahani reflects:

What are the implications of the export industry for women as we want to export more of our handicrafts abroad, as we want to export more of our textiles and our garments? Are we just interested in greater export promotion at the expense of debasing the status of our Filipino Women? Will we allow them to accept any salary as long as it is salary no matter how poor

are the working conditions and no matter how unjust are the conditions of work? I am saying these because this is actually what is happening. As Philippine Ambassador, my instructions are to promote exports and push for our Philippine products which we do. Let us become more competitive but in becoming more competitive, we keep also reducing the wages of our laborers. Now I know that if the capitalists or the managers will hear me they will say: "Well, how can you expect to compete with the rest of the world?" What I am saying is there are many implications for the status of the Filipino Woman in the employment and in the economic field. These are really all part of what we say is the New International Economic Order and this is why I believe that some of the very basic problems relating to women are in the field of employment. I would also like to make an appeal here that if there should be any seminars on the New International Economic Order, I think we should also raise the question of who controls the economy of this country. It is high time that Filipino Women examine what and how the means of production are controlled in this country. We cannot talk about employment, the status of the Filipino worker unless we know whether the economy is in Philippine hands or in non-Philippine hands.¹¹⁵

Serious thought indeed has to be given to the creation of a New International Economic Order and effective steps have to be taken to protect industry and labor from TNC ravage

The foremost task of industrial women workers, especially those working in export-oriented industries controlled by TNCs, is to unionize and to expand this unity to the rest of the Filipino workers in industry and agriculture, as well as to forge solidarity and closer ties among workers of countries subject to TNC operations, in order to prevent TNCs from using one country's workers against another in the capitalist competition for cheaper labor and better market venues.

Women workers, despite their double burden, must exert effort, spend time in union activities, and support and attend mass activities which truly uphold their interests, despite negative husbands and the machismo of some union leaders.

In addition to these, there is a need for an integrated framework and strategy for dealing with industrial women workers' interrelated economic and social roles, through research, evaluation, dialogue and actual involvement and participation of women workers themselves in national development planning.

The supportive efforts of all Filipinas, of their Asian and other Third World sisters, and other sisters in the rest of the world are needed in this continuing struggle.

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The Philippine Women's Research Collective (PWRC)

Henedina Rascon-Abad
Pennie Anarcon-dela Cruz (editor)
Rina Jimenez-David
Feresita Quintos Deles (coordinator)
Jurgette Honculada
Cristina Liamson
Roselia Sicat-Loranzo
Pe Mangahas
Emmelina Quintillan
Rosalinda Pineda-Ofreneo
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Rosario del Rosario
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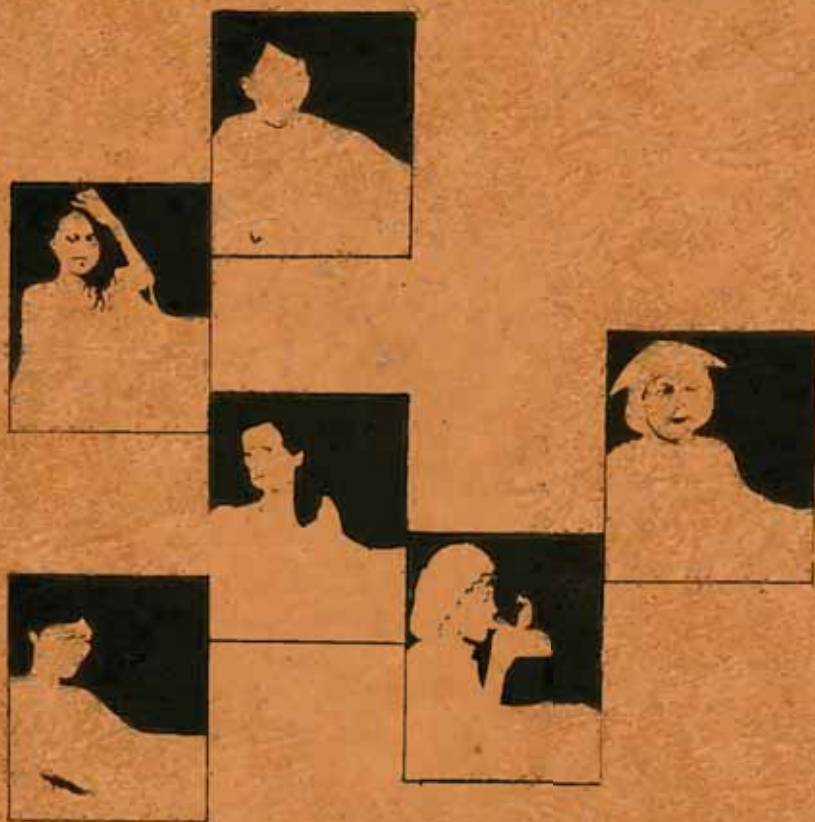
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