



ON THE FRONTLINES: PEASANT WOMEN AND LAND REFORM STRUGGLES IN THE PHILIPPINES

Abstract

In many agrarian communities in the Philippines, the failure of land reform completion continues to inspire the peasant movement, in many cases led by peasant women. Agrarian communities organize themselves to assert their rights and demand justice. Often, women are on the front lines employing different strategies, including rightful resistance, to achieve immediate access to and control over the agrarian covered or redistributed land. This study, however, found that the women's strategic gender interests, though equally crucial to advance land reform and achieve integrated justice, are often overshadowed by class-based concerns and not given adequate attention.

Employing the integrated justice framework (Fraser, 1999, 2005), this study critically interrogates the agrarian praxis in the country and how peasant women in two agrarian communities amplified (or silenced) not only the land redistribution, but also the recognition of their rights or gender-based issues as they led the land struggles in their communities. Based on fieldwork in the country and in two agrarian communities in the provinces of Masbate and Iloilo, and drawing from key informant interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), participant observation, and literature reviews, this study analyses the status of women's land rights and interprets experiences of peasant men and women, especially the members of the Samahan ng mga Anak ng Magsasaka ng Famosa (People's Organization of Farmers' Children in Famosa) (SAMFAI) and Kaisahan sang Mangunguma sa Programa sa CARP (Unity of Farmers in CARP Program) (KMPCI). Highlighting women's leadership in the advancement of land rights for both men and women helps demonstrate the women's important contributions in agrarian justice.

The cases show peasant women's key roles in bridging the gap in the country's exploitative agrarian hierarchy and the silence on gender injustice. In so doing, this study expands the often dichotomized redistributive/non-redistributive agrarian debate.

In sum, the peasant women's front line and leadership roles in the agrarian struggle have been driven by the collective desire to advance land redistribution. However, although the peasants' initiatives critically respond to the agrarian policy implementation failure in the country, these are not necessarily conducive to gender justice. This study therefore problematizes how women-led land struggles advance (or otherwise hamper or delay) the attainment of integrated justice, especially within contexts often marred by violence (triggered usually by landowners) and within an agrarian structure which is operating through an outdated set of gendered norms and values (reproduced in large part by the state's complacency and weak political will).

Key words

Peasant women, women's (social) movement, social and gender justice, land reform, social transformation, Philippines