

PEDAGOGY FOR ADDRESSING EMOTIONAL SUBORDINATION AMONG WOMEN WORKERS

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SUMMARY

This paper elucidates a pedagogy to enable women workers as a gendered, oppressed group to unpack and break through the numbness arising from suffering continuous subordination.

INTRODUCTION

Conscientisation of women workers tend to focus on their material-objective conditions. Consciousness-raising about their structural oppression, that is, class exploitation and gender subordination are emphasised. However, their personal experiences and feelings are rarely taken on board. The more subjective commonalities of unspoken thoughts and repressed feelings, especially the emotional implications of subordination, tend to be overlooked.

Pedagogical approaches and organisational practices tend to deny women workers the space and authority to talk about their lived experiences. Far from gaining a voice and being helped to take control over their lives, the women are often silenced or made to feel stupidified, with both oppressive stereotypes and the experience of subjugation reinforced. Although many programmes emphasize the importance of participation, they ignore the practical obstacles and internalised intimations of inferiority that make participation impossible. Current pedagogical practices rarely take on board the person's overall well-being and experienced subjectivities: their physical exhaustion, the emotional and disabling effects of being eternally in subordinate positions.

This paper elucidates a pedagogy to enable women workers as a gendered, oppressed group to "make-sense" of their silenced experiences of subordination. It explores how we can facilitate women to unpack and break through the numbness arising from suffering continuous subordination. Finally, it demonstrates that collaborative personal narratives in small groups can be a powerful strategy for reinterpretation of silenced experiences and repressed feelings, self-recovery and reconstruction of the self.

The first section situates Malaysia and Malaysian women factory workers. The women's lived experiences of emotional subordination and its implications on their personal sense of self and agency are explicated. The second section examines how lived experiences of emotional subordination can be addressed, and explains what takes place during this process.

MALAYSIA and MALYSIAN WOMEN FACTORY WORKERS

Malaysia

Malaysia is regarded as one of the most rapidly developing nations in South East Asia, poised to join the ranks of the Newly Industrialised Countries! Economically it is deeply entrenched in the world capitalist economy through its industrial capitalist development

strategy. Politically it projects itself as a well-managed multi-racial democracy. In reality it is an authoritarian, corporatist state. It is a patriarchal, highly unequal society, divided by class, ethnicity and religion with a rigid gender division of labour at home, in the community and in the labour market. Since 1970 its economic base has been radically restructured from agrarian to a foreign-dependent export-oriented industrial economy. This started a phenomenal influx of young rural migrant Malay women into world market factories in the export-processing zones as first-time, first generation industrial labour.

Malaysian Factory Women Workers

Like other Malaysian women, women factory workers are socialised into accepting patriarchal values and practices. They are expected to be respectful and obedient to male authority-domination. They are acquiesced by cultural and religious influence to concede to unquestioned subservience. When they resent they are made to feel guilty, that they are weak and deficient. Most endure in silence, are silenced and learn to be silent.

Women factory workers in Malaysia are constant victims of ridicule, derogation and sexual harassment. They are at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy and experience deprecation all the time. They are made to feel that they are promiscuous and deserving of such disparagement. At work they are subjected to another system of subjugation. They work in tedious, often hazardous tasks as non-unionised, unskilled or semi-skilled shift-workers. More unbearable is the rigid discipline, pressure, verbal abuse and intimidation from supervisors and technicians.

In my interactions with them I have found in them an underlying pervasiveness of emotional derangement, anxiety, inferiority and acquiescence. Most of them are withdrawn and submissive. They hardly speak spontaneously about themselves or their feelings. Yet in an emotionally safe, supportive space they talk passionately about their pain - their acquiesced feelings and thoughts. They speak of belittlement from intimates and strangers alike. Pain, shame, anger and helplessness are recurrent themes.

Their stories tell of social stigmatisation, oppressive relationships, discrimination in the family, hardships, husbands (mal)treatment and infidelity, work pressure, sexual abuse and supervisors derogation. Underlying many of these accounts belie their situation as women: daughters, wives, sisters, sister-in-law and as women workers, as the following quotes testify:

People look down on us. They see us with only one eye. Society looks disparagingly at us. They say factory girls are cheap. They fall for any man in the street. .. All these talk make us feel inferior. Even when they are not saying anything I can feel their belittlement from the way they gawk at us.

Even my own family feel embarrassed with my factory job. I avoid my neighbour so as not to be asked insinuating questions. One day she asked: 'you come back almost midnight yesterday and left again so early this morning. What do you actually do?' All I could say was work .. I felt ashamed, defensive, actually disgusted ... I am not what she maybe thinking.

We are petrified all the time. You can literally see some jerking when shouted at, stammering and shivering. You can imagine the kind of tension we work in. I do not know any more how to think, only anticipating when I will be shouted at.

Memories of my childhood still choke me. I have not dared talk about them for fear they get repeated and become distorted. I cannot forget how my step-mother treated me. I could not understand why I got scolded all the time. I was blamed for everything. Even when my younger step-sister fell. I was not allowed to participate in school activities. I did not even have time to do my homework - before I could change from my school uniform I was loaded with housework and babysitting. If I want to go anywhere my step-mother would shout for the whole neighbourhood to hear that I want to look for men.

It is very difficult to tell anyone about hurts from your own family. Outsiders cannot know how it hurts. Five years ago, in my first annual leave I had a quarrel with my brother. He hit my niece head for playing in the sun. I tried to stop him but he only shouted at me; 'Who are you to control me? Is this what the factory has taught you?' My mother, instead of appeasing us reproached me. Such is the fate of girls in Indian families. This brother is much younger than me. Yet I have to obey him and get his approval for everything since my father's death. Maybe if I were an office clerk I would have a better say.

My husband deride me until I am not worth a cent. Not only does he prevent me from participating in neighbourhood activities, he tells others that I am a stupid useless woman, that anything I do will bring chaos. .. How not to feel mad but if I retaliate I am no longer a good wife! More ammunition for him to run me down. Better to ignore him than invite more attacks.

Young men whistled as we alight from the factory bus: 'Look, they go day and night like prostitutes.' How to retaliate? You know what kind of characters they are! All creeps! If I retaliate back they may bring their gang to tackle us - we have to use this road everyday. We just pretend not to hear.

Given their all-pervading experience of subordination and abuse, it is not surprising that the women describe themselves as feeling scared, insulted, reluctant, humiliated, looked down upon and ashamed. Under their "no mood" perception of themselves as worthless, inferior or emotionally deranged, lie truly unspeakable hurts, worries, fears and insecurities. A perpetual state of unspoken troubled heart, troubled mind.¹ Their minds are clouded over with blankness and numbness. 'I feel stupid and do not know how to think any more from all the scolding,' as one put it. Without words or tears, they often cry in their hearts. 'The

¹ This is not to say the women are entirely passive victims. Side by side their deeply buried emotional suffering, is a seed of resistance. Their stories resonate with both vulnerability and strength, shuttling between distressed anxiety and resilience, submission and subtle defiance, incapacity and resourcefulness.

sorrow suffocates me, making me feel so numb and incapable.'

It is these prevailing experiences of subordination and emotional sufferings that this paper addresses.

Intimations of emotional subordination

Emotional afflictions arising from subordination and derogation are not only dehumanising and depersonalising, they instill helplessness and maim the self-esteem of women. Over time the women feel inadequate, stupified and lose confidence in themselves. They are made to feel inferior, ashamed, apologetic and guilty of the subsequent prejudices, stereotypes and abuses inflicted on them. These afflictions are translated into a view of themselves as failures and incapable, internalised as the depreciated self. The internalised oppression can be so great that the individual can have immense difficulty imagining her recovery from oppression, hence the need of personal healing, personal and political transformation.

Emotional subordination affect not only how the women feel about themselves but also ideas about their self-image and capabilities - their entire subjectivity and agency. They negate their sense of themselves, even immobilising their very capacity to act. Their minds become blank and dulled over time. Likewise, their emotions and behaviour are numbed. These perpetuate a victim's mentality and belief that change is impossible, restraining further their capacities and opportunities. Not only are these effects of subordination disempowering emotionally but are subjugating ideologically by breaking their spirit and rendering them incapable of understanding the nature of those agencies responsible for their subjugation. Indeed it results in the oppressed denigrating any actions of their own that are not supported by the existing dominant discourses.

Cumulative effects of these experiences ingrain a deep veneer of powerlessness, of fear, inertness, self-degradation and silence upon the women. Thus, the material-objective conditions as well as their subjective-affective experiences, in particular, feelings of emotional subordination, powerlessness and inferiority have to be taken on board in our consciousness-raising work. Pedagogies and strategies of action that can unfold, challenge and reconstitute women's emotional sufferings and their subordinated position are essential.

Addressing emotional subordination

As exemplified above, emotional sufferings, when unprocessed and repressed are disabling. However their potential as a source of oppositional knowledge, as the revolutionary core of feminist activism has been noted (Lourde, 1984). Feminist writing on organising (Dominelli & Mcleod 1989) have likewise, expounded the necessity of attending to emotional welfare for women to reclaim their potential in asserting their individual and collective rights and needs. Emotions have constituted a very powerful resource for liberation in the women's movement. The power of redefining and naming feelings from one's own standpoint have been proven to be powerful to help change perceptions and legitimise 'forbidden' emotions as the basis for visionary social change. In particular, (repressed) anger has been used to

problematize the incongruity between lived experience and sanctioned interpretations of that experience. Feminist educators, particularly women in the early consciousness-raising groups, have explored feelings as a 'critical way of knowing', or 'inner knowing': the source of true knowledge of the world for women living in a society that denies the value of their perceptions (Weiler, 1991).

The various uses and powers of story-telling have been well documented (Christ 1979; Buker 1987). Story-telling has been used as a tool for consciousness-raising and mobilization in the women's movement particularly, but also by organizations of indigenous people struggling against the effects of colonization and by other oppressed groups.

Story-telling-sharing here is not individual narrative. It takes place in interaction with the listening, questioning and reflecting of others. Henley et al (1984) describe this as collaborative story-telling, akin to consciousness-raising in women's groups (Jenkins et al. 1978). One story or comment sparks the memory or reflection for another. It is in this informal conversational mode that connections, meanings and understandings emerge through listening, questioning and reflecting on each other's stories, and it is this process that contributes to the recovery of participants' authentic realities as they themselves have experienced them. Within feminist discourse, voice and speech are metaphors for women's self-definitions (Collins 1990), countervailing the constructions of others. Indeed, moving from silence to voice is to reclaim what has been denied and dismissed. It is to assert opposition to established meaning. It is an act of profound personal and political significance, reinstating the suppressed or submerged knowledge of the marginalized (see, for example, Daly 1978; Christ 1979; Rich 1975; Dale 1985).

The next section describes a pedagogy I have explored to facilitate factory women to recall, articulate and make sense of their repressed emotional suffering by telling stories of repressed pain.

STORY-TELLING, TALKING PAIN and MAKING-SENSE

I name this as a methodology of "reflective-talking and making-sense". It entails three phases. The first: a phase to elicit talk by building bonds and breaking the silence. The second phase entails talking stories and talking pain, while the third phase is about making-sense.

The central method is story-telling in small groups to evoke repressed voices: the recollection and articulation of denied feelings, thoughts and experiences for the purpose of reconstituting self-esteem and self-definition. Story-telling in small groups does not only create participants' sense of a safe space, but also maximize the opportunity for collective learning, with information, interpretation and analysis fused in shared conversation through which participants begin to recognize and validate past experiences and present circumstance.

Each session generally covered three main areas: an introduction; uncovering lived experiences and feelings through photo-language or the recollection of incidents of being undermined; and focused discussion. The introduction established the purpose of the gathering, clarified my role and, through group profiling and energizing exercises, aimed at relaxing participants and creating a climate for self-disclosure. Stress reduction exercises were incorporated later, when exhaustion and anxiety surfaced in the stories told.

The next part focused on the women telling their stories - either the perceptions, feelings and experiences evoked by a picture each chose, or narration of specific lived experiences. The women were encouraged to talk about their own emotional and physical well-being. This was followed by a summary and reflection of the experiences and viewpoints raised. The focused discussion at the end helped examine various dimensions of the self, the women's sense of themselves and to what extent and how this had been constructed by others. My agenda was to help them validate their own conceptions and recognize their own feelings and experienced realities in contrast to the negative stereotypes they had internalized.

Eliciting talk: building bonds and breaking silence

From the outset most of the women were reticent, unable or unwilling to talk spontaneously. Talk had to be evoked. When they had warmed up and broken their numbness they talked passionately. Indeed, eliciting talk about lived experiences and personal feelings and helping the 'factory women' to make-sense of it called for particular conditions, sensitivities, methods and skills. A sense of shared purpose had to be cultivated to promote bonding and collaboration. This was achieved through clarifying the nature and objectives of the session, levelling expectations and anticipated anxieties, and group and self introductions.

Activity-based group introductions helped to break down inhibitions and generated much laughter and fun. Bonds began to be forged as the women giggled away their awkwardness and moved towards a sense of being comfortable in a mutually created emotionally safe space. Though many were shy and some found the self-introductions nerve-racking, the experience of speaking out fostered a sense of their own value. The exercise gave voice and attention to each. Being listened to had the effect of prompting feelings of self-worth, confidence in one's judgement and a sense of the legitimacy of one's own experiences and feelings. A more confident sense of one's self was experienced.

Talking Stories, Talking Pain

Three evocative techniques: photolanguage, visualisation and recollection of specific incidents of personally experienced subordination were used to facilitate an inward focus for each individual to feel and connect with herself to invoke memories and feelings. Focused questions aimed at drawing out the multiple aspects and contexts of recalled incidents helped to identify different reactions to them.

The very act of vocalisation gave recognition and ownership to repressed personally-felt views and feelings instead of being the victim of other's constructions. The narrative form of talking stories enabled the naming of suppressed reactions without fear of criticism or

controversy from a different point of view. With some coaxing and assurance, most embraced the opportunity to say the unspeakable. Once participants felt that they were 'allowed' to do this, and to cry, be upset, feel ashamed or express anger, most took the risk of disclosing their vulnerabilities, sharing what they really felt, how they really reacted.

The process of reminiscence and 'permitted articulation' helped the women to discharge their hurt and to begin to reclaim a sense of both their own agency and the validity of their own feelings and standpoints, as well as to let go of defensive patterns of behaviour resulting from being hurt.

Making Connections, Making-sense

This phase involves making connections and the definition of one's self in opposition to the negative constructions of others. Making-sense is not a purely intellectual activity but rather, an affective-cognitive knowing, centered and pursued subjectively, but unfolding through interactive and reflective talking, listening, questioning and introspecting with others.

Connections occur at two levels: intrapersonally and interpersonally-collectively. At the intrapersonal level, the process of narration, reflection and releasing and naming emotions lead to personal insights, validation from others, and eventually to renewed, clearer thinking. At the interpersonal-collective level, the sharing of stories and personal feelings not only built emotive bonds of empathy but fostered understanding, commonality and solidarity.

Together they explored the issues behind their experiences and deconstructed the power dynamics of their relationships and the social construction of the self. By making links and integrating the insights of fellow participants in the collaborative development of new perspectives, their political understanding of the world evolved. Through exploring the ways, however small, in which they had contested and defied societally imposed labels and stereotypes, the women were able to recognise the strength of their own agency and realise that they were not utterly powerless after all.

Heard and interpreted together, the women's narratives uncover their experiential knowing: their lived wisdom. The consciousness which unfolds becomes the basis for both self-recovery and social agency - in effect, individual and collective liberation. Indeed this is a process of retrieval and reconstruction of subjugated knowledge. it can potentially create effective and meaningful resistance, to make revolutionary transformations' (Hooks, 1989).

CONCLUSION

The importance of addressing emotional suffering has been explicated as fundamental to recovery from the injuries of subordination. Talking, naming, working through repressed feelings with caring support have been effective in enabling women redefine and make sense of their suppressed pain.

Making-sense through reflective talking and sharing pains in small-groups has shown to be an effective pedagogical tool that allows factory women to reclaim their self-integrity and self-worth. Although emotional suffering is only one dimension of women's subordination, it is a critical area to address in and as educational work. Indeed, this is where it must start.

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