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Chapter

Introductory Chapter: Feminism, Corporeality, and Beyond

Michael Eduard L. Labayandoy and Dennis S. Erasga

1. Introduction

A theory or movement ceases to become relevant or exist when it no longer serves a purpose in society. That case is not applicable to feminism which continues to be significant today. It further develops [1], even shifts, and reaches new meanings and articulations—from lifestyle influencers [2], digital/hashtag feminism [3, 4], and even transmedia feminism [5]. One can only hope that feminism becomes less needed which would mean that the society becomes fairer and more inclusive. However, feminism, as a movement and a frame of mind, evolved together with the times. It refuses to turn a blind eye to all the inequalities and systems of marginalization brought about by existing and new forms of social contexts and social relations.

It is obvious that the pandemic has gendered effects, especially on women's lives [6, 7]. During the pandemic, domestic violence was heightened [8–10]. The government-imposed lockdowns forced families to be confined together for longer periods of time. This posed a serious problem with the already existing domestic violence. The said violence was further exacerbated by the pandemic lockdowns. The intimate partner violence amidst the lockdowns victimized mostly women which took significant tolls on their, among many other aspects, psychological, social, mental, and especially physical well-being. Other than the amplified domestic violence, the very bodies, strength, and management of time of women were challenged and were put to the test. For instance, the closure of the schools and the transition to online classes became a burden to many parents or guardians at home [11]. This means additional work for those involved in the child's education at home. But this was even more challenging in places like the Philippines. Because not all students attending the public schools have access to the internet and gadget, the modular approach was used which means parents, especially mothers (stereotyped as “care giver, teacher”), served as the tutor or were practically tasked to accomplish the lessons. This could be taxing, especially when many other things are needed to be done by mothers at home. Notably, violence at home, additional and demanding tasks, and many other concerns tested the physical and bodily dimensions of women. This reveals the significance of going back to the problem of the body as we face extraordinary situations like the pandemic today.

2. Agency and women's body as a continuing and unfinished project

Even beyond the pandemic, the issue of the corporeal continues to permeate the many dimensions of women's lives. The corporeal is even more meaningful today given the many continued struggles of women in various aspects of their lives—from

women and their bodies in anti-mining movements [12, 13], the feminine body in the context of the culture of care [14], body positivity in digital media cultures [15], among many other iterations. It is true that the history of gender theory is almost equivalent to the history of conceptualizations of embodiment and corporeality [16]. While many valuable feminist works advance the interests of women and the greater society, there is a need to considerably add agency into the equation. It is valuable to examine the nexus of corporeality and embodiment. The idea is that to mend the broken link between these two, the notion of “agency” must be accommodated and emphasized in the analysis. Lim [17] effectively countered the ahistorical, monolithic, and disembodied portrayal of women of Saudi Arabia. She heavily problematized the literature on how the role of the body is detached from women’s movements. To highlight the corporeal elements of the movements, she utilized Butler’s performativity. In her analysis of the said campaigns and movements, she successfully revealed various forms of protests (e.g., driving, cycling, silent walking) that reflected performative embodiments. More importantly, she highlighted that some forms of protest like cycling can make the body or the element of corporeality more visible and effective. Our appreciation of this example of important work is that the creative demonstrative capacities of women are clearly seen. As we explained in our other write-up here, corporeality can be regarded as a performance that is geared toward the audience for certain possible reasons or to achieve specific goals. Embodiment, seen as a demonstration, on the other hand, reveals the creative and solidarity-oriented actions and meaning makings of women. Lim’s study revealed that silent walking and tweeting as forms of protest tend to organize women to act in unison. She highlighted that some sites prompt women’s bodies to act together. Here, embodiment is no longer limited to the idea of performing, instead, the element of demonstration clearly reveals a certain form of agency that emanates not from the performance itself but draws power, energy, and strength from the very expression itself and demonstrated along with or in solidarity with the marginalized others.

Feminism is never a settled field. Various debates continue today like seeing sex/body as a stable identity (Nussbaum) versus assuming the body together with many aspects of our social lives as merely constructed and performed (Butler) [18]. Some even propose to see these contending positions to be intractably linked and inseparable [19]. These contradicting and gradating positions serve particular and still relevant purposes. For instance, it is worthwhile to see the body as a stable identity in relation to identity politics. In other words, for women’s political rights to be realized, sex or the body must be drawn in a concrete sense. The value of seeing the body as merely a social construction/performed allows us to see the arbitrariness of corporeality and embodiment, and hence see opportunities to change stereotypes and inequalities. The beauty here is that the interests are alive. One can argue that the concern on the body or the corporeal is an ongoing and unfinished project. The body or the corporeal is truly far-reaching, especially in the lives of women. But we reiterate that it is important to anchor the analysis on women’s agency as we examine corporeality and embodiment. Liimakka [20] correctly proposed to move away from the Cartesian agency and move closer instead to the idea of corporeal agency (or what we call embodied demonstrative agency). We argue that the emphasis on the latter opens the room for the re-reading of the body and unraveling the creative and social ways of actualizing the feminist project toward genuine freedom and equality. Here lies hope, wishing that we continue to examine feminism and corporeality and perhaps go beyond as we actualize the promises and potencies of women’s agentic selves.

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Author details

Michael Eduard L. Labayandoy* and Dennis S. Erasga
Department of Sociology and Behavioral Sciences, De La Salle University, Manila,
Philippines

*Address all correspondence to: michael.labayandoy@dlsu.edu.ph

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