

At Home with the Struggle

By Sarah Raymundo

It is a humid Wednesday afternoon. After welcoming me, *Ka Nere* suggests moving next door to a day-care centre packed with kids reciting Filipino nursery rhymes. At the back, a spiral staircase leads to a room with two computers and an excellent view of the neighbourhood's galvanised-iron roofs. *Ka Nere*, a plump, good-natured woman of fifty wearing an oversized shirt and an unusually disarming smile, calls this place her office. It has also been her home in more ways than one.

The Faces of Women

Nere Guerrero is the national chairperson of *Samahan ng Malayang Kababaihang Nagkakaisa (SAMAKANA)*, a militant organisation of urban poor women in the Philippines. Since it was formed in 1986, the organisation has taken the lead in articulating the situation of the poor in the slums of Metro Manila, and in fighting for their rights

and gaining access to affordable housing, jobs, health services, etc. As part of the national democratic movement for social justice, *SAMAKANA* situates gender and class issues within a concrete historical context (i.e., the Philippine semifeudal mode of production as the social base of monopoly capitalism). It is necessary, *Ka Nere* explains, to understand the specificity of women's experience in a Third World society.

"In particular, rural women suffer from a heightened militarisation programme in the countryside. On account of our role in keeping the family intact, state violence of this kind has had a heavier impact on wives and mothers who lose their husbands or children along with their homes. In the same vein, urban poor women agonise when their homes are violently demolished by city authorities. Nowadays, we don't only

take charge of the household budget and childcare. We are forced to earn a living too—washing clothes, giving manicures, peddling, caregiving, dressmaking, mat-weaving."

Ka Nere stresses the importance of comprehending patriarchy as a historical phenomenon that articulates itself in different historical periods. Rather than taking women's work as an indication of their improved social status, she sees it as a corollary of an amplified sexual division of labour that serves to alleviate the severe crisis of global capitalism. More women are finding jobs primarily because mass lay-offs have created a huge reserve army of cheap and docile labour.

The Making of a Mass Leader

With pride and passion, and yet with a certain casualness, *Ka Nere* traces the interplay of history and

society in her own development as a worker, mother and activist.

"I had not always been a part of the women's movement. I used to work in a tire factory. It was there that I first became aware of being exploited, as a worker." As a union official, she realised the decisive role of the working class in constructing a society released from the violence of hunger, among other things.

Meanwhile, finding herself jobless after the factory closed down, *Ka Nere* had to spend most of her time at home, immersed in the daily routine of an urban poor community. Then came another realisation: "When I finally settled as a full-time housewife, I found out that one cannot dissociate the problems of the community from those that have to do with the factory. These two are connected because at the end of the day, workers are

The fight for uplifting the impoverished situation of urban poor women in Metro Manila finds voice in *Ka Nere Guerrero*.



photos by Sarah Raymundo

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the inhabitants of the community's impoverished urban spaces."

The urban poor community in this light ceases to be in the realm of the private sphere. Rather, it is a symptom of uneven development that results in the lack, if not the eradication, of secure jobs and permanent settlement areas. Space in this context is not fixed but contested; it is not passive but a potent terrain where impoverished men and women fight with stakes in the class struggle.

Blurring the Line Between 'Private' and 'Public'

A proud mother of five adults, *Ka Nere* recalls how she was able to manage the home while at the height of her involvement in union organising.

"My husband and I would leave home for work in the morning. But before leaving, I would make a list of reminders. Notes like 'Here's your allowance for the day', 'Your food is ready, you just have to cook the

rice' were prominently posted on the toilet door. I would ask my sister who lives nearby to look after the kids while I was at work."

Ka Nere's daily routine continued even when the factory workers eventually decided to go on strike. This time, she would leave home to take her place at the picket line. The strike ended after two years and three months, but *Ka Nere* lost her job.

"At a young age, my children already understood what unemployment meant for them. They would tell me: 'Nanay (Mother), please go back to work since we hardly drink milk any more.' They missed the nice food that I used to be able to afford from time to time. My husband's wages as a family driver were not enough to pay for our daily expenses."

Apart from the financial difficulty, *Ka Nere* also felt restless at home after having done all her chores. It was the political work she missed the most. So when

she got the chance, she joined the Concerned Women's League (which later became SAMAKANA).

"At the start, I would sneak out just so I could attend those seminars together with the other women in our community. I would leave

soon after my husband left for work. As usual, I'd ask my sister to look after the children. I told the seminar facilitator that I would have to leave at four o'clock, in order to get home ahead of my husband. But at times, he would arrive earlier than me, so eventually I had to let him know about my involvement. From then on he would nag me, saying: 'You are never around. Aren't you supposed to take care of the children? You were at the picket line for two years, haven't you learned your lesson yet?'"

In her seminal work *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir wrote that in a patriarchal culture, "the colonisation of women by men is veiled by ideology. Women see themselves as the 'other' to men who are the 'one.' In order to attract the attention of, and endear themselves to, the 'one,' women disempower themselves unknowingly."

Ka Nere, however, refuses to be disempowered. Many times, she would stop her husband's reproaches

with an unyielding rebuttal: "I have to be involved in the women's movement because as a woman, I need to know my rights."

This statement demonstrates how inseparable political causes are from personal aspirations. For activists like *Ka Nere*, the point is not to strike a balance between personal fulfilment and social commitment. The bifurcation is a consequence of the division of labour under capitalism that has given rise to the cult of the autonomous individual conferred with the freedom of choice. But social conditions reveal that the cult of the individual is nothing more than the brotherhood of the male bourgeoisie. The exclusion of women is expressed by the cult of domesticity that requires all classes of women to be mothers and wives in order to realise their essence. Moreover, women of the working class and of the Third World confront both racism and class exploitation. This is why a feminist like Delia Aguilar insists on "the urgency of attending to the relations of production on the home front with parallel revolutionary zeal and commitment."

Empowered by this revolutionary ideal, *Ka Nere* deemed it necessary to reconcile her family life with the political work in the women's movement.

"After losing my job in the factory, I had to make my children understand that employment is not a matter of choice. I lost my job because the times are harder.

And even if I didn't, we would have been in dire financial straits just the same."

Like a lot of women, *Ka Nere* also went through a trying episode in her life that made her question her capacity as mother and activist.

"My son got into drugs when he was in high school. I started blaming myself, thinking that I hadn't been a good mother to my children. Something like this happened because I was always away doing political work."

The ideology of the family as internalised by women causes them to feel responsible for every crisis that besets the family. As an activist, *Ka Nere* does not claim to have easily exorcised herself of the "lived experience of motherhood"—an ideology that feminises childcare and household work. She had to go through the difficult process of understanding the many factors that could have led to her son's drug addiction. After all, substance abuse is less a result of dysfunctional households or a practice of adventurous youth (according to psychologism that normalises it and precludes political and economic factors) than of the highly profitable criminal activities of drug syndicates conniving with state agencies.

At this crucial point in her life, *Ka Nere* relates how the women's movement gave full support to her family by providing counselling and rehabilitation. This was how she eventually gained

a more comprehensive view of family life and the women's movement.

Unleashing Women's Power Through the Dialectic of Gender and Class

Tempered by the hardships of domestic responsibilities, gendered proletarian experiences and an unwavering commitment to the women's movement for national liberation, *Ka Nere* reflects upon her struggles with a sober yet forthright dignity.

"My children did not pay attention to my political activities when they were younger. Now that they are older, they tend to display their concern and subtle disapproval. They worry about the hazards of marching in the streets. But I assure them that it is fairly safe and that comrades do take care of each other during rallies. Now that most of them have families of their own, I can attend seminars that last for days! After all these years, I can sense that my husband must have finally recognised the urgency of my cause. We no longer argue over the meetings and conferences I have to attend. Now he merely asks how long I'm going to be away."

Not even arthritis could stop her from being at the forefront in mass mobilisations: "All I need is an acupuncture treatment, and I'm on my way!"

For *Ka Nere*, political commitment is not just an act of good citizenship. Neither does she romanticise

political involvement as a selfless act on the part of the activist. She deems it as no less than women's work that is an extension of her role in the family. As *Flaudette May Datuin* puts it, "The home necessarily extends to many sites—the house, and its interiors, the household and its everyday rituals of self-maintenance, the factories, offices, churches, picket lines, schools, halls of Congress, the theatre, stages, the streets."

This position challenges the liberal-feminist notion that work liberates women. As *bell hooks* argues, this belief alienates working-class women because "they know from their experiences that work was neither personally fulfilling nor liberatory—that it was for the most part exploitative and dehumanising."

The same line of reasoning is amplified in *Ka Nere's* own experience.

"To my husband's surprise, I managed to secure a job in a garments factory after a few years without work. He would joke that because I was known to be assertive and a 'subversive,' no employer would take me in. He was wrong. But then again, I stayed on the job for only four months because of the terrible working conditions and the horrible repression of worker's rights. My coworkers, mostly women, were resigned to the idea that nothing was worse than not having a job. I really wanted to fight but most of us were newly-hired contractals, so that any

form of opposition would get us fired. So I left my job."

But doing so did not deprive her of valuable and productive work. Since then, she has worked full time in the women's movement.

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