

Woven Lives: Sisterhood and Feminism¹

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Abstract

The study explores the lives of seven sisters; the Cabrera sisters namely: Lorena, Abcede, Penelope, Minerva, Nelfa, Nemesia and Lualhati through the stages of their lives from childhood, adolescence, adulthood and through their old age. These women were born between 1920 & 1940. They survived the Second World War and witnessed the changes in their society until the present time.

Their stories reflect the struggles and changes in the women's movement both in the Philippines and in the world in general. Oppression and discrimination happen in all institutions of society: family, Church and educational institutions. Throughout the women's lives, they experienced oppression from the simplest forms to the worst. In the family, in many societies, particularly in Asia, sons are favored over daughters. Sons are given more responsibility in decision-making because they are believed to be the pillars of the families, while daughters are just seen as reproduction vehicles only since they cannot carry the name of their fathers upon marriage. At the workplace, sexual harassment and other name-calling is mostly experienced by women. In schools, service-oriented courses like nursing,

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tourism, and teaching are considered “women’s courses” because they are an extension of the domestic services women have traditionally provided in the home, while engineering, and other science-based courses are mostly taken by men since they are considered “rational”. Until now, some churches like the Catholic Church still prohibit women to become priests.

The research here tried to understand the meaning of sisterhood among the siblings and the women’s movement; as well as the innate feminism among the Asian women, which we call “organic feminism”.

Organic feminism is not influenced by Western form of feminism instead it is in every Asian woman’s psyche due to their shared experiences of oppression, exploitation and discrimination, not only among the men but also among other women.

The research strengthened the belief of other feminists in Asia, that Asian women are organic feminists that could be further strengthened in our fight against oppression and discrimination. Furthermore, organic feminists do not only see women as oppressed in the way the poor, differently-abled or children are seen regardless of sex and gender. Rather, they are seen as agents of change in society.

Keywords: feminism, gender, organic feminism, sisterhood, women’s movement

Introduction

A lot of studies have been done among women; such as mothers and daughters relationships but studies on the relationship among sisters are very limited. Feminists seldom give emphasis to this relationship even though women always call each other sisters. (Neal, 2004; Fishel, 1994). The relationship among siblings, like the women’s movement, is also full of misunderstandings and power plays based on their individual differences. But on the other hand, these

differences highlight the camaraderie and closeness among women. From here, women learn and unlearn the mistakes of the past and try to rectify these so that in the end the women can collectively gather their strength to achieve victories against their fight for oppressions and discriminations.

This study answered the factors or elements that strengthened sisterhood relationships among siblings and from there its feminist characteristics which is linked to the feminist movement.

In relationship to the problem, the study answered the following questions: a) from their experiences, what are the indications that show feminist consciousness? b) what are the elements in their relationships from different life stages which can be characterized as feminist? c) what are the perspectives of each woman on their relationships as sisters? and d) what are the factors that influenced the strengthening of their relationships as sisters?

General Objective:

This study shows the factors that strengthened their relationships as sisters which could be seen with feminist characteristics and consciousness which also prove that organic feminism is inherent among the Filipino women.

Specific Objectives:

1. To be able to explain the correlation between sisterhood and organic feminism;
2. To be able to determine the factors which influenced the strengthening of their relationships as siblings which could be anchored to feminist perspective;
3. To be able to reveal the status of the seven sisters during the different phases in their lives and to know if these strengthened their relationships as well as to show the evidence of feminist characteristics; and
4. To be able to determine the strategies and actions taken by each other to overcome or address issues and problems they faced and currently facing in life and how it influenced their relationship as siblings.

A. Definition of Sisterhood

In the Feminist Dictionary (Kramarae at Treichler, 1985, in Simmonds ni Simmonds, 1997:19) the meaning of sisterhood was defined by feminists from different decades. *More than a word. It is a responsibility. It will become more important than status, colour or money (Vann, 1970). A discovery of shared oppression... (Beth Brant, 1983). It is a joining threatened by pollution from the two "ideals" of feminine fulfilment, namely "unselfconscious inclusion" (tokenism) and feminine self-sacrifice. (Mary Daly, 1978) and cannot be forged by the mere saying of words. It is the outcome of continued growth and change. It is a goal to be reached, a process of becoming. (bell hooks, 1981)*

Sisterhood transcends culture, race, nationality and even gender. It is a relationship that does not dictate nor has power over another; instead it is sharing not only of success but most importantly by being with each other throughout trials and tribulations.

B. Sisterhood in Literature

In literature regarding sisterhood, like novels and stories, the relationships of the sisters are shown as rivals, friends, and allies against oppressors, be it men or their parents (Brown, 2003).

The relationship between Martha and Maria in the Bible (Luke 10:38-42) who are rivals but have a strong relationship due to their status in society: firstly, both are single women; secondly, both are intelligent and they have a strong connection to one man, Jesus Christ. Honculada (1992) says that there are two aspects of womanhood shown in the story. Maria is imaginative and does not bother doing household chores while Martha, portrayed as the house-owner shows *domesticity* in entertaining and feeding the guests. But this does not mean that they have strong rivalry, instead it shows their differences as women.

The story of Urbana at Feliza written by a Spanish friar Modesto de Castro in 1864 has shown the strong bonding of sisters which was centered on the Christian faith. The story is an exchange of letters by the sisters Urbana, who was left in the Paombong, Bulacan while Feliza was studying in an exclusive school for girls in Manila. Although it is focused on what every woman should do as “Christian”, it also shows that distance is not a hindrance in the relationship of the sisters.

C. Different relationships between sisters in society

They grew up during the 60’s sprout of liberalism and feminism; the Vietnam War and Flower Power; for the Dolan sisters, Julie, Liz, Sheila, Monica and Lian (2001) the differences between them gives color to their life as a family. Distance does not disrupt the connection between sisters. As sisters, they always give time to call each other to share happiness, problems and even trivial things. Age gap is not a hindrance to forge a closer relationship among sisters. They influence each other and the elder ones served as role models for younger sisters.

For Fishel (1994) her younger sister with an age gap of 5 years, is her bestfriend and bitterest rival; the mirror of her life and her opposite; her confidante and a traitor; a student and a teacher; a supporter and the one that needs support; a daughter and a mother. But her greatest fear is her sister being her equal. Fishel says: “dominating younger siblings gives older sibling an illusion of power in an unfree world”. Furthermore, Fishel believes that the relationship between sisters also adheres to the ideal of sisterhood in the feminist movement. She believes that the pattern in the sister’s relationship such as the fluctuation of closeness and distance overtime, the constancy of ambivalence and the gradual recognition of similarity and differences is also relevant among the sisters outside of the Women’s Movement.

In the Philippines, the Pagaduan sisters Maureen and Carol (Guerrero, 1997) although it was not directly implied that their relationship as sisters influenced their feminist inclinations, it shows that the younger sisters, Maureen and Carol showed high regard to their elder sister Patsy who was studying in the United States at that time. The emergence of feminist consciousness among the Pagaduan sisters resulted also in the political setting in the Philippines. It was 1973 and the country was in political turmoil due to the declaration of Martial Law by the then President Ferdinand Marcos.

Neale (2004) and Brestin (1988) believe that sisters' relationships are closer than their male counterparts. It is due to the family structure wherein the women become allies and support each other in terms of emotional and material needs. Further the study of Neale shows that helping each other among the sisters is based on *reciprocity* rather than *obligation* which matches the feminist model of reciprocation rather than the traditional model of obligation. She adds that it followed the feminist expectations around friendship, rather than the more 'sterile' idea of duty.

Brestin (2006) believes that sisters could surpassed the phase of rivalry because of shared happiness and loneliness. Thus, they could be the best of friends while Greenberg and Smith (2008) mention that the quality of the sibling relationship changes as people age. Literature on typical sibling relationships indicates that siblings have strong ties of affection during childhood and adolescence. However, siblings become more distant during early and middle adulthood because of competing demands from work and family. Yet during late middle and older age, after children are launched from their parents' home, siblings have increased contact and greater intimacy.

D. Sisterhood and Feminism

Sisterhood in feminism is due to the shared experiences of oppression and other issues suffered by every woman which is also comparable to the oppression among sisters within the family context. Sisterhood is the symbol of feminism because it acknowledges the diversity among and of women. “*Sisterhood is powerful*” was the slogan of the second wave of feminism in the 1960’s to 1970’s, wherein the issues in the family, sexuality and reproductive health were discussed and fought for. All of these affected women, hence, the word “*sister*” has a profound meaning. It does not only mean sister between women– siblings but also between those with shared ideas of idealism. Fajardo’s (2009), concept of *sisterhood* and *solidarity* are separate but connected. It strengthened the thought that the personal (*sisterhood*) is also political (*solidarity*). According to her, in a sisterhood, one feels with and respects those in the group in an atmosphere that has a collective feeling as the core of the experience. In solidarity, on dialogues with others, building a collective intelligence. Balser (1987) gives emphasis on sisterhood and solidarity on the women’s movements all over the world. She cites both the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) and NOW (National Organization for Women). CLUW was a women–workers’ organization while NOW is an organization of feminist activists. Although, the organizations have different orientations, both believe that the liberation of women could also mean the liberation of society. On the other hand, Napikoski (no date) asserts that the term sisterhood is used among feminists to express the connection of women who are not biologically related but are bonded in solidarity. The sisterhood of women often refers to their feminism, their participation in the women’s movement, their support of other women or their recognition of female qualities that are unique to women’s nature. The use of the word sisterhood implies that women relate to one another in ways that are distinct from how they relate to men (although not

necessarily exclusive of relation to men). Morgan (2003) believes that *sisterhood is forever* from the feminist movement and among the siblings. In an anthology she edited entitled *Sisterhood is Forever*, describes the struggles of women from different times; from the slavery of black women, to their fight to its abolition; right to suffrage; emancipation of women; and reproductive rights among others. She also explains that sisterhood of women encompasses time, powerful, global, “forever” and also complex, hilarious, stubborn, elastic, tender, furious, sophisticated and dynamic work in progress.

In the exchanges of letters among sisters in New England, Nancy Cott (1977) asserts that sisterhood increases our awareness on our womanhood due to trust among each other. This also means political. Cott further says that this *consciousness* brings the women to a wider women’s movement to work and fight together for their rights.

E. Feminism and Organic Feminism

Feminism

To become a feminist Cassel reminds (1977 in Labayen, 1998) there is no such measure but there are many factors to become one. Feminism as defined by Basin and Kahn (1986) as an awareness of women’s oppression and exploitation in society at work and within the family and conscious action by men and women to change it. In other words, to overcome patriarchy. Chakkalakal (2004) stresses that feminism is a model where help, support, friendship and has a division of responsibility with the main goal of equality through unity. She further describes feminist leadership as relational, flexible, intimate and passionate.

Signs of Organic Feminism Among Asian Women

Bhasin and Khan (1986) claim that in Asian societies, like ours, the seed of feminism is in every woman. They claim that the growth of feminist

consciousness in Asia did not happen in modern or recent times, but was already an acquired consciousness among our women.

There is an inference that during ancient times or before the Spanish colonization, the influence of women in their societies was equal and they had the same rights as their male counterparts. It fits the feminist category we have today. (Salazar, 2010, in Jose and Navarro, eds., 2010). Mananzan (2005) and Feria (1993) both prove that is indeed true. The Spanish friars first “tamed” the *mujer indigena* (native women). The colonizers gave an account on the free and liberal attitudes of the women; from their major roles as priestesses in rituals and sexuality. Mananzan (1991) further explains that the consciousness of the Filipino women was rooted in the struggles on the long history of the country’s oppression from the Spaniards, Americans and Japanese. Feminism of Filipino women was a very important thing that they would do everything to gain back their former social roles. Although history books seldom mentioned women in these struggles, it is undeniably important to cite the roles of women in the Revolutionary Movement against the foreign colonizers and oppressors. We know women fighters like Gabriela Silang, Melchora Aquino, Gregoria De Jesus, Trinidad Tecson, Agueda Kahabagan and nameless others.

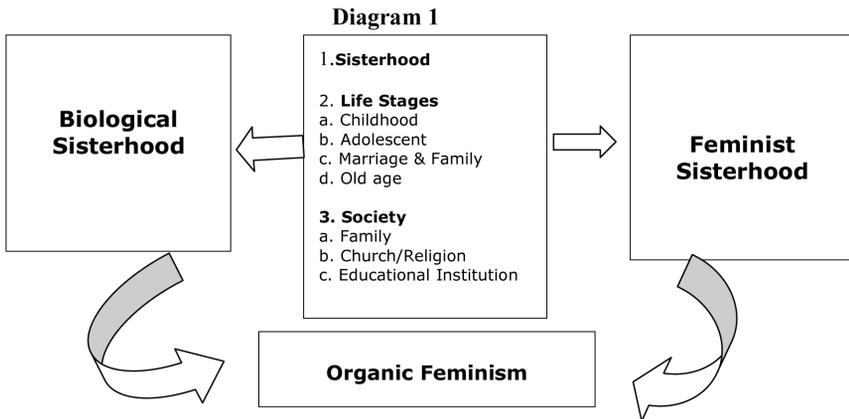
Even Jose Rizal, our national hero recognized the consciousness of women through his famous letters to the Women of Malolos (Quindoza, 2010, in Jose and Navarro, 2010) where he praised the women for their effort to study the Spanish language and thus, their awareness of the importance of education.

Capuno’s (2001) research mentions the different faces of organic feminism based on her interviews with different women of different status levels. She found: feminism is the product of education; feminism is produced by financial capability and conviction; feminism is a quiet acceptance and willingness to accept what is happening; feminism is voicing out and winning small battles and

feminism is giving and re-creating itself. According to Labayen (1998), a woman with feminist orientation has a unique trait. She has a particular opinion or feelings of society, particularly regarding the roles of women. For lay people, feminists have their own “culture”.

Conceptual Framework

The concepts of sisterhood, life cycles and society were examined in this study, where these are seen as the reason for the formation of feminism not only within siblings but also among other women. Sisterhood (Cott 1977, Fajardo 2010) gives personal and political consciousness which lead to our desire to collectively work to end oppression.



2. Methods

Life story is used in this study wherein the relationship of the Cabrera sisters became the center of the study and showed its similarities to the women’s movement. Life story is a particular method where I used the following: questions,

dialogic interview and review of related literatures as secondary data on the historical context of the women in the Philippines as well as Western Literature on feminism and sisterhood. Ofreneo-Pineda (1994) claims the importance of life stories for a feminist study because it gives concrete construction of gender and sexuality phases in a woman's life like childhood, adolescent period, adulthood, married and family life, old age, widowhood, etc. Life story is a feminist method wherein a woman is given free will to tell her story in a way she likes it and in her own voice. The Cabrera sisters told me their stories individually and collectively. From there, I was able to examine sisterhood and the feminist consciousness. Oral history is included in the life story. Aquino (2002:95) asserts that oral history is important to develop the perspective of women according to their own words, meanings, feelings and consciousness. In oral history, the secret lives, abandoned selves and repressed feelings and unfulfilled dreams are freely discussed. Coleman (1991:139 in Aquino) says that the stories of old women are very important because they experienced different contexts and changes in society. The elderly could contribute more on the development and study of our history and the changing cultures.

3. Results

A. The Sisters' perspectives on their relationships

As time passed and in every life cycle, sibling relationships also change. It can be seen in the life cycles of the seven Cabrera sisters. But it is also assumed that these changes strengthened their relationships. As the study progressed, these same changes happened to the women's movement.

For Lorena, she was the second mother of her younger siblings, except for Abcede whom both considered each other as best-friends. It was not because they did not have other friends, but it is a special bond, aside from the blood that

ties them. For Abcede her relationships to her other younger sisters were equal. If any of them needed help, she would help them, even if her husband did not always agree with it. Minerva said that having sisters are a gift from God. They are pillars to lean on in times of depression. They helped each other in times of need especially during childbirth which a brother could not do, she added. Nelfa's perception of her sisters was as a guide in her decision making. At times, she'd disobey them, but she still needed their opinions in whatever major decisions she made. Penelope was considered the "hard-headed" among the sisters, according to Abcede and Lorena. She was impulsive, maybe due to typhoid fever that affected her brain, the two sisters added. But for her, she had given her elder sisters high respect. Although at times, she disobeyed them when she was younger, she considered it a normal process of growing up and gaining independence. She looked at her sisters as her equals, except Lorena whom she regarded as a surrogate mother. Nemesia, on the other hand, knew the importance of sisters as allies. Their solidarity as sisters was important as she struggled in her married life and later on, on her problems with his alcoholic son.

Nemesia and Lualhati were always against its other when it came to opinions, but they did not use it as a tool to declare "war" against each other. For them it was normal between siblings and sisters. Although Lualhati was the youngest, she was the most vocal and opinionated. For her, it is better for a sister to correct a sibling or another sister if she commits a mistake, rather than let other people to correct her later.

B. Factors affecting their relationships as biological sisters and its relationship to Feminist Sisterhood

1. *Mother's Influence*

It is undeniably the case that the mother's influence is an important factor that created a strong bond among the sisters. However, not only the positive

experiences but also the negative ones inspired the daughters to strive for the better. Lorena claimed that their mother always said that she, as the eldest daughter, should look after her sisters. Yet, even if her mother did not say it, she felt obliged to look after the welfare of the sisters.

But it does not mean that the sisters would always depend on each other. Minerva remembered that their mother was dependent on her brothers because she was the only daughter. According to her, their mother was spoiled by her brothers. If they did not have food, their mother would ask her to go to their uncles' homes. Minerva blamed her mother for letting their father become a philanderer. Abcede said that being independent does not mean they are no longer looking at each other's welfare. They would make their own decisions and would just ask the elder sisters for their opinions. It is up to them to follow or not, but they need to correct each other's mistakes for their own good.

For feminists, the relationship between mothers and daughters has an important role in their development as people. The majority of feminists or those women with feminist consciousness were influenced by their mothers who have the conviction and strength to face whatever problems cross their paths; be it in daily lives or in politics. (Guerrero, 1997, Capuno, 2001).

2. Orphaned by father and brother

The loss of their father and their elder brother is another factor binding the sisters together. Their elder brother, a USAFFE soldier died during World War 2, while their father died in an epidemic after the war. Thus, the sisters learned to do "men work" like chopping of woods, fixing things, and others. In their situation, being orphaned to their father and brother was not negative but positive because it gave them the strength to depend on their strength as women and as individuals. This situation also helped them in solving their problems throughout their lives.

The Women's Movement gives solutions to every one, regardless of sex and gender to become independent and more confident as well as to treat every one as equal. Every woman and man should look at themselves to determine their sexual identities and transcend the traditional roles prescribed by society. Everybody has independence, interdependence, tenderness, strength, giving, and receiving (Eviota, 1994).

3. Life's difficulties during the War

In a feminist perspective (Neale, 2004) sharing and giving among sisters is not seen as an obligation rather a feminist form of friendship. It is a factor in the feminist concept of reciprocation rather than obligation.

The difficulties during the war tested the bond between the sisters. It was all about survival, but in the end, the ties of sisterhood prevailed. Lorena recalled that during the war, one could sell even herself just to survive. She was already married at that time and had two children, yet she shared everything to her younger sisters, even if it meant depriving herself of food.

4. The land as a material thing that binds them

Their land was important to the sisters. This was the place where they were born and raised. This was the only material thing that they did not give up in spite of being married to migrants from distant places. Even to their children who migrated and asked them to come, they never left. For the sisters, the land was where they were firmly rooted. The remains of their husbands and some of their children are buried there. According to Cott (1977), the things women valued and the shared experiences and abuses, could become a basis for political consciousness and unity.

5. Tragedy

Tragedy strengthened the relationship among sisters. Brant (1983, in Simmonds, 1979) claims that sisterhood in the feminist perspective is the

discovery of shared oppressions. They empathized with each other because they shared the same experiences or tragedies. At this stage, they saw each other as allies and could openly talk about it.

Some children died ahead of their parents. This was experienced by Abcede, Minerva, Nemesia and Penelope. Each child's death was not only theirs, but also a loss among the sisters, since they also considered each one as their own; knowing them from birth, their childhood, puberty and adulthood. Thus, theirs surpassed aunts-nephews/nieces relationships but also became mothers-children relationships.

In their twilight years, their widowhood also contributed to their strong bonding as sisters and friends. Widowhood made them closer because they could give more attention to each other. Although their husbands were not hindrance to their closeness, they found themselves freer than before.

C. Feminist Indication as Sisters

Just like what Millman (2005) claims, the relationships between sisters change in every phase of their lives. The seven sisters went through the same process. But it is notable that in every phase, their solidarity was always present. Fishel also believes (1994), that biological sisters and the women's movement are sharing the same experiences and challenges like loss of solidarity due to distance, different ideas, sameness and differences but with the intention to connect because they want to have independence and they are afraid to be alone.

1. *Sisters as models*

Lualhati had negative and positive influences from her sisters. From her eldest sister, Lorena, having a husband who was kind and unselfish inspired her to find a husband like him, in contrast to Abcede's husband who was always against his wife in helping her sisters. Although they both have their own concepts of

morally right and wrong due to their upbringing, the sisters saw each other as beacons in guiding them.

Lorena, chose and did everything so she could marry the man she liked. This became the model for Penelope, Minerva and Nelfa when they got married. Brought up in traditional days, where “kissing and holding hands” was considered a reason to get married, Lorena, then 17, told their father that her boyfriend, Rodrigo “stole her a kiss”. But in the case of Penelope, it was Lualhati who told their mother that Antonio, the boyfriend of Penelope kissed the latter. Because of these instances, Minerva, already in her late 20’s told her mother directly that she would like to marry her fiance, Felix. Nelfa, on the other hand, fought for her love to Gaudioso, although the family did not like him, since, he was previously married.

2. Sisters as friends and allies

The feminist model of reciprocity and friendship can be seen through sisterhood relationships, not just an obligation but also showing solidarity as a sister.

At an early age, it was already evident among the Cabrera sisters when they fought with their brother Lutgardo. Although Lutgardo was older and their mother always said “respect your older brother”, they did not believe it, especially if they viewed that a sister was at a disadvantage. Nemesia’s husband, Isidro was an alcoholic. One time, Nelfa, saw that Nemesia was being abused by Isidro, she called her other sisters and they mauled him, until he ran away. Minerva and Nelfa were Lorena’s allies when the latter escaped from her husband to study dressmaking and cosmetology. The two did this not because Lorena was a sister, but because they believed that she had the right to improve herself by having skills.

But the special relationship between Lorena and Abcede happened since they were young and continued until they reached old age. The two were bound not only by blood but also by friendship. It firmly held the belief of Brestin (2006)

that sisters, because of their shared experiences; be they happy or sad, could become friends.

3. *The interests of the majority over self-interest*

According to Mary Daly (1978) feminism is threatened by women's acceptance of the ideals of tokenism and self-sacrifice. Although self-sacrifice is debatable, the Women's Movement experienced and is still experiencing sacrifices to achieve changes for themselves, for society and for fellow women.

The experience of Lualhati and Nemesia since childhood was that of intense sibling rivalry and attention seeking from their mother. Lualhati, although the youngest could not let her older sister Nemesia overpower her. But the most remarkable show of self-sacrifice by Lualhati was during a disagreement between their husbands, Plaridel and Isidro. This led to the separation of Lualhati and Plaridel. Lualhati said that it was better to let her husband leave, because they have only one child; while Nemesia had already three.

But the stereotypical characteristics of a woman or a mother always thinking of their children is also evident in their stories. Until their old age, they are still thinking of the success of their children in various fields. For Lorena, she studied not only for herself but for her children's survival, thinking that if something untoward happened to Rodrigo, she could work.

4. *As surrogate mother*

Taking care of younger siblings is the usual role of elder sisters. Simmons (1999) acknowledge that although she resented taking care of her sister, in the end it proved to be an advantage when it was her time to become a mother.

Lorena helped their mother in raising their younger sisters, Nelfa, Nemesia and Lualhati. Thus, for the younger sisters, Lorena was their surrogate mother. Again, Neal's claim of reciprocity rather than obligation is present in this feminist indication.

5. Respecting their differences as individuals and as women

Although biologically related, the sisters are different persons with different personalities. It is the same in the Women's Movement, although they have shared experiences and memories, the differences also prevail due to different upbringings, status in the society, etc., yet they are bound by the same idealism, experiences and abuses as women. Napikoski (no date) notes that the term sisterhood is used among feminists to express the connection of women who are not biologically related but are bonded in solidarity. The sisterhood of women often refers to their feminism, their participation in the women's movement, their support of other women or their recognition of female qualities that are unique to women's nature. The use of the word sisterhood implies that women relate to one another in ways that are distinct from how they relate to men (although not necessarily exclusive of relation to men).

The Cabrera sisters have different perspectives on life, due to the environment when they were growing up and the people they came to associate with. Lualhati, Minerva, Abcede and Lorena were frank, while Nelfa and Penelope were modest. Minerva might be silent, but she has a lot of things to say if needbe. Lorena remembered her mother's lesson on individual differences: siblings are like fingers. These are of the same hand but not equal. But they cannot work singly. They must cooperate in order to do something.

6. Giving and sharing in times of need

Again, this is a feminist category of reciprocity rather than obligation. It is evident in the life stories of the sisters where they showed giving and sharing in times of dire need: during the War, during the most difficult times of their married lives and the loss of some of their children. Even if they could not voice their feelings, the reality that they were together in one land was enough to sustain them to go on for another day.

7. *Equality*

Chakkalalal (2004) claims that feminism aims for equality towards unity. Within the family, there is hierarchy. The elder ones are called “*ate*” (big sister). We also have to respect our older brothers or sisters because they are our surrogate parents. The Cabrera sisters was no different. They called their older sisters *ate* and the older brother “*kuya*”. But as the time passed, equality is also achieved within the relationships. There is no more dominant or overbearing sister. Lorena’s concern and sometimes advice to them was no longer considered domination, rather a concern. They could now argue, give opinions and decide for themselves.

D. The Society as Influence on Feminist Consciousness

1. *Family*

The Cabrera sisters were born in a highly patriarchal times. It was the time when the words of the father were considered as law. In the absence of the father, the elder brother would take charge or whoever considered an authority would give the “laws” to be followed by the whole family. Because they grew up in this kind of setup, this same structure gave them an awareness of the need to question the high authority given to men by society. It was also in the family that the sisters experienced unequal treatment between the siblings which resulted to jealousy and rivalry.

2. *Religion/ Church*

Although their mother was religious, not all the children would follow her lead. Although it could be assumed that they grew up within the Church since their great- grand aunt officiated the Mass during the absence of the priest, not all of the sisters turned to the Church or religion. For Lualhati, the Catholic Church had a negative influence. It was a factor why a large tract of their land was lost.

Their grand-uncle, Leoncio Urieta, facilitated the donation of their land to the friars. Abcede was given an award by the Catholic Women's League for more than 30 years of service to the Church, while Minerva became a catechist. Lorena became one of the pillars of the Marian devotees. Nemesia was also a Marian devotee. Nelfa, although not a church organizer, attended Mass regularly. Only Penelope did not mention any church membership or role in the Church. The Church had a positive influence to Lorena, Abcede, Minerva, and Nemesia. Although the Church's dogma during that time was all about obedience and total submission to their husbands, this was not followed by the sisters. The Church became a part of their lives by being active members and leaders within the Church organizations for the lay members.

3. Educational Institution

In school, the treatment between male and female students awakened the consciousness of Lualhati on equality. According to her, bullying girls specifically was already happening during their times. As much as possible, she would fight bullies who were usually males, making fun of her girlfriends, even if it meant fist-fights or game competitions. It meant not only fighting for others but also fighting for her right as a girl not to be bullied. Minerva also experienced being bullied when she transferred to another school. She also fought bullies and did not show any fear which was usually the reaction of girl-children during those times. She did not just cry or tell her teachers about bullying, which showed her strength even though she was "only" a young girl.

E. Different and shared experiences of the sisters in their life cycles as factors affecting their decisions

Violence, abuse and discrimination were experienced by the sisters in their life cycles. But these were not the in the same phases in their lives. Even when

they were young, the sisters showed that women and girls should not just cry in times of bullying or other forms of violence, instead they fought, be it physical or verbal just to show that women are strong and not just objects of ridicule or violence. It was in contrast to their mother's advice not to fight because it would become a stigma in their lives. For the sisters, only those who refused to fight are always the losers.

It was believed that men had high respect for women during that time but the sisters did experience sexual or attempted sexual abuse. These were experienced by Abcede, Penelope and Nemesia during their adolescent years.

But these were never known by their parents mainly due to their agreement not to tell it to anybody for fear that if their relatives knew of those attempted sexual advances, there would be more trouble. It may be positive in some aspect because it shows the pact between the sisters. However it is more on negative because it shows the *conspiracy of silence* among women when it comes to violence. These experiences are the factors that helped them in forging a strong bond as sisters as well as influenced their decisions in life.

The mother factor, both negative and positive, was also a strong influence in their individual lives as well as their shared life. Tragedies in their families were also a factor which helped them emerge as stronger women than ever. Most importantly, the land bound them to together and to stay in one place in spite of having migrant husbands.

F. Feminist indications in various life cycles

1. *The consciousness to end discrimination and abuses*

According to the Cabrera sisters, their mother and aunts always told them that girls were not supposed to fight, especially to boys. They should be modest; prim and proper. The martyr image of their mother was something they never

wanted to happen to any of them or among their daughters. For them, it would be better to be separated rather than be together without love or always fighting.

2. Do not depend or follow men

In puberty and throughout adulthood, the sisters were not dependent nor dominated by their husbands. Although they were orphaned by their father at a young age, they did not depend on their uncles. Even when they got married, they did not go to their migrant husbands' places to live.

3. Faith in their strength

The sisters like Minerva, Nemesia and Lualhati believed in their strength as women. Nemesia separated from her husband and was able to sustain her six young children. Lualhati became a leader in an organization usually reserved for men. She became the first female member of the Free Farmers Federation (FFF) in Occidental Mindoro and eventually its first woman official. She was also a member of barangay (village) council.

4. Choosing the husbands

During their times, it was not acceptable for a woman to choose a husband. The parents were the one choosing among their suitors. Until now, in the Philippine society, it is still taboo. The sisters, except Nemesia and Abcede, chose their husbands by doing things that could force their parents to marry them off, like setting-up “kissing situations”, etc.

Endeavor to improve self and family

Their poverty, after their father's death, forced their mother to make the most difficult decision; whom to send to school, even just to finish high school. Because Lorena and Abcede had their own families, it was difficult for them to help financially. However, to the sisters, like Nelfa, Nemesia and Lualhati, not attending school did not hinder them in developing themselves, like studying technical skills for Nemesia and Lualhati and accepting odd jobs like doing laundry and food vending.

6. *Strength to face struggles and difficulties*

Capuno (2001) claims that the silent acceptance of whatever difficulties along the way is an indication of feminism, if you also tries to change it for the betterment of your life. Some of the Cabrera sisters experienced difficulties in their lives. Abcede's two sons were murdered, while the other son, died of an illness. Minerva, Penelope and Nemesia's children also died ahead of them. Nelfa and Penelope's husbands got sick and depended on them. Although their relationship as sisters helped a lot to overcome their grief; it is also presumed that the sisters were brave and strong-hearted in facing their own difficulties. Again, Chakkalakal's assumption that feminism is all about equality to achieve unity is mirrored in the lives of the Cabrera sisters. Anchoring biological sisterhood and sisterhood within the Women's Movement can be seen in the life stories of these women.

Feminist sisterhood awakens the consciousness of women, according to Cott (1977). Through this consciousness, shared experiences, struggles and hardships as women and as individuals, the women endeavor to change these (Bhasin, Khan, 1986).

According to Honculada (1994), the Women's Movement started to tackle and resolve women's issues like prostitution, discrimination and unequal pay at the workplace, sexist advertisements and news, schools or universities' curricula which strenghtened gender-stereotyping; the Church dogmas and even the control of the State on women's sexuality. In their analysis, these inequalities can be traced in the family, where the division of labor and unequal treatment between girls and boys exist.

Because of the rising awareness on inequality and discrimination, the women launched massive protests and joined the politics to achieve equality and to raise consciousness among fellow women and men. Balser (1987) also

demonstrates that sisterhood could happen even to women's organizations with different political ideologies, like the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) and NOW (National Organization for Women). They came to terms on the issues faced by women like equal pay, reproductive rights and addressing sexual harassment among others because they both believe that achieving women's freedom also means freedom of both sexes and genders.

The confidence of women in their strength and skills to learn by studying can be seen in the examples of the Women of Malolos in their effort to learn the Spanish language reserved only for the elite (Quindoza, 2010, in Jose and Navarro, 2010). Their awareness of the importance of education also serves as inspiration for the modern women to continue pursuing higher education. Confidence and trust between each other helped them achieve freedom and equal treatment in the Revolutionary Movement as leaders and members during struggles against Spain, like Gabriela Silang, Teresa Magbanua and others (Mananzan, 1991).

Dependency on men was never a character of the early Filipino women. Before the Spaniards came to the island, our women enjoyed rights and privileges more like the men. They had their own sources of income and many of their decisions did not depend much on men. Alzona (1934, in Camagay, 1986) mentions owning of properties and entering contracts without men, including their husbands, even being the present. It also included choosing their husbands (Mananzan, 2005). The Women's Movements did not depend on men in their fight for their rights. Women's groups and individuals initiated laws favorable for women, including the Anti-Rape Law and other laws for their protection as women (Eviota, 1994).

Being a feminist does not only mean struggles against class and equality, ending violence and oppressions by men, at home, and within the society. Women

showing feminist indications are also like the Cabrera sisters. They have confidence, accepting their mistakes and trying to rectify those; the strength to face hardships for themselves and their families. Feminism is a natural consciousness of every woman mainly due to the kind of environment where she grew up and lives. Feminism is the desire to change their lives for the better.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study strengthened that, indeed the Filipino women are organic feminists. Organic feminism is based on the literature and the studies of the foremost feminists in Asia like Bhasin and Khan, (1986) Labayen (1998), Quindoza (2010), Mananzan (2005), Feria (1993), Guerrero(1999) and Capuno (2001) and also men like Dr. Rizal and Salazar (2010). The feminism of Filipino women is a natural awakening due to the environment of suppression and oppression just because they are women. This is also innate since we enjoyed equality and the same rights as men prior to the arrival of the Spaniards. An organic feminist is conscious of the differing treatment by society of her and of men in simple things like: why only men are given the privilege to do the courting; why women should be meek, while men are shown as strong; why is there a division of labor, etc. Although she cannot voice it, the organic feminist does mean to change society's treatment not only for herself but also for other women and also for men.

Organic feminism has the determination to change how the society molds women, as meek, subordinate and weak. She will show her true self: strong, free, with determination and never losing hope. Organic feminism is not selfish. It means that she wants to liberate others as she liberates herself from the clutches of the stereotypical mold of society for both women and men. Within the family, the initial bonding among siblings started. Their relationships are affected by many

factors such as age, position in the family and their shared experiences. In the tradition model of the family, the usual role of a sister is to support the elderly parents. The sisters and other siblings are also expecting help from each other in times of need; be it emotional or financial (Neale, 2004).

Firth (1970, in Neale, 2004) mentions that the relationship between the sisters is also affected by economic standing. In kin relationships, age gap, capability as well as economic capability could be the reason why a certain sibling gives without reciprocity and the other does not. As sisters, these concepts are seen as a connection between them as women and through feminist consciousness. Although we live in a patriarchal society, every woman seeks changes for herself. Her quiet acceptance or unacceptance could be seen as a struggle to free herself from the box that society created for her. These concepts influence her decisions in life. The oppressive system in society also pushes her to fight to be able to mold herself into a woman with conviction.

These indications of feminism or organic feminism are shown in the life stories of the Cabrera sisters. They did not have outside influence like media and education, but emerge through their experiences.

It is also important to note that discrimination and violence happen throughout a woman's life cycle. Each woman has the capacity to fight it, but it is more effective if there is unity. These are also shown in Cabrera sisters' life cycle.

Their shared and individual experiences strengthened them as persons and their relationships as sisters. These also paved the way for their strong bond not only as biological ones, but also as women needing each other. Differences are set aside in order to achieve unity for the common good. Individual differences may be an element of disagreement but it is also a factor that connects people in order to have another or new perspective. Their ability to accept differences is an important factor in unity and in harmonious relationships.

This study also shows that a woman's life does not depend on having a man by her side. Although the Cabrera sisters got married, they did not imply that their husbands would be their better-half during old age. In fact, it is the contrary. The husbands depended too much on their wives specifically when they got sick.

This study also shows that sisters' relationships change over time and in their life cycles. It emphasizes that age is also a factor in building a relationship among them. However, when they all reached old age, they finally achieved equality. This study describes the levels of sisterhood; from best of friends, rivals and allies. Their decision to stay in the land of their parents in Sablayan, Occidental Mindoro, instead of following their husbands in their own provinces, shows unity because their beliefs of solidarity help them to get strength from each other. They wanted to support each other in any way they could throughout their lives. Although there were past disagreements and rivalries, their similarities and shared experiences as sisters and as women were given more importance in their relationships. They set aside their differences to be able to live harmoniously.

As a metaphor of feminism, biological sisterhood shows equality, recognition of individual differences and their similarities and their common goal to change their lives and their society. Just like feminist sisterhood, they surpassed their differences. They may have misunderstandings due to politics and idealism, but they are hoping that all the women of the world will unite to achieve equality and equal rights. It is therefore concluded that biological sisterhood became the symbol of the Women's Movement because they have a special bond that surpasses individual differences, races, religions and political affiliations.

From a feminist perspective, sisterhood gives support, friendship and help (Dolan, 2001; Fishel, 1994; Neale, 2004; Finch, 1989). In biological sisterhood all of these happen.

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