



Analyzing Women-Led Resistance and Political Education in *Sr. Stella L.* Through Iris Marion Young’s Model of Inclusive Democracy

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores power and collective action in Mike de Leon’s *Sr. Stella L.*, set during the Philippine Martial Law period. Applying Iris Marion Young’s theory of inclusive democracy and the activist challenge, the study analyzes the film’s portrayal of collective resistance and contested institutional boundaries. By tracing Sr. Stella Legaspi’s journey, it illustrates how her development embodies the transformative agency of Filipino women. Through Young’s framework, her evolution demonstrates how marginalized actors transition from passive compliance to active resistance through direct activist challenge against oppressive structures. Utilizing content and semiotic analysis, this study affirms the film’s sustained relevance. It highlights *Sr. Stella L.* as a vital historical document and medium for political education that continues to inspire contemporary women-led activism. Ultimately, the paper recommends utilizing feminist critiques to adapt Young’s Western model of collective responsibility to women-led resistance and political pedagogy within the Global South.

KEYWORDS

collective action, inclusive democracy, Filipino women, political education

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Introduction

The on-screen portrayals of women have evolved throughout Philippine cinema's rich history. Filipino films have brought diverse female characters to life by moving away from conventional archetypes toward resilient figures with strong female agency. These cinematic portrayals reflect the shift in the cultural and socio-political landscape as films increasingly explore themes of power, intersectionality, and gender roles, particularly during the dictatorial regime in the Philippines.

Different aspects of women's representation and empowerment, including their societal roles, character development, and intersectionality, were revealed in films like *Brutal* (1980), *Moral* (1982), and *Karnal* (1983) (Castillo et al., 2023). Among these socio-political films is *Sr. Stella L.* (1984), a political drama and a renowned cinematic achievement directed by Mike De Leon. The film serves as a social and political commentary on the oppressive socio-political climate as it effectively captures the struggles of ordinary Filipinos, the role of women, and the interplay of faith, power, and collective action within the backdrop of Philippine society during the Martial Law era.

The film is about the character of Sr. Stella Legaspi (played by Vilma Santos), a young nun who initially avoids involvement in political issues. With the encouragement of a fellow nun, Sr. Stella becomes active in social activism, which opens her eyes to the harsh socio-political realities experienced by the impoverished and working class.

This paper utilizes Iris Marion Young's (2001) theory of inclusive democracy and the activist challenge to explore this cinematic piece. Young's framework offers a comprehensive lens to understand how marginalized actors confront structural inequalities, disrupt exclusive institutional boundaries, and assert their political agency within a repressive political system. Her critique of structural injustice clarifies how oppressed groups challenge hegemonic power and demand a more inclusive democratic order. Guided by this theoretical foundation, the objective of this paper is to analyze how *Sr. Stella L.* serves as a medium for political education by demonstrating how marginalized groups challenge authoritarian power through grassroots resistance and adversarial political engagement. To achieve this, qualitative methodology is employed, particularly thematic content and semiotic analysis, to analyze specific scenes, dialogue, and visual symbols in the film. The expected output of this study shows how Sr. Stella's character transforms from a passive convent-bound observer to an active political actor. Her direct engagement with marginalized communities served as an experiential learning, which further heightened her critical awareness of social injustice and developed her agency to mobilize collective resistance against the patriarchal and oppressive institutional structures.

Theory and Related Literature

Iris Marion Young's Theory on Inclusive Democracy

Iris Marion Young's (2001) political theory on inclusive democracy and the activist challenge provides a powerful lens for understanding how marginalized groups build and deploy collective power. To establish a meaningful framework for political resistance, this study reframes the normative content of democracy through Young's "politics of difference." Young argues that traditional liberal-egalitarian models of citizenship, which promise equal political and civil rights, have failed to provide their promise of true equality. Even when marginalized groups achieve formal citizenship status, deep-seated structural inequalities continue to reduce them to second-class citizens, leaving them effectively oppressed and excluded from the public sphere (Beiner, 2006). Young expounds that achieving full inclusion and social justice requires a shift from a standard policy of "equal treatment for all" toward a mechanism that explicitly recognizes group differences to ensure that vulnerable populations are not silenced by dominant majorities. Central to this inclusive democratic model is a relational, deliberative framework where the legitimacy of any collective decision rests strictly on the inclusion of all affected parties in the process of discussion and decision-making (Maboloc, 2015). As Young (2000) notes:

"Participants in the deliberative model offer proposals for how to best solve problems or meet legitimate needs and so on, and they present arguments through which they aim to persuade others to accept their proposal."

Genuine public consultation is crucial for a meaningful democracy, so people will not be systematically misrepresented and stripped of their right to voice opinions on issues that directly govern their lives. This requires the collective unity of the marginalized to disrupt the systemic exclusions perpetuated by the privileged minority. Through public assemblies, marginalized groups can impose real accountability on institutional leaders and transform political power from an instrument of top-down domination to inclusive democracy (Maboloc, 2015).

Young introduces the "social connection model" of responsibility to analyze how individual awareness translates into collective action and illustrate how collective responsibility alters repressive and discriminatory institutional structures (Aubert et al., 2019). Drawing from feminist relational ethics, this model also expounds that political responsibility is both individual and collective, because individuals coexist within a system of interdependent processes that produce structural injustices (Young, cited in Clifford, 2012). Under the social connection model, systemic injustice is a shared responsibility of all who participate in that system (Clifford, 2012). Instead of viewing injustice as an isolated violation of rules, this framework unmasks how everyday norms and institutions routinely enable oppressive outcomes, thereby shifting the focus from backward-looking blame to forward-looking structural change (Aubert et al., 2019; Clifford, 2012). Dismantling entrenched systems requires shared political responsibility through collective action (Young, 2000, cited in Clifford, 2012), yet the capacity and duty to enact this change remain directly contingent upon an individual's power and social location (Clifford, 2012). Young (2001) challenges the assumption that social,

political, or labor conflicts can be resolved solely through polite debate within established channels, arguing instead that true democracy demands a citizenship that embraces mobilized dissent. Outside pressure must be applied through adversarial political actions such as strikes, boycotts, and picketing to forcefully disrupt public consciousness, as powerful institutions are rarely persuaded by intellectual debate alone (Young, 2001; Frazer, 2006). Ultimately, this framework demonstrates that the politics of inclusion is intrinsically bound to a politics of empowerment, thereby showing how marginalized actors transform collective voice into actual decision-making power (Andersen & Siim, 2004).

Moving beyond the passive citizenship inherent in traditional civics models, Young's framework advocates for a robust political education that prepares citizens for the frictional and diverse realities of public life (Frazer, 2006). Rather than promoting mere compliance, this approach trains individuals to recognize structural oppression, navigate strategic conflict, and view disruptive protest as a legitimate democratic tool (Young, 2001; Frazer, 2006). To ground these democratic theories within the specific realities of the Philippines during the Martial Law period, this study draws on the foundational work of Sr. Mary John Mananzan. Through her lived experience and scholarship, this study illustrates how the activist model translates into a localized, gendered paradigm of resistance, demonstrating how marginalized groups move from structural isolation to active solidarity and collective action.

Sr. Mary John Mananzan, OSB, and the Praxis of Resistance

Emerging literature positions Sr. Mary John Mananzan, OSB, as a premier Filipina philosopher whose work directly rivals established canons (Liwanag & Demeterio, 2017; Liwanag & Romero, 2020). Her intellectual contribution is defined by a deep integration of theory and praxis, providing an emancipatory framework tailored specifically to the historical vulnerabilities of the Philippines and the broader Global South (Roces, 2008). Sr. Mananzan's evolution from a traditional, academic nun to a radical socio-political activist proved significant in the Philippine progressive movement. Her radicalization was born out of historical material conditions, specifically the landmark October 1975 La Tondeña strike in Tondo, Manila (Roces, 2008; Liwanag & Demeterio, 2017), upon witnessing the military's violent suppression of striking laborers. The strike prompted Sr. Mananzan and other progressive religious women to cross physical and ideological barriers to protect the workers (Roces, 2008). The institutional radicalization of the Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines (AMRSP) was reflected in the character of Sr. Stella Legaspi in the film. As the inspiration behind this character, Sr. Mananzan demonstrated how the progressive combination of religious identity, Catholic social teaching, labor rights, and domestic feminism can mobilize a unified front against the Marcos dictatorship. This era demonstrated the shift of women religious from a passive, detached theology to active, front-line political confrontation alongside the working class (Liwanag & Demeterio, 2017; Liwanag & Romero, 2020). Ultimately, this analysis of how these women subverted their institutional positions to build highly effective resistance networks prompted Roces (2008) to define them as transnational feminists. Sr. Mananzan demonstrated cross-sectoral solidarity by co-founding and chairing GABRIELA, a broad alliance of progressive women's organizations, and establishing the Institute of Women's Studies (IWS) at St. Scholastica's College (Roces, 2008; Reese, 2010). Through these initiatives, she successfully unified institutional

religious resources with secular mass movements and generated global campaigns that exposed human rights violations and economic exploitation to international tribunals (Liwanag & Romero, 2020). As a living agent of structural change, her *Theology of Consecrated Life* insists that religious devotion must be measured by its willingness to confront deeply entrenched structural injustices. While contemporary public activism faces new challenges under shifting political landscapes, Sr. Mananzan's synthesis of third-world feminism, liberation theology, and institutional subversion remains a foundational blueprint for democratic resistance and social justice in the Global South (Liwanag & Demeterio, 2017).

Women-Led Resistance in Philippine Cinema

The "Second Golden Age of Philippine Cinema" served as a powerful platform for urban-realist films to provide socio-political critique despite strict dictatorial censorship (Diaz, 2021). Prominent directors like Lino Brocka and Ishmael Bernal leveraged social realism to capture urban poverty and institutional oppression (Campos, 2011; Tolentino, 2012). Brocka's *Maynila: Sa Mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (1975) and *Orapronobis* (1989), and Bernal's *Manila by Night* are fearless commentaries on society and feature characters who morally challenged the political status quo and served as a critique of Marcos's dictatorship. (Tolentino, 2012). The recent revival of realist-themed films goes beyond reflecting the country's socio-political backdrop by capturing the intersecting identities that perpetuate the oppression of Filipino women while simultaneously portraying their power and agency.

Films such as Jun Lana's *The Barber's Tales* (2013) look back at the Martial Law period to examine themes of traditional machismo, institutionalized gender roles, and female empowerment. These recent film portrayals serve as a record of the women's evolution from passive victims into active agents of political resistance. The studies of Castillo et al. (2023), Biana & Nalam (2020), and Brillon (2019) analyzed how women-led narratives challenge traditional patriarchal machismo, confront structural displacement, and reframe political trauma through cinematic fictions of memory. This directly subverts earlier Martial Law cinema, which Azarcon-dela Cruz (1988) laments promoted the submission of women and children to a false patriarchal authority, normalized humiliation and violence, and reduced female representation to "weak-willed, passionate, [and] emotional" archetypes that ultimately hindered both women's self-realization and national development.

Semiotic Studies: Visual Signs and Political Action

To decode how visual elements convey deeper ideological messages within cinema, film scholarship frequently relies on semiotic analysis to unpack the relationship between a signifier and its socio-cultural meaning (Bouzida, 2014; Luthfi, 2021). Semiotic theory by Roland Barthes is used to analyze how visual signs shift from denotation, or the literal, objective relationship between signifier and signified, into connotation, which introduces subjective socio-cultural values and ideologies (Bouzida, 2014; Luthfi, 2021; Tanzil, 2023). In social realist films, common visual signs are rarely considered neutral; instead, they undergo a semiotic shift when placed in the context of grassroots

resistance. In this paper, for example, a nun's habit, like that of Sr. Stella, denotes ecclesiastical identity, conformity, and political neutrality. However, when deployed within the context of a labor strike, this transforms into a symbol of solidarity with the oppressed groups. Likewise, objects within the *mise-en-scène*, like protest placards and martial law posters, serve as visual markers that represent resistance to the authoritarian system. Semiotics, then, provides the tools to understand how specific visual signs represent the transition of Sr. Stella from a passive observer to an active agent of political resistance.

Synthesis and Research Gap

The existing literature thoroughly documents how social realist films critique the existing socio-political climate (Campos, 2011; Tolentino, 2012) and depict how women-led resistance challenges traditional patriarchal structures. (Castillo et al., 2023). Visual signs like a nun's habit or political propaganda are often treated by current literature as background settings rather than catalysts for collective resistance and political education. Specifically, a research gap exists at the intersection of visual semiotics, women-led resistance, and active political engagement. This paper addresses this gap by applying Young's (2001) model of inclusive democracy to the film *Sr. Stella L.*, grounded in the localized, real-world praxis of Sr. Mary John Mananzan (Liwanag & Demeterio, 2017), and utilizing Barthes' semiotic framework (Bouzida, 2014; Luthfi, 2021). An integrated analysis is needed to demonstrate how the transformation of the protagonist articulated through religious garments and protest media directly links to a structural critique of the political system and traditional patriarchal structure. Ultimately, this paper advances film scholarship by showing how visual signs in cinema actively construct a framework for democratic resistance against structural violence.

Methods

This paper employs a qualitative research design, specifically content and semiotic analysis, where *Sr. Stella L.* is analyzed as a dynamic cultural text whose representation of the Filipino women is inextricably linked to socio-political crises, structural oppressions, and collective resistance of the Martial Law period. By analyzing the film's narrative and visual architecture through a structure, this study examines how these representations of power, dissent, and collective action operationalize the dynamic progression within Young's (2001) framework, moving from structural inequality to the limits of communicative democracy and, ultimately, the necessity of the activist challenge.

To establish how the film directly connects to the socio-political events of the period, the analysis began with a contextual mapping by situating the film alongside the labor strikes and religious activism of the 1980s. Second, the film was viewed iteratively to identify specific scenes, dialogues, and character interactions through thematic content analysis. These contents were purposively selected based on their capacity to illustrate the theoretical framework of Young. Specifically, the analysis evaluates three distinct dimensions of this dynamic progression: structural inequality and exclusive communication, examined through scenes that depict institutional boundaries and the

enforcement of passive compliance; communicative democracy and internal efficacy, analyzed through community organizing scenes that demonstrate the collective dialogue necessary to challenge marginalized status; and the activist challenge, illustrated through factory strike scenes that capture adversarial political action and the mobilization of collective power against deeply entrenched injustices.

Results

This section maps the dominant power structures within *Sr. Stella L.* and examines how the film dramatizes the dynamic progression of Young's (2001) framework. The study traces how the characters confront structural inequality, cultivate agency through communicative democracy, and ultimately pivot to the activist challenge, providing a comprehensive analysis of how marginalized actors transform collective voice into actual decision-making power under the constraints of Martial Law.

I. Structural Inequality and Exclusive Communication

Sr. Stella L. visually and narratively maps the pervasive, intersecting power structures dominating Philippine society during Martial Law. Institutional exclusion and hegemonic power structures are cinematically represented through the repressive authoritarian state, the conservatism of the religious institution, and the pervasiveness of structural patriarchy.

The visual representations of factory workers on strike in front of the Republic Oil factory (see Figure 1) powerfully capture the oppressive climate and the economic hardships endured by marginalized Filipinos during the Martial Law period. These scenes symbolize the resistance of the marginalized against exploitation and injustice at the hands of the privileged and highlight how the government exerts control through coercion and aggressive tactics towards the factory workers.

Figure 1

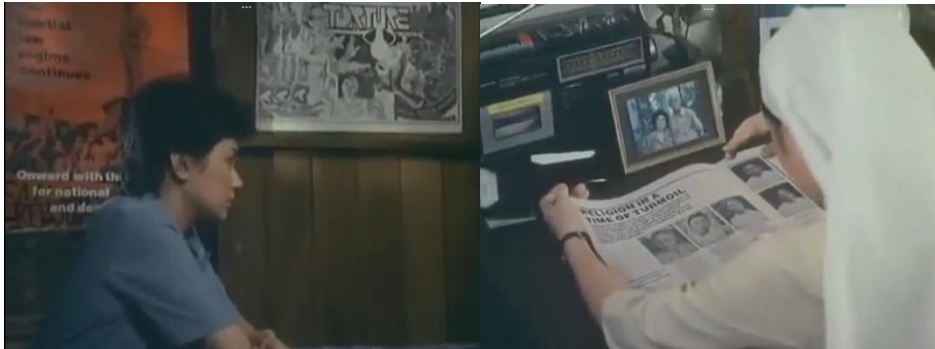
Workers on strike at the Republic Oil factory



The prolonged and centralized powers of the dictatorial regime served as the primary dominant power structure emphasized in the film. Emmanuel Reyes (1989) highlights that the severe absence of press freedom and widespread human rights violations by the military were notable during this period.

Figure 2

Printed media and posters that illustrate the political climate during the Martial law period



Visual objects, such as newspaper and poster captions (see Figure 2), serve as a tangible record of the events and social unrest, showing that the enforcement of political power results in the curtailment of freedom of expression and substantive political engagement.

Sr. Stella's initial journey illustrates her being in a state of abstract isolation within the walls of the convent. The opening scene of the film has a voice-over prayer that emphasizes the commitment of Sr. Stella's congregation to social justice: *"Sumasa akin ang Espiritu ng Panginoon sapagkat hinirang niya ako upang ipangaral sa mga dukha ang mabuting balita..."* Cloaked in her cream-colored habit, Sr. Stella and her fellow nuns demonstrate their adherence to the rules of the congregation. Her obedience to the expectations of the Church and her congregation is also demonstrated through her faithful dedication to counseling the unmarried and abused women who sought refuge in their convent. Sr. Stella's initial refusal to be politically involved in social issues in her response to journalist Nick Fajardo's question on the clergy's role in social activism further illustrates her obedience not only to the doctrines of the Church but also to the limitations of their congregation's mission: *"...wala akong masyadong alam diyan kaya hindi ako pwede magbigay ng opinyon."* Despite her seclusion within the convent, Sr. Stella's character shows awareness of the injustices experienced by women in particular through her interaction with those under the care of their congregation: *"Tulad ng trabaho ko dito sa Caritas, di ba involvement din ito? Ang pagtulong namin sa mga residents dito; biktima rin sila eh."*

Sr. Stella L. also portrays the profound influence of the Catholic Church in the Philippines. Sr. Juaning, who plays the role of the Mother Superior, represents the disciplinary power of the Catholic Church over religious members. When she reminded the nuns to focus on social action and avoid being actively involved in politics, she reaffirmed the Church's doctrines and the boundaries of their congregational work to clearly enforce a conservative theology of

obedience. Her reminder aligns with the conservative teachings of the Catholic Church during that period, which discourage the religious from participating in social movements and depoliticize the clergy by keeping their work safely within the confines of charity.

An equally dominant power in Philippine society during this period is patriarchy, which emphasizes male dominance in family structures and larger social institutions and exhibits extensive control over culture, sexuality, economy, and the state (Valdez et al., 2022; Estrella et al., 2019). This systemic insulation is mirrored in the domestic sphere of the women of Barrio Agoho (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

The women of Barrio Agoho doing their domestic chores



In this setup, the wife generally manages the domestic sphere and cares for her children and husband, while the husband, as the household's head, provides for the economic needs of the family (Alcantara, 1994). In the narrative of Auring, the wife of the labor leader, Ka Dencio, she emphasized that her daughters already have their own families, and like her, they also help their husbands: *"May kani-kanilang pamilya na rin... Ang isa'y nasa Parañaque at isa naman nasa Marikina. Katulad ko rin, tumutulong sa kani-kanilang mga asawa."* Auring's character portrayal as a homemaker illustrates that her role and that of her daughters are viewed as an accepted societal norm. The responsibilities they carry reflect the influence of patriarchal norms, which restricts not only the agency and potential of women but also perpetuates intergenerational inequality and economic dependence on their husbands. These deeply entrenched gendered expectations towards women confine them to domestic life and restrain their participation in social activism. These cinematic representations of state hegemony, religious conservatism, and pervasive patriarchal structures align with Young's critique of structural inequality and institutional boundaries, wherein the political environment creates a state of containment that constrains marginalized voices from expressing their political and social sentiments in the public sphere.

II. Communicative Democracy

The capacity for adversarial political engagement is not immediately evident in the initial journey of Sr. Stella inside the convent, an environment initially defined by structural inequality and exclusive communication that isolates the nuns from broader social realities. Instead, her gradual participation in open discussions and her exposure to the community served as a vital form of experiential learning that will later catalyze her transition toward radical political resistance.

Figure 4

Sr. Stella Legaspi engages with the workers in the strike area



As the film's narrative progresses, the development of Sr. Stella's character is seen through her frequent visits to Barrio Agoho and her attendance at the strike (see Figure 4). Sr. Stella showed agency through her engagement with the striking laborers and her articulation of their collective sentiments. In her interaction with Gigi, the unwed mother who is under their care, her character showed that she realized the potency of the social and political problems that exist beyond the convent: *"Iba ang nakita ko dun... ang kahirapang nababasa at naririnig ko lamang ay naging buhay na sa akin."* Sr. Stella's deepened community engagement was more manifest at this stage of the narrative. Possessing more awareness of the social and economic challenges experienced by the laborers through her constant presence in Barrio Agoho, she started to gain the trust and respect of the workers and their families. Using this as leverage, her character is portrayed as actively raising critical awareness about social injustice while navigating the challenges of dismantling oppressive structures. Her apprehension regarding the violent suppression of the strike, *"Malakas ang kalaban... kaya nilang gawin kahit ano para mabuwag ang welga,"* and her subsequent assertion, *"Madre o hindi madre dumarating sa buhay ng tao ang oras na kailangan siya magpasya hindi para sa kanyang congregation, hindi para sa kanyang pamilya, o para kanino man, kundi para sa kanyang sarili,"* highlight her transformation from a passive observer to an active political force. Within Young's framework, this shift signifies her conscious rejection of the passive compliance demanded by dominant, exclusive institutions. Her character development illustrates the cultivation of internal political efficacy as a crucial

prerequisite for communicative democracy. By claiming her independent agency, she finds her voice, builds solidarity, and prepares to confront an explicit activist challenge against deeply entrenched structural injustices.

III. Political Engagement and Activism

The latter part of the film shows Sr. Stella's shift from passivity to a fearless engagement in political activism. Young argues that when powerful institutional interests refuse to engage in fair democratic deliberation, marginalized groups must utilize tactics such as strikes, pickets, and public demonstrations to challenge powerful systems.

Figure 5

Sr. Stella Legaspi participates in the factory strike and answers the questions of the police officer



The scenes of the factory strike directly demonstrate this public confrontation. In her response to the police officer who questioned her presence in the strike, Sr. Stella's firm conviction showed that she understood the connection of her religious mission to political action: *"Ano po ba ang papel ng isang Kristiyano? Di ba ang papel niya ang tumutulong sa mga mahihirap at inaapi? Ano man hong gawin natin sa mga pinakamakabamak ni Kristo ay ginagawa din natin para kay Kristo"* (see Figure 5). Following the violent dispersal of the picket line and the torture-murder of Ka Dencio, Sr. Stella returns to the frontlines to demonstrate her public defiance against the authoritarian system. Her rallying cry of *"Mabuhay! Mabuhay ang welga! Mga kasama kapit bisig tayo"* in front of the assembled laborers, as she recounts her ordeal with the abductors who tortured the labor leader, Ka Dencio — *"Natakot ako, at natatakot pa ako sa maaari pa nilang gawin"*— illustrates her courage to act despite the fear of exposing the truth and injustices behind the oppressive system. At this point in the narrative, the laborers exhibit scenes of a more active and stronger collective resistance. Within Young's framework, this moment epitomizes the climax of the activist challenge, where marginalized actors move past the boundaries of polite, exclusive institutional channels to engage in deliberate structural disruption. Sr. Stella's vulnerability and

subsequent call to action foster an adversarial political engagement that unifies the workers, demonstrating how collective responsibility and solidarity are forged on the frontlines to directly challenge deeply entrenched systemic oppression.

As Sr. Stella's character forcefully concludes her speech at the rally with the words, "*Katarungan para kay Ka Dencio, mabuhay ang welga, mabuhay ang uring manggagawa!*" her call not only challenges the laborers but likewise marks that defining narrative moment when her individual voice merges with the collective. Within Young's framework, this moment represents the ultimate realization of the activist challenge. Her moral conviction, aligned with explicit, adversarial political engagement, solidifies Sr. Stella's shared collective responsibility and demonstrates how marginalized actors fully claim their agency and achieve democratic efficacy on the frontlines of adversarial political action.

The monologue of Sr. Stella at the end of the film captures the profound transformation of her character as she embraces her new role as an activist nun:

"Marami pa akong hindi alam, marami pa akong dapat malaman tungkol sa kasalukuyang kalagayan, tungkol sa mga dapat gawin... narito na ako ngayon sa gitna ng pangyayari, may konting nadagdat pangunawa pero patuloy na nag-aaral at natututo... hindi nanonood na lamang kundi nakikiisa sa pagdurusa ng mga hindi makaimik, nakikiisa sa paglaban ng mga nagdurusa, tumutulong sa abot ng aking makakaya."

More than this, her conviction reflects her belief in human agency while professing her role as a Catholic in her exercise of social activism: "*Ilang beses kong narinig, ilang beses akong sinabihan at pinaalalahanan na ako ay isang madre lamang. Isang madreng hindi dapat manghimasok sa mga bagay na wala siyang nalalaman, pero una sa lahat, ako ay isang tao, ako ay isang Kristiyano.*" Her character's act of self-disclosure resonates completely with Young's (2001) conceptualization of communicative democracy and political agency. By explicitly rejecting the exclusive communication and institutional boundaries that seek to minimize her voice as "*madre lang*," Sr. Stella redefines her social position and builds a narrative of shared collective responsibility, demonstrating how marginalized individuals must first assert their full humanity to effectively engage in the activist challenge and confront deeply entrenched structural injustices.

Conclusion

Sr. Stella L. garnered significant attention for its political courage and controversial narratives. The film gained significant attention for its exploration of social issues, particularly on labor rights and oppression of the marginalized in society, during its release in 1984, while the Philippines was in a state of political turmoil and social unrest under the dictatorial regime of Marcos, Sr. It was also widely regarded by critics as a socially reflective film and praised for its political courage and disciplined, classical narrative structure. While the film did not explicitly name Marcos, it was a

daring act of cinematic protest, with its unflinching warning against remaining apolitical in the face of injustice (Lange, 2022). Critics also lauded the portrayal of the film's central character, Sr. Stella Legaspi, who showcased the militant nun's prominent role as a visible symbol of resistance against the Marcos dictatorship (Roces, 2004; 2008).

This cinematic portrayal of Sr. Stella also reflects an important change in the political history of the Philippines. Partly influenced by the call of Vatican II for the Church to engage with contemporary issues and social justice, nuns increasingly became more involved as active political actors. Sr. Stella's portrayal directly challenged the "traditional cultural construction of the feminine as beauty queen, wife, and mother," instead presenting the "woman as militant activist" (Roces, 2004). Further, the religious women became more politicized and were drawn deeper into the struggles of the dispossessed as a response to the injustices committed by the dictatorial regime (Barry, 2014). More than just focusing on the character of Sr. Stella, the film garnered considerable attention for its courageous portrayal of women's empowerment as seen through the collective action of the women in Barrio Agoho. Standing side by side with the male laborers, the women of Barrio Agoho's defiant stance against the prescribed gender roles dictated by a patriarchal system underscored the significant political role of women in Philippine society. Decades after the release of *Sr. Stella L.*, the film's depiction of violence and human rights abuses continues to find chilling parallels in present-day realities. These atrocities remain evident in ongoing reports of extrajudicial killings, particularly within the context of the 'war on drugs,' and enforced disappearances during the Duterte administration. The fate of the labor leader Ka Dencio and the violent dispersion of the labor strike show a striking resemblance to contemporary issues such as 'red tagging' against labor leaders and grassroots organizers and the tragic killings of union members (Amnesty International, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2024). The film's portrayal of labor issues remains significantly relevant in the present context as laborers continue to struggle for wage increases, security of tenure, and the right to freely associate (Abad, 2024). These systemic economic inequalities continue to shape the condition of Filipino laborers today, who also realize their enduring similarities to the issues portrayed in the film. The historical trajectory of Sr. Stella Legaspi finds its real-world counterpart in the lived praxis of Sr. Mary John Mananzan, whose life and works bridge the gap between theological reflection and radical activism. Much like Sr. Stella's narrative transition, Sr. Mananzan's historical engagement demonstrates how women religious subverted their institutional positions to build transnational feminist resistance networks. Sr. Stella and the women characters in the film serve as symbolic representations of present-day women-led activism. The portrayals of these women in confronting injustice and inequality echo in the contemporary advocacy of mothers and women's groups fighting against extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances of activists. This activism is exemplified, among others, by organizations like "Rise Up for Life and for Rights," a prominent group of mothers actively campaigning and demanding accountability for perpetrators and securing justice for those affected by the war on drugs through statements made before the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) (Amnesty International, 2024; National Council of Churches in the Philippines, 2021; Ratcliffe, 2021). Another powerful symbol of resistance and a persistent voice for justice for their loved ones are groups such as Families of Victims of Involuntary Disappearances (FIND) and Desaparecidos. These organizations are spearheaded by mothers together with the family members and colleagues of the missing, who tirelessly search for their disappeared children,

advocating for the full implementation of the Anti-Enforced or Involuntary Disappearance Act and demanding accountability from those responsible for such atrocities (Gavilan, 2023). Other women's rights advocates leverage digital platforms for organizing, campaigning, and amplifying their call for gender equality and empowerment. These digital platforms became an important avenue for women-led campaigns like #BabaeAko, whose campaign centers on ending sexism and misogyny in the Philippines, and #HijaAko, an internet-based advocacy movement empowering women to share their own stories of harassment and victim-blaming (Leonardo, 2018; Bagayas, 2020). The activism of these women, which is focused on acts of oppression committed against marginalized groups, powerfully demonstrates the political activism portrayed by Sr. Stella and the women in the film in the face of contemporary abuses and inequalities.

Theoretical and Educational Implications

Through Young's model of inclusive democracy and the activist challenge, the findings of the study reveal a profound connection between gender, resistance, and political pedagogy. Rather than treating education as a neutral "ivory tower" pursuit of abstract truth (McCartney et al., 2013), the film demonstrates that political education is a dynamic process of political engagement and awakening that occurs when marginalized individuals actively step into the public sphere.

Through the lens of Young's framework, *Sr. Stella L.* advances that true democratic engagement requires moving beyond standard, polite civic engagement toward an explicitly adversarial political engagement. Through their shared dialogue, Sr. Stella and the women of Barrio Agoho transform their spaces of structural exclusion into active environments for collective discussion. Within these spaces, the women engage with each other to openly challenge deeply entrenched patriarchal expectations. For Sr. Stella, this means questioning the conservative institutional rules that constrain a nun's participation in politics. For the women of Barrio Agoho, this means stepping out of their traditional roles as submissive homemakers to stand on the frontlines. Ultimately, this active engagement serves as a powerful form of gendered political education. For Sr. Stella and the women of Agoho, the factory picket line becomes their actual classroom. Their participation in this form of collective resistance forces a direct critique of power relationships and moves these actors beyond passive volunteering toward a deep, systemic analysis of oppression. By refusing to be polite, compliant onlookers, these women claim their place in the public sphere as assertive individuals who refuse to let democracy remain a spectator system. This total transformation is seen not only in the cinematic character of Sr. Stella Legaspi and the resilient women of Barrio Agoho but also in the real-world historical example of Sr. Mary John Mananzan. Their journey led to their transformation from passivity to claiming their place and agency in the public sphere as assertive individuals.

To conclude, Sr. Stella Legaspi and the women of Barrio Agoho are more than just cinematic characters and evolving symbols of social change. Their journey illustrates that power and agency are dynamic processes reflected through their transformation and active commitment to social justice. Their cinematic portrayals continue to empower Filipino women to courageously articulate their voices, advocate for justice, build communities, and strengthen collective action.

This paper advocates that *Sr. Stella L* must be viewed not merely as a cinematic achievement but as a vital medium through which intergenerational memory and historical legacy profoundly shape contemporary social and political consciousness. The film is a living testament that will continually inspire collective action and new beginnings in the face of ongoing struggles. Consequently, this paper recommends that future scholarship on feminist film studies continue to utilize and adapt Iris Marion Young's (2001) framework of structural inequality and the activist challenge to further explore the intricacies of women-led resistance in other Philippine cinematic works. Future research could explicitly leverage feminist critiques to contextualize her Western-derived model of collective responsibility within the unique socio-political realities and histories of collective mobilization in the Global South.

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3. **Declaration of Generative AI in Scientific Writing**
The author used Grammarly and Gemini's AI features to check for plagiarism, sentence structure, and grammar construction.
4. **Ethical Approval: Ethical Considerations**
This research employs non-obtrusive methods to provide a scholarly understanding and significant illustrations of qualitative data using films without the involvement of human subjects. The selected film was viewed and downloaded from legally accepted streaming sites and used only for the purpose of this research. This research strictly complies with the policies of the UST Graduate School in the conduct of ethical research and has been exempted from ethics clearance by the Research Ethics Committee of the UST Graduate School.

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