

Manila Women's Forum

A Network of Women Professionals

July 2004

Trailblazing a Filipina Feminism

By Melissa Howell Alipalo

Mary John Mananzan looked like the archetypical nun in her crisp gray habit, sitting quietly while observing a room full of chattering women gathered at host Heather Davenport's home for the Manila Women's Forum on June 21.

Appearances can be deceiving, though. Once in the guest speaker's chair, this Benedictine nun unraveled stories from her days as an activist against Marcos, her time in the mountains visiting the NPAs, and as a controversial advocate of women's reproductive rights in this predominantly conservative Roman Catholic country.

Mananzan also earned applause among the group for her unabashed criticism of the Catholic Church's male-dominated organizational structure and insensitive doctrines toward women. She also sparked brief debate on the destructive habits of Filipinas in their relationships with men that perpetuate female oppression.

"We are not naturally oppressed as women. We are socialized this way. This is made by people and must be undone by people," Mananzan said. Her contribution to the undoing of an unjust society began decades ago upon returning from graduate school abroad. "When I came home from Rome, it was martial law and nobody was interested in linguistic study," her field of study, she said.

It wasn't long before she was swept up in the growing public furor over



Mary John Mananzan

dictator Ferdinand Marcos' regime. While trying to help workers on strike, Mananzan experienced her "baptism of fire" into the activist's world. "I saw them (the military) beat up workers and drag them off to the detention centers. And it was then that I became an activist against Marcos," she said.

Despite any regime change or political progress made after Marcos' fall in 1986, Mananzan said she recognized a major oversight in "the movement," which was a lack of attention to women's rights. "Feminism was in the Philippines was equated with bra-burning, anti-man, lesbian, etc. And that's not right. The essence of Feminism for me is the recognition of the woman question and the commitment for change," she said. "We just wanted to be treated like humans with rights."

Filipino women needed empowerment, and that was only going to come with organization. From the seeds of an earlier organization called "Filipina," Mananzan helped found "GABRIELA Philippines," which she chaired for 18 years.

GABRIELA is the Philippines' oldest and largest national alliance with more than 200 women's organizations and 50,000 members, and has grown into an international organization with several chapters in the United States. It has been at the forefront of major political and social battles, particularly a

movement that ended a half-century of U.S military bases in the Philippines, which was seen as a victory against a myriad of social issues that surrounded the bases, such as prostitution, abuse, trafficking, and child abandonment.

Despite being a member of its religious order, Mananzan doesn't spare the Catholic Church her criticism. Calling the Church "the most chauvinistic" and "patriarchal" organization, Mananzan gained applause among attendees. "The church should be working for women, not against women," she said.

Reproductive rights is one area Mananzan doesn't see the Church helping women. While advocating virginity, she is appalled by the way women feel like trash when they are raped or are incest victims because they are no longer virgins, even if not through their own fault. She recognizes women's call for women's rights to contraceptives. She understands the feeling of women being pushed to the corner regarding the matter.

Speaking out on behalf of women without the choice has cost her negative media coverage and controversy, but not enough to shut her up or stop her. Mananzan has (*Continued on p. 4*)

Next MWF Meeting

When: 6:30 p.m., Monday
July 19, 2004

What: Cyndy Tan-Jarabata, President of Advocates for Youth Foundation Philippines, will speak about their campaign to prevent teen pregnancy through awareness raising and providing assistance to abused girls.

Where: Marty Plumly's home, 141 Luan, Ayala Alabang, Muntinlupa 1780

Bring: A contribution to the potluck dinner.

August meeting: 6:30 p.m., Monday August 16, 2004



Voice of the Chair

By Lisa Kircher Lumbao

Ed. Note: This was circulated through the Internet. It is a sobering and I believe correct view of what we should be working for as feminists.

Barnard Commencement 2004 Speech by Barbara Ehrenreich

It is a total thrill to share this day with you today. I really feel honored to participate. How many of you are parents of graduates? What I'm really curious about is how you managed to get here today, after paying all that money for tuition – Greyhound bus? I put two kids thru Ivy League myself, which meant I had to hitchhike to their commencement ceremonies.

I had another speech prepared for today – all about the cost of college and how the doors to higher education are closing to all but the wealthy. It was a good speech – lots of laugh lines – but 2 weeks ago something came along that wiped the smile right off my face. You know, you saw them too – the photographs of American soldiers sadistically humiliating and abusing detainees in Iraq.

These photos turned my stomach – yours too, I'm sure. But they did something else to me: they broke my heart. I had no illusions about the United States mission in Iraq, but it turns out that I did have some illusions about women.

There was the photo of Specialist Sabrina Harman smiling an impish little smile and giving the thumbs sign from behind a pile of naked Iraqi men – as if to say, "Hi mom, here I am in Abu Ghraib!"

We've gone from the banality of evil...to the cuteness of evil.

There was the photo of Private First Class Lynndie England dragging a

naked Iraqi man on a leash. She's cute too, in those cool cammy pants and high boots. He's grimacing in pain. If you were doing PR for al Qaeda, you couldn't have staged a better picture to galvanize misogynist Islamic fundamentalists around the world.

And never underestimate the misogyny of the real enemy, which was never the Iraqis; it was and should be the Al Qaeda-type fundamentalist extremists: Two weeks ago in eastern Afghanistan, suspected Taliban members (I thought we had defeated them, but never mind)...poisoned three little girls for the crime of going to school. That seems to be the attitude in that camp: In the case of women: better dead than well-read.

But here in these photos from Abu Ghraib, you have every Islamic fundamentalist stereotype of Western culture – all nicely arranged in one hideous image – imperial arrogance, sexual depravity...and gender equality.

Now we don't know whether women were encouraged to participate. All we know is they didn't say no. Of the 7 US soldiers now charged with the abuse of prisoners in Abu Ghraib, 3 are women: Harman, England and Megan Ambuhl.

Maybe I shouldn't have been so shocked – certainly not about the existence of abuse. Reports of this and similar abuse have been leaking out of Guantanamo and immigrant detention centers in NYC for over a year. We know, if we've been paying attention, that similar kinds of abuse, including sexual humiliation, are not unusual in our own vast US prison system.

We know too, that good people can do terrible things under the right circumstances. This is what psychologist Stanley Milgram found in his famous experiments in the 1960s. Sabrina and Lynndie are not congenitally evil people. They are working class women who wanted to go to college and knew the military as the quickest way in that direction. Once they got in, they wanted to fit in.

And I shouldn't be surprised either because I never believed that women are innately less aggressive than men. I have argued this repeatedly – once with the famously macho anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon. When he kept insisting that women are just too nice and incapable of combat, I answered him the best way I could: I asked him if he wanted to step outside...

I have supported full opportunity for women within the military, in part because – with rising tuition – it's one

of the few options around for low-income young people.

I opposed the first Gulf War in 1991, but at the same time I was proud of our servicewomen and delighted that their presence irked their Saudi hosts. Secretly, I hoped that the presence of women would eventually change the military, making it more respectful of other people and their cultures, more capable of genuine peace keeping.

That's what I thought, but I don't think that any more. A lot of things died with those photos. The last moral justification for the war with Iraq died with those photos. First the justification was the supposed weapons of mass destruction. Then it was the supposed links between Saddam and Osama bin Laden – those links were never found either. So the final justification was that we had removed an evil dictator who tortured his own people. As recently as April 30, George Bush exulted that the torture chambers of Iraq were no longer operating. Well, it turns out they were just operating under different management. We didn't displace Saddam Hussein; we replaced him.

And when you throw in the similar abuses in Afghanistan and Guantanamo, in immigrant detention centers and US prisons, you see that we have created a spreading regime of torture – an empire of pain.

But there's another thing that died for

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The Manila Women's Forum

The Manila Women's Forum (MWF) is a cross-cultural network for women. It provides opportunities to build friendships, to talk to women of various cultures, and to share information about resources. Our meetings are intended to provide intellectual stimulation and lead to personal and professional development. All women are welcome to join. The current officers are **Lisa Lumbao**, Chair, Programs, Treasurer, and Newsletter. **Penny Poole**, Programs, Newsletter. **Susan Nishihira**, Programs. **Heather Davenport**, Database. **Beulah P. Taguiwalo**, Newsletter, Website.

Cost of membership is P300 per year. Members receive a copy of the current mailing list in addition to the newsletter, which is also sent to non-members. A contribution is collected at each monthly meeting: P20 for members, and P40 for non-members. Please contact Lisa Lumbao at Tel. 818-2887 or 813-0168, or at lumbao@mozcom.com for more information about MWF.

Visit our website – a work in progress
www.geocities.com/manilawomensforum

(*Barnard... Continued from page 2*)

me in the last couple of weeks – a certain kind of feminism or, perhaps I should say, a certain kind of feminist naiveté.

It was a kind of feminism that saw men as the perpetual perpetrators, women as the perpetual victims, and male sexual violence against women as the root of all injustice. Maybe this sort of feminism made more sense in the 1970s. Certainly it seemed to make sense when we learned about the rape camps in Bosnia in the early 90s. There was a lot of talk about women then – I remember because I was in the discussions – about rape as an instrument of war and even war as an extension of rape.

I didn't agree, but I didn't disagree very loudly either. There seemed to be at least some reason to believe that male sexual sadism may somehow be deeply connected to our species' tragic propensity for violence.

That was before we had seen female sexual sadism in action.

But it's not just the theory of this naïve feminism that was wrong. So was its strategy and vision for change. That strategy and vision for change rested on the assumption, implicit or stated outright, that women are morally superior to men. We had a lot of debates over whether it was biology or conditioning that made women superior – or maybe the experience of being a woman in a sexist culture. But the assumption of superiority was beyond debate. After all, women do most of the caring work in our culture, and in polls are consistently less inclined toward war than men.

Now I'm not the only one wrestling with that assumption today. Here's Mary Jo Melone, a columnist in the St. Petersburg Times, writing on May 7: "I can't get this picture of [Pfc. Lynndie] England out of my head because this is not how women are expected to behave. Feminism taught me 30 years ago that not only had women gotten a raw deal from men, but that we were morally superior to them."

Now the implication of this assumption was that all we had to do to make the world a better place – kinder, less violent, more just – was to assimilate into what had been, for so many centuries, the world of men.

We would fight so that women could become the CEOs, the senators, the generals, the judges and opinion-makers – because that was really the only fight we had to undertake.

KaWoMeNaN

**Selected and Edited
by Beaulah P. Taguiwalo**

"I learned that it is the weak who are cruel, and that gentleness is to be expected only from the strong."

– Leo Rosten

Girls' cruelty can be deadly

Girls may be biologically hard-wired to engage in sophisticated, non-violent forms of aggression that can hurt just as much as a punch in the face from a boy... Indirect aggression among young girls includes gossip, backbiting and social isolation, which researchers say can drive victims to suicide in extreme cases. – The Leader-Post (Regina)

Because once they gained power and authority, once they had achieved a critical mass within the institutions of society, women would naturally work for change.

That's what we thought, even if we thought it unconsciously. And the most profound thing I have to say to you today, as a group of brilliant young women poised to enter the world – is that it's just not true.

You can't even argue, in the case of Abu Ghraib, that the problem was that there just weren't ENOUGH women in the military hierarchy to stop the abuses.

The prison was directed by a woman, General Janis Karpinski. The top US intelligence official in Iraq, who was also responsible for reviewing the status of detainees prior to their release, was a woman, Major Gen. Barbara Fast.

And the US official ultimately responsible for the managing the occupation of Iraq since last October was Condoleezza Rice.

What we have learned, once and for all, is that a uterus is not a substitute for a conscience; menstrual periods are not the foundation of morality.

This does not mean gender equality isn't worth fighting for for its own sake. It is. And I will keep fighting for it as long as I live.

Gender equality cannot, all alone, bring about a just and peaceful world.

What I have finally come to understand, sadly and irreversibly, is that the kind of feminism based on an assumption of moral superiority on the part of women is a lazy and self-

Women & Cruelty

"...when placed in positions of power, are women altogether different? History is not without instances of women who wielded power and who indulged in the utmost cruelty. Two examples may suffice: Boadicea, who inflicted untold tortures and mutilated the women of London, and Mary, the daughter of Henry VIII and predecessor of Elizabeth I, who had some 300 people burnt alive as heretics. From literature, we have Lady Macbeth, who was as merciless as her husband, if not more! From our day-to-day life, we have any number of cases of women, who torture and burn their daughters in law, showing no mercy whatsoever."

– From *Women & Cruelty*, by Samra Rahman, columnist

indulgent form of feminism.

Self-indulgent because it assumes that a victory for a woman – whether a diploma, a promotion, a right to serve alongside men in the military – is ipso facto – by its very nature – a victory for humanity.

And lazy because it assumes that we have only one struggle – the struggle for gender equality – when in fact we have many more. The struggles for peace, for social justice and against imperialist and racist arrogance... cannot, I am truly sorry to say, be folded into the struggle for gender equality.

Women do not change institutions simply just by assimilating into them. But – and this is the "but" on which all my hopes hinge – a CERTAIN KIND of woman can still do that – and this is where you come in.

We need a kind of woman who can say NO, not just to the date rapist or overly persistent boyfriend, but to the military or corporate hierarchy within which she finds herself. We need a kind of woman who doesn't want to be one of the boys when the boys are acting like sadists or fools.

And we need a kind of woman who isn't trying to assimilate, but to infiltrate – and subvert the institutions she goes into. YOU can be those women. And as the brightest and best educated women of your generation, you better be.

First, because our nation is in such terrible trouble – hated worldwide, and not just by the fundamentalist fanatics.

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The Women's Ecology and Wholeness Farm

An important function of the Women Studies Institute and Sr. Mary John Mananzan's work is the Women and Ecology Wholeness Farm in Mendez, Cavite. A self-sustaining retreat center that features organic farming methods and alternative energy sources, it is host to male and female visitors and groups for either day trips or extended stays.

The farm is located at Barangay Asis, Muzon, Mendez, Cavite - about a 90 minute drive from Manila. Its grounds include a mushroom hut, butterfly sanctuary, vast gardens, fish-ponds, meditation areas and a spa. The day-trip fee is P120 per person. For overnight stays, the cost is P550 per person for dormitory accommodations or P600 per person for double occupancy rooms. The rate includes three meals and two snacks. Massage services are also available for P250 per hour.

For inquiries and reservations, call the institute at 522-3551 during weekday office hours or the farm at (046) 861-0762. MWF is planning to organize a weekend retreat for interested members. More information will be sent out through e-mail.

(Traiblazing... From page 1)

helped build a women's crisis center for raped and battered women, written bookshelves on feminist theology, spoken at hundreds of conferences and mobilized resources to empower the young and old.

One of her most recent contributions to Filipina liberation developed while still president of St. Scholastica College, an exclusive all-girls school in Manila.

She wasn't seeing the kind of political and feminist consciousness in the students she had hoped for, she said. In 1988, she helped introduce a women's studies course, which was modest but the first of its kind in the region. It soon became a required subject and resulted in the creation of the Institute for Women's Studies.

"It's not what they learn academically," Mananzan said, "but what they learn through self confrontation."

Esteem building became a recognizable key to teaching women to protect themselves and demand respect from the men in their lives. Without this confidence, Mananzan said women perpetuate their own oppression by fulfilling demeaning roles that society has taught them is natural, expected and right.

Her comment, "Filipina women are spoilers of men," raised mixed reactions throughout the room. One attendee said she thought this tendency exists because women lack support. Another attendee said she saw the tendency as self-survival: "If a woman does not spoil her husband, she is afraid another

woman will." With a strong female support system, though, another attendee said there wouldn't be this kind of disempowering competition.

This kind of debate is what you can imagine Mananzan is working toward. "Feminist theology," she said, "reaches to the grassroots level with women to get them to think for themselves." ■

(Barnard... From page 3)

My version of patriotism is simple: When the powerful no longer act responsibly, then it is our responsibility to take the power away from them.

You have to become tough-minded activists for change because the entire feminist project is also in terrible trouble worldwide. That project, which is minimally about the achievement of equality with men, is threatened by fundamentalisms of all kinds – Christian as well as Islamic.

But we cannot successfully confront that threat without a moral vision that goes beyond gender equality. To cite an old – and far from naïve – feminist saying: "If you think equality is the goal, your standards are too low."

It is not enough to be equal to men, when the men are acting like beasts. It is not enough to assimilate. We need to create a world worth assimilating into.

I'm counting on you. I want YOU to be the face of American women that the world sees – not those of Sabrina or Megan or Lynndie or Condoleezza.

Don't let me down. Take your hard-won diplomas, your knowledge and your talents and go out there and RAISE HELL! ■

MWF Newsletter
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