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# Manila Women's Forum

A Network of Women Professionals

March 2009

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## Shunning Stereotypes About Muslims

By Shari Virjee Tañada

**O**n February 16, those attending the Manila Women's Forum meeting had the opportunity to explore stereotypes and misconceptions about Muslims and Islam. Fe Kagahastian, a Filipino currently working in Kabul, Afghanistan as Adviser for MISFA (a multilateral microcredit agency), led the evening's talk. Her work in media and communications in Manila, Abu Dhabi, New York and now Kabul has required her to navigate across cultural biases, bridges and gulfs of understanding between the Philippines, the United States and different parts of the Middle East.

The Gulf War of 1990 was Fe's first experience in an Islamic culture. That was also when she discovered that the Oxford English Dictionary defined Filipina as "domestic helper." This was shocking; Fe has always been proud to be Filipino. However, having recently returned to Manila from Kabul, Fe has been equally shocked by the negative stereotypes her Filipino friends have  
*(Continued on page 2)*



*Above: Locals and expat women wearing shalwar kameez, to adapt to the socio-cultural and religious norms of the country.*

**A**fghan women are not encouraged to work for international organizations. Fe called her female Afghan colleagues "brave," adding that cultural exchange occurs on a daily basis in her work place. Fe can converse in *Dari*, one of the two national languages of Afghanistan.

**FEBRUARY MWF Meeting** ■ **When:** 6:30 p.m., Monday, March 16, 2009. **Where:** Joanne Finnamore-Crorkin's home, 4909 Pasay Road, Dasmariñas Village, Makati. **What:** Marine biologists herald the Philippines as the earth's center of marine biodiversity. Caron de Mars, Science Officer at the U.S. Embassy, will speak about a recent National Geographic expedition to help find new species in unexplored deep seas near Mindanao. Caron will share her photos and stories from the trip, including discovering a new species of worm. **Bring:** Something to share for the potluck dinner.  
**April Meeting:** Monday, 2009 April 20.

*(Shunning... from page 1)*  
about Muslims. Since Kabul is now her home, and she has married a Muslim with Afghan/Danish roots, she has been grappling with these issues on a more personal level.

Recent reunions with family, and with friends—graduates from Manila’s elite schools (Ateneo, La Salle, UP)—have revealed numerous mispercep-

tions being held by educated Filipinos about Islam and Muslims. One of her old university chums, in an effort to explain his negative view of Muslims, said that most of the petty crimes in Metro Manila are committed by Muslims.

This surprised Fe because she knew it was not true, having covered the crime beat in Manila as a journalist,

and because her friend offered nothing to substantiate his claim.

Fe began asking herself, what are the fundamental factors shaping such stereotypes? Despite the large number of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) in Islamic countries, why is there so little (if any) interest in cultural exchange? What are the implications

*(Continued on page 4)*

*Below: Breadmakers. Facing page, top photos: Woman wearing a burqa. Bottom: Four women in shalwar kameez.*



### **Salwar kameez**

Salwar kameez (also spelled shalwar kameez or shalwar qameez) is a traditional dress worn by both women and men in South Asia. Salvars or shalvars are loose pajama-like trousers. The legs are wide at the top, and narrow at the bottom. The kameez is a long shirt or tunic. In Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, the garment is worn by both sexes.

### **Islamic dress controversy in Western Europe**

Face-covering Islamic clothing has become a controversial political issue in Western Europe, and some intellectuals and political groups advocate prohibition, for various reasons. In 2004, France was the first country to abolish the wearing of the burqa.

Islamic dress that covers the face of women has also caused controversy in the UK. A senior

member of the government, Jack Straw, asked Muslim women from his constituency to remove any veils covering their faces during face-to-face meetings with him. He explained to the media that this was a request, not a demand, and that he made sure that a woman staffer remained in the room during the meeting. A media furor followed. Some Muslim groups said that they understood his concerns, but others rejected them as prejudicial.



*(Shunning... from page 2)*

for future generations who will face more multiculturalism and globalization? Is the Filipino attitude toward Muslims and Islam because we were brought up as Catholics, or because we're so closely tied to the US? How can Filipinos working abroad become ambassadors of peace and cross-cultural understanding? How might things (attitudes, perceptions, engagement) change with US President Barack Obama in power?

These questions served as the backdrop for the evening's lively and candid discussion.

### **Muslims in the Philippines**

Philippine Muslims are distinguished from Christian Filipinos not only by their profession of Islam but also by their evasion of 300 years of Spanish colonial domination.

They share their religious culture with the neighboring majority Muslim nations of Indonesia and Malaysia.

They also retain certain elements of an indigenous pre-Islamic and precolonial lowland Philippine culture—in dress, music, political traditions, folk beliefs and practices—that are similar to those found elsewhere in Southeast Asia but are today mostly absent among Christian Filipinos.

We also got a glimpse into life in Afghanistan through the photos and stories Fe shared about the way of life in the war-torn country and her work with MISFA, a multilateral microfinance investment support facility that channels donor funds to small entrepreneurs, who are mainly poor women. For more information, visit [www.misfa.org.af](http://www.misfa.org.af)

Some information on Afghanistan shared by the guest speaker:

- There's a big gap between the rich and the poor, with the rich—warlords, corrupt government officials—allowed to amass ill-gotten

### **MISFA**

Microfinance Investment and Support Facility, Afghanistan (MISFA) was set up in 2003 at the invitation of the Afghan government—to get donor coordination right from the start and avoid the counterproductive efforts that have emerged from conflicting donor objectives in other post-conflict situations.

It was the first facility of its kind, pooling diverse donor funding mechanisms and converting them into streamlined, flexible support to microfinance institutions in Afghanistan, tailored to local priorities and accompanied by technical assistance and strong performance monitoring.

wealth with impunity.

- Only 28 percent of the Afghan population is literate.
- 68 percent of microcredit borrowers are women.
- MISFA has nearly half a million clients across Afghanistan, who use the money for a number of income-generating activities, including shopkeeping, sewing and embroidery.

## **Manila Women's Forum**

Manila Women's Forum (MWF) is a cross-cultural network for women. It provides opportunities to build friendships, talk to women of various cultures, and 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: **Amy Alexander**, Message Board. **Julia Holz**, Treasurer, Membership and Programs. **Cecilia Leung**, Programs. **Lisa Lumbao**, Chair. **Lisa Stuart**, Message Board Moderator. **Beulah P. Taguiwalo**, Newsletter, Website. **Shari Virjee**, Programs, Message Board.

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. For more information about MWF, please contact Lisa Lumbao at Tel. 813-0168, or at [lumbao@mozcom.com](mailto:lumbao@mozcom.com).

Visit our website – a work in progress  
[www.geocities.com/manilawomensforum](http://www.geocities.com/manilawomensforum)

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