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Filipino
American
Women's
Network

Conference
March 3-5, 2000
San Francisco
Bay Area

WOMEN RISING

By Ananda Tinio

**Not only do
Filipino American
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Famed author Susan Faludi once asked, "If American women are so equal, why do they represent two-thirds of all poor adults? If women have 'made it,' then why are nearly 80 percent of working women still stuck in traditional 'female' jobs—as secretaries, administrative 'support' workers and salesclerks? If women 'have it all,' then why don't they have the most basic requirements to achieve equality in the work force? If women are so 'free,' why are their reproductive freedoms in greater jeopardy? Why do they still shoulder 70 percent of the household chores?" It was with these quoted words that Mona Lisa Yuchengco welcomed the delegates of the Filipino American Women's Network 2000 conference, stressing that to add being Filipino American to the equation of womanhood is to magnify such concerns tenfold. Not only do Filipino American women have to deal with issues particular to their gender, they must come to terms with issues particular to their culture and status as a minority as well.

In 1980, a group of Filipino American women posed the same daunting questions and came up with a vision: to establish an organization that would address concerns particular to Filipino American women. Calling themselves the Filipino American Women's Network (FAWN), the organization aimed to battle institutionalized racism, especially in the workplace, pool resources so as to stay abreast of sociopolitical issues, and build a cultural bridge linking them to the greater community. Now in its 20th year of existence, FAWN's constituency has grown nationwide, but the organization finds itself still wrestling with the same issues. It's in light of such a state of affairs that FAWN convened for its biannual conference at the San Mateo Marriott in the San Francisco Bay Area last March 3 to 5.

With hopes of enlightening, educating, and empowering, FAWN 2000 was a perfect networking opportunity, offering roughly 300 participants of varying ages and



Political empowerment panel speakers Tessie Guillermo and Gloria Megina Ochoa.

solidarity. The conference conducted interactive panels, workshops, dialogues and provided entertainment over a three-day period. Facilitated by Ph.D.s, activists, politicians, business women—icons of the Filipino American community—each panel proposed empowerment via several vehicles: family and culture, education, politics, business and economics, health and community.

The first session to kickstart the conference revolved around family and

cultural empowerment. Keynote speaker Dr. Ruth Cobb Hill, a psychologist from UC Berkeley, stressed that for people of color, especially immigrants, the psyche inevitably experiences tension when existing on the threshold of two disparate cultures. The Filipina must identify her place and role in the American cultural context. The remaining speakers—Dr. Patricia Heras, Trinity Ordonez, Joy Cañeda and Dr. Penelope Flores—who spoke on such issues as teenagers in crisis, homosexuality and civil rights, domestic violence and Filipino culture, respectively stressed that to get to the point of self-definition, the Filipina must take several factors into account: family dynamics, cultural values both at odds and in accordance with the mainstream, sexual orientation, and aging. Once she reconciles with issues at home, the Filipina can then empower herself outside of her immediate social realm—that is, through the next logical steps: education and politics.

The subsequent panel, comprised of Dr. Araceli Suzara, Leni Juarez, Dr. Rosemarie del Rosario, Myrna Araneta and Dr. Allyson Tintiangco, thus raised such issues as bilingual education, understanding the Fil-Am child, cross-cultural learning, the state of Philippine Studies in the U.S. and the proactive role parents should take in their children's education. Del Rosario, the most outspoken crowd-pleaser of the bunch, told parents that



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Speakers Sonia Aranza (left), Gloria T. Caoile (fifth from left), Dr. Joy Bruce (third from right), Gloria Megina Ochoa (second from right) and Vi Baluyot (right) pose with conference participants; (below) delegates to the conference included many members of the youth.



"public schools know nothing about Filipino culture," and that to leave education solely to the school system is typical of "the quagmire of contributing to our own oppression." Taking a proactive stance toward matters was a topic elucidated on by political forum speakers Gloria T. Caoile, Juanita Tamayo Lott, Gloria Megina Ochoa and Tessie Guillermo. The forum itself dealt with such topics as voting, the upcoming U.S. Census, the need to be an activist and policy advocacy. Caoile's fiery speech exposed FAWN's inherent political agenda of mobilizing the Fil-Am community. She and fellow panelists urged compatriots to get out the vote and fill out the Census. "Politics is a state of war," Caoile declared, and voting and participating in the Census represents the Filipino community in the political process. Adequate representation leads to the proliferation of resources and ultimately, power. On that note, the day concluded with various workshops, which featured a queer caucus, art in action workshop, cultural workshop, a dialogue on toxic waste in the Philippines and a workshop on setting up women's organizations.

The second day of the conference dealt with issues of business, health and spirituality and community. The professional and economic panelists—Cora M. Tellez, Perla Daly, Sonia Aranza, Evelyn Dilsaver and Rosemarie Consunji—expressed the need for women to use the internet to their advantage. Their presentations also dealt with the importance of investing, breaking the glass ceiling and how to resolve conflicts in the workplace. Daly, founder of bagongpinay.com (NewFilipina.com), told her success story of starting a website that offers a positive forum for Pinays on a global scale. Disheartened by the numerous websites revolving around the sex trafficking of Filipinas, Daly used the internet to promote a more empow-



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ered image of Filipinas—as role models, achievers, writers, artists, mothers and professionals. Tellez and Dilsaver also gave advice on how to bridge cultural gaps, what they called “the glass ceiling,” in the workplace. Tellez stressed that such cultural traits as having an “overworked sense of humility and modesty” and “being deferential to authority” may sometimes be counterproductive in the American workplace, and should therefore be downplayed. Dilsaver’s speech on conflict resolution echoed Tellez’ sentiment, emphasizing that asking for help doesn’t reflect negatively on the professional, but, rather, creates a support network.

Health panelists Dr. Gemma Guillermo, Sharie Soriano-Nereu, Melen McBride and Dr. Ofelia Dirige gave advice on how to improve one’s physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being by means of exercise, dealing with depression, and recognizing a higher, although not necessarily religious, power. Dirige presented healthier versions of Filipino cuisine, while Guillermo focused on ways of dealing with everyday stress and frustrating situations.

The community forum—Lillian Galedo, Lourdes Tancinco, Lynn Palma and France Viana—was the last of the conference’s panels, touching on such subjects as Filipino World War II veterans and their fight for equity, hate crimes and racial discrimination and Filipinos’ power as consumers. Viana gave perhaps the most eye-opening speech on power through consumerism. When an audience member said it was ironic that Gap, a corporation allegedly running sweatshops, donated T-shirts to FAWN, Viana commented, “You can persuade companies by approaching them as a consumer. As an activist, your agenda is clearly political, and corporations are less likely to listen. But as a consumer voicing the same complaints, the company sees you as having power through your pocketbook. For companies nowadays, ‘diversity’ has become a buzz word and an imperative.” The health, business and community empowerment panels outlined topics to be discussed in the later workshops:



(Above) Dr. Rosemarie del Rosario, a crowd favorite, gave a lively presentation during the education empowerment panel; Longtime FAWN members sing a song at the closing ceremonies to celebrate its 20th anniversary; **(from left)** Rosemarie del Rosario, Lina Susbilla, Dr. Penelope Flores, Linda Nietes, Alice Bulos, Alma Chand and Fely Santos.



Polly Cortez (left) and other delegates at the Girl Scouts of America booth; (below) members of the steering committee and "galavanting" committee at the Saturday gala dinner.



sional mentoring and breast cancer workshops.

The energy and aura of excitement created by FAWN 2000 culminated with Saturday's gala dinner, whereby the crowd was entertained by an amalgamation of arts and education. Members of dance company Teatro ng Tanan collaborated with acting troupe Tongue in A mood to present a never-before-seen dance performance based on Philippine folklore, and a comedy sketch combining the individual experiences of five Filipina Americans. Dealing with such topics as familial responsibility at a young age, eating disorders, teen sex, and becoming a legal U.S. citizen, the five

performers gave moving monologues that brought FAWN's feminist issues to artistic light. R&B singing group Pinay followed the skits with an inspirational song, paving the way for final speaker of the evening, political heavyweight Irene Natividad.

As the only Filipina American to have been elected head of the National Women's Political Caucus, Natividad's speech at the Saturday dinner seemed to echo Susan Faludi's concerns, recapping much of FAWN 2000's pressing issues and sharing invaluable lessons of empowerment. Despite the large female population in the United States, "women," Natividad pointed out, "are not yet in charge—not in government, not in business." For instance, although 80 percent of buying decisions in the United States are made by women, only 5 percent of executive positions are held by women, according to *The Wall Street Journal*. Natividad also noted the absence of women in government, citing the existence of only three female governors and that out of 100 senators, only nine are women. Only 12 percent of

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Congress, moreover, is comprised of women. Natividad's advice to the Filipina American crowd? Go global, be political, be market and tech-savvy. First off, be political by getting out the vote. "As women and as Filipino Americans, we need to vote. Each and every one should encourage those around us to vote. Politics is based on numbers." Second, take advantage of the opportunities technology offers. "Technology equalizes everybody. And information is power. Technology must be used by us to create a level playing field." That said, Natividad received a standing ovation.

The conference attracted delegates from all over the country, like the ones from Florida, Ohio and Georgia



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Members of Teatro ng Tanan and Tongue in A Mood perform at the Saturday gala dinner; (below) members of FAWN-Minnesota came in large numbers to the conference.



The dinner concluded with the Babaylan award ceremony. Stemming from tribal language, babaylan was a term reserved for sages, medicine women, priestesses, leaders—in essence, pillars of various tribal communities in the pre-colonial Philippines. FAWN adopted the term for an award given to active, up-and-coming Filipino American women. This year, FAWN awarded Babaylan plaques to singing group Pinay, bagongpinay.com founder Perla Daly, Immigration and Civil Rights Advisor to the President, Irene Bueno and Asian Pacific Islander American Health Forum executive director Tessie Guillermo for their outstanding contributions to the Fil-Am community. Upon receiving her award, Clinton Administration advisor Irene Bueno broke down in tears as she thanked her family and fellow Fil-Am supporters for the surprising honor.



The heightened mood of the dinner signified the end of FAWN 2000, which bid a fond farewell to its participants the following day. Reactions to the conference were, for the most part, positive. "It was so inspiring to be surrounded by all these mentors," said Verna Fabella, who is studying for her Ph.D. in clinical psychology in Los Angeles, California. "Everything about the event—the speakers, the issues addressed, even the entertainment—was a success. I was able to exchange information with a wide variety of people."

But with only two-and-a-half days to cover a multitude of topics, FAWN organizers found it hard to articulate the agendas of every interest group. On the final day of FAWN 2000, a certain time was allotted for an informal dialogue, whereby participants could make criticisms and suggestions about what FAWN did or did not do, and speak about issues they want FAWN to cover and elaborate on in the 2002 conference. Luzviminda Carpenter, a biracial student hailing from a military house-

(Above) Marie Romero of Arkipelago Books and Marissa Frankenfield of Magenic Technologies attended as both vendors and delegates; FAWN 2000 steering committee members (from left) Vida Benavides, Chair Mana Lisa Yuchengco, Laami C. Almendrala, Lily Ruiz and Yima Tintiangco.



Student volunteers from the Filipino Sorority Kappa Psi Epsilon prepare to welcome speakers to the conference.



hold, stressed the need to address class issues and being multiracial. Sil Savellano, an openly gay professional from Alameda, California, pointed out that when FAWN travels outside the very accepting, open-minded context of the San Francisco Bay Area, the organization should always keep in mind the concerns of gay, lesbian and bisexual Filipino Americans. Above all, despite the high turn out of college students, a point of contention among the youth present seemed to be the lack of speakers addressing youth issues. Youth delegate Camille Montilla said, "As a youth myself, I believe we are all at the same level. I think about everything—my background, my education. Everything." Business empowerment panelist Sonia Aranza, however, best summed up the conference's message. "Whatever you do," she advised, "do



Trinity Ordon spoke on the emergence of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender activism in the Philippines.