

CONVERSATION □ Carmen G. Nakpil

'Womanpower is wasted on menial tasks'

Best known as a writer, Carmen G. Nakpil recently agreed to be a director in the executive board of the National Commission on the Role of Women. Created by a presidential decree, the Commission has three goals: equality before the law, change in education and the appointment of women in policy-and-decision-making jobs. They are goals which Mrs. Nakpil has constantly and at times provocatively clarified in her writings, most of which are found in her books, *Woman Enough* and *A Question of Identity*. As a writer and as representative of the Philippines to various international conferences, Mrs. Nakpil travels to many countries of the world. She is founding director of the Writers Union of the Philippines. She has served as chairman of the National Historical Commission. In this conversation with Monina A. Mercado, managing editor of *Archipelago*, she re-emphasizes her beliefs and working goals for women's rights.

In discussing women's rights, would you say that man is the villain?

No, he just needs to be re-educated.

Partly also, it is the women's fault. We have spoiled the men. Not only have we spoiled them, but the majority of women do not like the idea of talking about their rights.

But why?

They are afraid that these rights will turn into duty. The price for freedom and independence comes high. Most women are not willing to pay it.

Perhaps this reluctance to talk about rights is a ploy to keep a fact under cover, the fact that women tend to be the strong party in the Filipino family.

Tradition and history for Malay women in general, and not just for Filipino women, make them different from other Oriental women. Several anthropologists and historians have said that they have a certain enterprising spirit which makes them more independent and gives them more integrity and status in life. Thus, the Filipino woman has always lived by a sovereignty based on her fellowship with man. She is self-sacrificing, but she is no fool. She has always been her own woman.

Millions of documents of Philippine history attest to this. Pigafetta, Magellan, the conquistadores, the friars and the encomenderos, found queens and princesses, shaded by parasols and by masculine deference, priestesses and healers who were wise and self-possessed.

History and tradition bear out that the Filipino woman has always been assertive, hasn't she?

Legend, history and the facts of women added to social equality a superiority of passion, for many of them believed—according to an old Spanish chronicle—that after death, a woman could be helped to cross the river of the Great Beyond only by those men who had loved.

In more recent times, how were equality and superiority indicated by Filipino women?

With the exception of a tiny European upper class, the women of the colonial period in fact resisted the enfeebling effects of foreign rule and foreign culture much better than the men, perhaps because the letter had borne the brunt of it.

The women retained their devious freedom, their enormous energy, a native industry and talent for enterprise, and most of all, the tradition of seeing themselves as the conscience, the giver of moral courage and the full partner of Filipino men.

In the politics of revolt, the Filipino women were avengers and inciters, as well as helpmates. In the rosters of the secret society of the Katipunan, they were victims but also proud aggressors, muses as well as warriors. At the beginning of this century, an American jurist wrote, in a tone of astonishment, that the Filipina was "the best man in the Philippines."

What then is there for Filipinas to complain about?

Philippine laws and the civil code are full of legal inequalities still. While Filipino women are relatively better off than many women from other countries, before the law we do not enjoy the sort of position that you would expect from our performance outside of the confines of the law.

The opinion is sometimes expressed that in a developing country, the battle of the sexes is not really the most important problem, rather it is economic upliftment, a concern shared equally by men and women.

I never disagree with that. But it has to be one of the most important questions, more important perhaps in a developing country than in a developed country.

By the legal inequalities and by the cultural attitudes in a developing country, half of the manpower—or the womanpower—available is wasted by not allowing women to share in the development, by putting them aside, by giving them all the menial tasks when they have the talent and the capability of contributing precisely to this economic upliftment that is desired.

In the Philippines, there are statistics which show that Filipino women are more highly educated than the men. In graduate school alone, 71 percent of the students are women, 29 percent are men. In the college level, 55 percent of students are women and 45 percent are men. It is only in kindergarten where there are as many boys as there are girls.

However, the statistics also show that only one percent of jobs in the managerial, executive or policy-making caliber is held by women. That is a waste of educated womanpower.

You are aware, of course, that

some women do not want to work. It is, in fact, considered a mark of status or prestige in some quarters to be a lady of leisure.

I lectured once at a university where most of the coeds come from so-called exclusive convent schools. I was asked, "If her husband makes enough money, why should a woman work?" I said, "Do you mean to say that women should work only out of economic necessity? I believe that work is part of life. Not to work is to waste human resources. Whether your husband can afford to keep you or not still you should work."

While that attitude is common among certain women, it is not general with all Filipino women, is it?

Curiously enough, it is the westernization of Filipino women that gives a negative aspect to the picture. It is the upper class women, the so-called elite who are apathetic, who do not join and who do not do their share. This may be from Spanish as well as American influences. I find that women's lib, for instance, is a westernized value and a westernized movement. The mass of Filipino women who are not westernized, the rural women from the middle and lower income groups, are untouched by westernized sex-typing roles.

Most social commentators on the situation of Filipino women do make such a distinction between the attitudes of the so-called upper class from that of the middle or lower groups.

Another fine distinction has to be made. The upper class partially educated women are the most victimized by westernization. But there is a very thin elite that has common ground with the lower group—in the dynamism, the independence, and the enterprise that they share. Somewhere in between they meet and come full circle.

Is the weighing factor Westernization then—or something else?

It seems to be some kind of partial or partial westernization. By that I mean colonization, a period of westernization which seems to have enslaved or brought down the status of women. The exception are women who are very highly educated and who do imagine themselves to be highly westernized. It is they who have larger meetings and share with rural women in the sense of having the same kind of attitude and spirit.

What is this attitude or spirit?

They both see work as part of life. They think that work is something that a human being has to do—not just as something honorable or dishonorable or connected with earning a living or needing to earn money.

But they look at work from different eyes, as it were, don't they?

Even if they start from different points, in the attitude they have common ground. One group starts with being highly educated and highly westernized; the other side starts from the indigenous, the indigenous independent strain of the Malay women. Somehow they meet on the same plane: they think of themselves not only as having rights but as having duties.

As a matter of fact, I think that it is on that plane where for these Filipino women, rights and duties have become the same, one and the same thing. A right is a duty. A duty is a right.

That is a marvelous view.

That is my view of it. I think I have changed my position since some years ago. I base it on evidence of surveys and many other studies that have recently been made, which are revealing, comforting but in a way, strange.

For instance, there was a survey conducted by the Philippine Women's University where Margaret Mead was present at the summing up. The discussants were dividing the groups into: lower income, middle, and upper class.

The report on the upper class group showed that they tended to be the most

apathetic, the most self-indulgent, the most ready to withdraw from community life into their own private comfortable world.

On the other hand, the report on the lower class indicated otherwise. This is evident in the barangay, many of which are headed by women. The national president of the barangay is a woman.

There it can be seen that in the rural areas, it seems to be the women who seem to be stronger, who feel it is their duty to do something for the family, to contribute to the family funds, to take on responsibility. This seems to be true of the middle class as well as lower income groups.

What are your personal goals for being so outspoken about women's rights?

I think I have achieved all my personal goals.

Nevertheless, you are outspoken still. Why?

I think it is a matter of temperament. Nothing in my family background warrants it.

Your personal goals were so magnificently achieved, what are your ultimate goals for others—for men as well as for women?

I would like to re-educate the men out of sex-typing, particularly in work.

My other goal is to get women out in the open. If they want to be a cabinet secretary or a justice of the supreme court, then come out openly about it and stop using underhand methods. Stop using feminine attraction to get what they want.

The representation of women in public life should be more equitable.

More than half of the Philippine population is composed of women. Therefore half of the cabinet should be women, half of the judiciary should be women, half of the security council and of the foreign policy council should be women, half of the ambassadors should be women. That is my ultimate goal. Is it too visionary?

Even if women come out in the open and assume deserved roles in public life, they can never abandon their primary role as mothers and child-rearers.

Of course not, that is biology. But if a woman feels that her husband is better at taking care of the children, he should take care of the children.

How will you bring up a girl?

Treat her like a boy. Treat her as a person without any consideration of her sex—that because she is what she is, she has to be coddled or taught to serve the men. Just treat her like a human being. Don't take her sex into consideration.

How would you bring up a boy?

In exactly the same way—as a human being.

What contribution do you think women can give to public life, for instance, to politics?

The pat answer would be their intuition, their gentleness, their compassion. But I think it is the men who are soft and gentle and that it is the women who are ruthless. Women are ruthless because of the vengeer that they have learned in order to get their way. I find that it is the men who are more sentimental and more emotional, who are more tender.

Are you saying that there are no qualities that are exclusive to women as women and to men as men?

If you remove environment, training and education, basically that is so. The only difference is biological.

Nevertheless there simply are jobs that women can't do. That is why the women themselves have reservations.

Do you mean this whole business that women can't be stevedores? We don't want to be stevedores. We are not complaining because we can't be stevedores. But we want to run the stevedoring company. □



"Representation of women in public life should be more equitable."