

# An Irishwoman's Diary

IRENE NATIVIDAD, the director of the 1992 Global Forum of Women, which opens today in Dublin, describes herself as "the major propellant" of the event. "I'm the crazy one who stuck with the idea in order to make it happen," she says.

"It has taken a major amount of effort. International gatherings of women are usually sponsored by international agencies and governments. This is totally voluntary. It will be the leanest international gathering of women and will show that women can come together without costing a fortune."

Contributions to the event have come from many large corporations, some of whom are sending high-powered women executives or directors as delegates to the forum. For example, the Hitachi Foundation is one of the contributing corporations and its president, an African-American woman, will be attending as a delegate.

Ms Natividad is clearly delighted at the calibre of delegates, which include politicians, senior academics, executives, writers, journalists and high-profile activists. "People are coming from places as far away as Fiji, the Philippines, Brazil, Taiwan and Russia; 43 countries are represented."

## Global Dialogue

"We made a commitment to allocate the bulk of the money raised to bringing in women leaders from developing countries so that indeed it would be a truly global dialogue."

Organising the forum has been Irene Natividad's main preoccupation for the past year, and she has organised most of the fund-raising herself. "It has been a long and painful year, but it is wonderful to see it come to fruition with such a stellar cast. There are so many women policymakers gathered together."

"I'm very proud of these women and one of the pleasures of putting this Forum together has been getting to know the kinds of leadership that women have brought to a variety of sectors around the world." She quotes a few examples: Marianne Yepez — the first woman member of the Supreme Court in Ecuador; Sharon Capeling-Alakija, director of the UN De-



*Ms Irene Natividad: organising to empower*

velopment Fund for Women; Betty Bigombe, a minister of state in Uganda; and our own Monica Barnes TD.

Forum themes were determined last July at a planning meeting where it was resolved to follow on from rather than overlap with the themes of other international women's events. "We did not want to reinvent the wheel," says Ms Natividad.

## Transformational Leaders

"We decided to focus on the leadership provided by women in a number of areas, to highlight solutions developed by some women, and that we would focus on seven major issues as opposed to addressing every issue on the map. Lastly, we decided to hold it in a country which had a woman head of state, whose leadership exemplified the kind of leadership that we believe in — transformational leadership that enables rather than dictates."

She compares this forum with other international women's conferences, such as the UN Conference in Nairobi in 1985 to mark the end of the UN Decade for Women. "Women came as part of official delegations. This is not the case with the forum, so women are free to state their position and ideas without feeling that they must adhere to a party line," says Ms Natividad, a member of the Democratic Party who feels at home outside Washington.

Irene Natividad was born in the Philippines and came to the

US at the age of 18 to study law at Long Island University. "There is a stereotype of the over-achieving Asian-American and to a certain extent I fit that stereotype."

"Asian-Americans usually excel in the professions and in music. I went the non-traditional route, taking early American literature at Columbia University (from 1972 to 1976) with the sole aim of being an academic." Her mother's remark on hearing this news was: "You want a doctorate to study novels?"

Her first introduction to politics came during Eugene McCarthy's presidential campaign in the late 1960s. She was active in organising Asian groups and women's groups, and retains those loyalties.

"I would organise to empower because I always felt that alone an individual was powerless but in a larger group you could have a voice, especially in a country as large as the US."

She is a former vice-chairwoman of the Asian Caucus of the Democratic Party and in fact flies from here on Sunday to the Democratic Party Convention where she's hosting a salute to women congressional candidates of colour.

## Women of Colour

"Women of colour are very important. If women find it hard, women of colour suffer the double whammy of race and gender discrimination. Race relations in the US have deteriorated and I think that women of colour could be the bridge in the dialogue between races."

Currently chairwoman of the National Commission on Working Women, Ms Natividad is also a former chairwoman of the National Women's Political Caucus, and built up many of her international contacts from that time. "There is a network of women who make things happen and I want to expose them to each other."

She hopes that the Forum will "underscore the great deal of female leadership around that should be tapped. Among the women themselves, I want an exchange of what is called best practices. Some of the most innovative solutions have come from developing nations with very little resources and I'd like for some of those solutions to be shared."

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