

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

ENCARNACION ALZONA, AN INDEFATIGABLE FEMINIST

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Looking back at the life of Encarnacion Alzona, one can not help but notice her precocious interest in the Filipino woman. She recounts that when she was in high school, she took part in a debate about whether or not women should be given the right to vote. She took the side of the affirmative and asked her father what argument she should advance. Her father replied that since women are human beings and that all human beings have rights, then the right to vote should be enjoyed not only by men but by women too.

This early interest to take the cudgels for women was sustained by Alzona when she chose as topic of her thesis for her Master's degree "The Development of the School Education of Women in the Philippines (1521-1917)." Her training as a historian served her in good stead since she would be documenting the progress made by the Filipino woman.

At this particular point, feminism was translated into concrete action for the extension of the right of suffrage to women. Encarnacion Alzona as early as 1919 battled for woman suffrage. This is evidenced by an article she wrote entitled "Shall the Filipina Women Vote?" which came out in the *Philippine Review* (January, 1919). In this article, Alzona lined up the arguments why women should be given the right to vote. She mentions that the political enfranchisement of women would enable the Filipino woman to render direct help in the solution of social problems and help in the enactment of social legislation. Another argument mentioned by Alzona was the educational value attached to the right of suffrage. She asserted that "if men need this education, more so do women need it, they being what we proudly term the first teachers of man."

The same article mentioned the arguments of the opponents of women's suffrage. Among these are that the ballot "will destroy feminine qualities which are so admirable in our women; that the

home will be neglected; and that it will lower men's esteem and respect for her." Alzona dismissed the first claim as fallacious as can be proven in countries which have extended the right of suffrage to women. As for the second claim that the women would neglect their homes once given the ballot, Alzona countered "that the love of home, of family, is innate in woman and the ballot alone is not sufficient to kill that instinct." To the claim that men will lose their esteem and respect, Alzona asserted that "a person enjoying full political rights deserves greater respect and esteem than a disenfranchised one."

The fight for woman suffrage was a long and hard battle. Alzona attributes the slow legislative process to a very conservative Philippine Legislature. She explains:

Our legislature is surrounded with an apparent impenetrable wall of conservatism. No brilliant array of arguments in favor of women's rights has as yet moved to action. Neither has the example of some 28 civilized states which have enfranchised their women produced any perceptible effect upon it. Its determination to conserve as long as possible men's supremacy in the government is unshaken. The opponents of woman suffrage in our parliament have paid in rare moments of inspiration many flattering compliments to Filipino womanhood, but intelligent women demand that the compliments should be more substantial. ("The Philippine Legislature, Bulwark of Conservatism" by Encarnacion Alzona, *The Tribune*. September 19, 1926.)

In 1930, a bill was presented in the Philippine Legislature granting suffrage to Filipino women who could read and write in either English or Spanish. This bill was known as the Hernando Bill. Encarnacion Alzona proposed an amendment to the bill stating that the right of suffrage be given to Filipino women who can read and write in English, Spanish or any Philippine language. She argues thus:

. . . I will add the phrase "any Philippine language, because there are Filipino women who, though not conversant with any foreign language, are literate and well-informed. These women must be allowed to vote. It appears to me as inconsistent with our avowed nationalism to require our voters to speak and write a foreign language. A provision of this nature in our laws may be

interpreted that we admit the inferiority and the insufficiency of our native tongue to educate our citizens."(Statement prepared by Alzona, Sept 10,1930)

Part of the campaign for woman suffrage in the Philippines was the writing of books documenting the history and development of the Filipino woman. The first book of this nature was written by Maria Paz Mendoza-Guazon. The book was entitled *The Development and Progress of the Filipino Woman* published in 1928. This was followed by the book of Encarnacion Alzona entitled *The Filipino Woman: Her Social and Political Status 1565-1933* published in 1934.

Aside from this means, Alzona mentions hosting tea parties for members of the Legislature to convince them of the wisdom of granting the Filipino woman the right of suffrage. Alzona admits that the Filipino women suffragists are not the "window-breaking noisy suffragettes". Such a behavior according to Alzona is not in keeping with the nature of the Filipino woman. The Filipino woman will patiently wait for the legislators to pass a law which will enfranchise them.

Alzona made the comment that there were members of the women population who were against the right of suffrage. In an article she wrote entitled "Woman Suffrage in the Philippines", she writes:

There are also women opponents of suffrage. There are women, and there will always be those who consider politics outside of their domain until it is translated into terms of dances and receptions in which they can display their beautiful gowns and costly jewels. These women should be left alone in their happy, self-satisfied state. ("Woman Suffrage in the Philippines" by Encarnacion Alzona. *Graphic*, September 2, 1931.)

The sponsoring of a bill granting suffrage to women became an annual event in the Legislature. But the suffragettes did not lose hope. Women like Alzona were optimistic for they felt that sooner or later their battle would be won. For Alzona and her fellow suffragettes the index was that the country's intelligentsia was solidly behind the movement.

The country's intelligentsia, however, had to get the support of women from the grassroots when the Constitution of 1935 had a provision which stated that suffrage would be extended to women if 300,000 women voted for it in a plebiscite. Women organizations

combined their forces in a nation-wide campaign. The plebiscite resulted in 447,725 affirmative votes and 44,307 negative votes thus exceeding the 300,000 requirement set by the Constitution. Finally in September 1937 an election bill became a law extending the right of suffrage to all citizens, male and female, 21 years of age and who can read and write.

The extension of the right of suffrage to the Filipino woman did not end women activism. As Alzona writes: "It did not, however, establish complete equality in rights; for the Civil Code in force - a legacy of monarchical Spain -- contained provisions discriminatory to woman which rendered her status inferior to that of man." At the initiative of the Philippine Association of University of Women of which Alzona was one-time president and an active member, a movement was started to remove these inequalities. Like the campaign for woman suffrage, this likewise met opposition. Opponents argued that the provision of the Civil Code was "essential in the preservation of family solidarity." Out of this strong campaign spear-headed by the Philippine Association of University Women came out Act No. 3922 popularly known as paraphernal law. Opponents gave it the name of "the infernal law." The paraphernal law provided that "the married woman of age may alienate, encumber or mortgage or otherwise dispose of her paraphernal property, and appear in court to litigate with regard to the same, without the necessity of the permission or presence of the husband."

Alzona lived the life she had espoused. Women, she believed, had equal capacities as men. If man had the capacity for higher education, woman had the same capacity. Alzona proved this right when she obtained a Ph.D. degree from Columbia University. If a man could head an academic department, a woman had the same right. Alzona became chairperson of the Department of History in U.P. If a man could be elected to chair a committee in an international organization like the UNESCO, a woman could likewise be elected. In the 1946 meeting of the UNESCO in Paris, Dr. Alzona was elected Chairperson of the Sub-Committee on Social Science, Philosophy and Humanities. In an interview with United Press International, Dr. Alzona remarked: "I consider it (Chairperson of the Sub-Committee on Social Science, Philosophy and Humanities) an honor and a privilege to preside over so select an international group which comprise the best minds of 24 nations. I consider my selection a tribute to women. It is my hope that this will establish a precedent in future international conferences." Tribute to Dr. Alzona for this sparkling achievement did not only come from her fellow women, but also from the men. Senator Proceso Sebastian, head of the Philippine delegation during the same year had this to say:

I was never so proud in my life as when I glanced into the sub-committee room and saw Dr. Encarnacion Alzona ably directing the discussion there.

She made a hit in the Parisian Conference. The conferees recognized that she was genuine material and what she had to give was well thought out, scholarly, and worthwhile. And her clothes, dainty and simple like her person, captivated the foreigners. There was nothing sham about her.

She stood out there, in that foreign crowd, as the prototype of the best in Filipino womanhood and somehow, the other people feel it. A local university is honoring Dr. Alzona with the degree of Doctor of Laws. She deserves the honor and more. ("Women Sense" by P.S. Castrence. *Manila Bulletin*, April 19, 1947.)

After her stint as member of the Philippine delegation to the UNESCO, Dr. Alzona was elected member of the U.P. Board of Regents from 1959 to 1966, proving that women have as much right as men to become a member of the Board of Regents. The highest accolade given to Dr. Alzona was when she was awarded the distinction of National Scientist by the National Academy of Science and Technology.

Dr. Alzona has indeed brought credit to the Filipino woman. She and other first-wave Filipino feminists have opened a horizon which has been further enriched by the present crop of feminists. Paraphrasing the ads of Virginia Slim cigarettes—The Filipino woman has gone a long way.