



# LRS Reports

Legislative Research Service

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## PIONEERING WOMEN OF THE SENATE

(1947 – 1987)

By: Elvie F. Isleta

In celebration of women's month, the Senate pays tribute to the pioneering women of the Philippine Senate.

The entry of women in Philippine politics was made possible with Article V, Section 1 of the 1935 Constitution which provides that:

*"xxx...The National Assembly shall extend the right of suffrage to women, if in a plebiscite which shall be held for that purpose within 2 years after the adoption of this Constitution, not less than 300,000 women possessing the necessary qualifications shall vote affirmatively on the question."*

In line with this, a plebiscite was held in 30 April 1937, on the issue of women's suffrage which was provided in the Commonwealth Act No. 34. In this plebiscite, ninety percent (90%) or 447,725 of women voted in favor of suffrage, while 44,307 ironically voted that they should not be allowed to vote. Thus the start of the role of women in Philippine politics.

The 1987 Constitution has acknowledged the role of women in nation building, giving them more opportunities by erasing discrimination based on gender, as well as granting equality for both men and women. Some of the equal political rights are the right of suffrage, the right to run for public service, right to political expression, and the right to information.

Let us take a short and quick look at some of the women who assumed office and played a vital role in the Philippine Senate from 1947 to 1987.

1. **Geronima T. Pecson** (1947-1953) - the first woman senator. She was also the first Filipino and first woman elected to the executive board of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1950.



Pecson headed the Senate Committee on Education, the Senate Committee on Health and Public Welfare, and the Joint Congressional Committee on Education. She pioneered Philippines laws such as the 1953 Free and Compulsory Education Act, the Vocational Education Act, laws on establishing training facilities for instructors of arts and trades in certain national schools, and laws that upgraded the University of the Philippines' School of Forestry into a College of Forestry. She was also a member of Philippines Commission on Appointments and of the Senate Electoral Tribunal.

2, **Pacita Madrigal-Warns Gonzales** (1955 – 1961) - the lone woman in the senate during the 3rd (1955-1957) and 4th Congresses (1958-1961).



Gonzales headed the Senate Committee on Social Justice. Community Development and Welfare.

Gonzales authored laws including the establishment of the Women and Minors Bureau under the Department of Labor (R.A. 2714); and the creation of the Board of Censors for Motion Pictures (R.A. 3060).

3. **Maria Villanueva Kalaw Katigbak** (1961 – 1967) She was a journalist and a beauty queen before she entered politics.



Kalaw Katigbak authored Republic Act No. 3765 or the "Truth in Lending Act of 1963", which extends protection to consumer buying goods on an installment plan and enabling credit transactions. She also authored Republic Act No. 4165, which mandated the creation and appropriation of the National Commission on Culture.

During her term, she headed the Senate Committees on Education, Commerce, and Industry.

She also served as the chairperson of UNESCO General Conference of the Philippines from 1962 to 1966.

4. **Tecla San Andres Ziga** (1963 – 1969) - the first woman in the Philippines to top the bar examinations in 1930 with a rating of 99% in remedial law. She was elected senator in 1963. Ziga focused on the protection of women and children and regulation of practice in dietetics, among others.

During her term, she headed the Senate Committees on Health and Community Development. She was also a member of the Committees on Agriculture and Natural Resources; Education; Foreign Affairs; Blue Ribbon; Community Development; Social Justice; and Welfare, among others.



Ziga authored laws including the act defining the taxation powers of local governments (R.A. 4497); the creation of the Department of Public Welfare (R.A. 5416); and, the law that provides retirement benefits for municipal and city judges (R.A. 5095).

5. **Eva Estrada-Kalaw** (1965 – 1972) - the first woman to be re-elected as senator.

During her term, she headed the Senate Committee on National Minorities and the Senate Committee in Games, Amusements, and Tourism.

Kalaw introduced a total of 41 bills, including laws for salary increases of public school teachers (RA 5158); the creation of Local School Boards (RA 5447) and of the Barrio High School Charter/Magna Carta for Private Schools (RA 6054); the Educational Financing Act (RA 6728) and the inclusion of the presidents of student councils in the Board of Regents of all state colleges and universities.



6. **Helena Zoila Tirona Benitez** (1967 – 1972) - the administrator of the Philippine Women's University before she joined the Senate.

Benitez authored various laws including the creation of the Student Loan Fund Authority (R.A. 6014); the creation of the Price Control Council (R.A. 6124); and other laws on education, youth development and the environment. She also served at the Batasang Pambansa from 1978 until it was abolished in 1986. Benitez founded the Bayanihan Dance Company.



7. **Magnolia Welborn-Antonino** (1967 – 1972) She was elected Senator in the 1967 elections when she ran in her husband's stead, Engr. Gaudencio Antonino who died a few days before the elections due to a helicopter crash.

Antonino worked for the enactment of laws including Republic Act 6124 (Providing for the Fixing of the Maximum Selling Prices of Essential Articles or Commodities and Creating the Price Control Council); RA 6235 (Prohibiting Explosives and Flammables, Corrosive or Poisonous Substances or Material in Passenger Aircraft and Regulating the Loading thereof in Cargo Aircraft); and RA 6395 which consolidated and revised the Charter of the National Power Corporation.



8. **Santanina Rasul** (1987 – 1995) - the first Filipina Muslim senator.

Rasul authored legislation concerning women's rights, Muslim affairs, family, and gender equality.

A vital legislation that she co-authored with Senator Raul Roco was Republic Act No. 7192 or the Women in Development and Nation-Building Act of 1995. The Act opened the doors of the Philippine Military Academy to women, and mandated that a substantial portion of government funds at all levels be used for programs that would benefit and develop women's capabilities. She was also the chairperson of the Senate Committee on Civil Service and Government Recognition, and Women and Family Relations.



9. **Leticia Ramos-Shahani** (1987 – 1998) - the first Filipino woman to become *President Pro Tempore* of the Senate, in 1993.

Shahani headed the Committee on Foreign Affairs; Committee on Education, Culture and Arts; Committee on Agriculture and member of the Commission on Appointments.



She authored laws including the creation of the Regional Consultative Commission for Muslim Mindanao (R.A. 6649); the strengthening of the rights of workers to self-organization, collective bargaining and peaceful concerted activities (R.A. 6715); the establishment a Total Development and Protection of Children Program for Barangay Day Care Centers in the Philippines (R.A. 6972).

## Conclusion

We only cited a few of the women who left their marks in the Senate. There are and will be many more.

It can be noted that in the coming mid-term elections of 2019, only 11 or 17.74% are women, out of the 62 certified senatorial candidates. Women may comprise half of the electorate, yet fewer of them run and get elected into public positions.

As we are about to choose our new legislators, let us ponder on the issue of women's representation. Whoever we vote will have a direct hand in shaping our policies. The laws enacted by Congress concerns every citizen regardless of gender, age, economic status, values and beliefs. Women have shown their important role in our society through the years. Therefore, we should not typecast women as the weaker gender in the political arena. What we need are legislators who will serve to the best of our interests.

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