

The debate over beauty pageants in the Philippines: Empowerment or objectification of women?

Katarina Rodriguez stepped forward, picked a question from the fishbowl and handed it to the hosts Ruffa Gutierrez and Laura Lehmann. The question: “There are people who believe that beauty pageants are a form of women exploitation. What can you do to change their opinion?”

Without missing a beat, the candidate from Davao answered: “I’d like to think that one should live by example. And I would like to admit that I was one of those [ladies] before, until I learned more about what beauty pageants are about. One thing I can tell you is that you may think it’s very competitive but it’s not. You understand beauty pageants when you know that it is not competition against other women. It’s actually competing against yourself. And in a sense, it’s all about woman empowerment. And you can feel that in this group of girls... each girl knows that we are all individually beautiful.”

At the end of the evening, Katarina went on to win the Miss World Philippines title and will represent the country in Sanya, China. This will be her second time to compete in an international pageant, having previously competed in Egypt for the Miss Intercontinental last January.

The Philippines is no doubt a pageant loving nation. Beauty pageants are part of the country’s culture and this can be seen from barangay beauty contests to national competitions.

The country has produced 3 Miss Universe titleholders, 1 Miss World, 6 Miss International winners, and 4 Miss Earth titleholders. Despite the honor Filipino women have gotten some sectors believe that beauty pageants are unnecessary, even with the new slogans of women empowerment and advocacies it promotes.

Do beauty pageants today promote women empowerment? Or do they continue to objectify women’s bodies?

The beginning and rise of the Filipina in pageantry

It is believed that the root of the country’s love for beauty pageants started back during the Spanish times with the Santacruzán, an event celebrated during the Flores de Mayo, in honor of the search for the Holy Cross by Helena of Constantinople.

After the Americans came, they introduced the concept of the carnival queen. This event was established from 1908 to 1939 to commemorate the relationship between the US and Philippines. The carnival was held to advertise Philippine products.

Many of the women crowned during that time came from rich families, who then made use of the title to be famous and prominent in society.

Following the aftermath of World War II in 1947, a beauty contest was established to promote an airline, paving the way for the next chapter of Philippine pageantry.

In 1952, the Miss Philippines contest was born. In his article “The Philippines and Beauty Pageants,” published under the book *Mabuhay to Beauty*, writer McRonald Banderlipe mentioned that the first Miss Philippines, Teresita Sanchez, would become the first Filipino delegate to represent the country in the Miss Universe pageant.

Armi Kauusela, a Finnish national, became the first Miss Universe. She would later on have ties with the Philippines, marrying Filipino businessman Virgilio Hilario after her reign.

The 1960s and 70s were the golden era of pageantry for the country. Multiple titles would be won and the country would also earn runner-up positions.

In 1964, the international community took notice of the Philippines when Gemma Cruz won the title of Miss International. She was the first Filipino and Asian delegate to win the title.

It was also in the same year that the Binibining Pilipinas Charities Incorporated, (BPCI) was established. Founded by Stella Marquez, the first Miss International from Colombia (she married Filipino businessman Jorge Araneta), its purpose is to search for the most beautiful Filipino women to compete internationally and, as part of its mission, also does charity work.

BPCI has produced many women who went on to compete in various international beauty pageants.

The year 1969 was a turning point when the Miss Universe pageant took notice of Gloria Diaz, making her the first holder of that title from the Philippines.

Four years later in 1973, Margarita “Margie” Moran would take home the second Miss Universe title for the country. After their respective reigns, Gloria became an actress, while Margie is active with her advocacy in theater and ballet.

Miss International, the third most popular competition, has also been a pageant where Filipino women shine. After Gemma Cruz, Aurora Pijuan would win the title in 1970, followed by Melanie Marquez in 1979.

It was not just the Philippines that shined during those times. Thailand also earned the spotlight in the Miss Universe pageant when Apasra Hongsakula won in 1965. This was followed by Portnip Nakhirunkanok (Bui Simon) winning the title in 1988.

Japan also has two Miss Universe winners in the persons of Akiko Kojima in 1959 and Riyo Mori in 2007.

The birth of pageant camps and rebirth of the Filipina beauty queen

In the 1980s and '90s, the Philippines continued to send representatives to international beauty contests. While a few of the ladies would end up as semi-finalists or runner-up in the respective competitions, winning a crown from the Miss Universe, Miss International, or Miss World remained elusive during that time.

It was in the '90s when pageant training, most especially in Latin America, became popular. Venezuela, a country that has become a powerhouse in the pageant industry is one of the countries often associated with pageant training, thanks to Osmel Sousa, who has trained many of Venezuela's popular beauty queens.

Before the establishment of the beauty camps in the Philippines, Filipina delegates were sent to Venezuela and Colombia for training.

Arnold Mercado, one of the co-founders of pageant camp Aces and Queens, said that it was very different during the '80s and '90s compared to today where aspiring beauty queens undergo training.

Mercado, together with Mercator Models president Jonas Gaffud, and lawyer Nad Bronce established Aces and Queens, one of the top beauty camps that has produced the likes of Miss World 2013 Megan Young, Miss Universe 2015 Pia Wurtzbach, and Miss International 2016 Kylie Verzosa. The three have been training beauty queen aspirants since the early 2000's together with other pageant enthusiasts as a group formally called Mabuhay Beauties.

In the training of the ladies, they also gain knowledge and learnings essential for winning the coveted titles.

“Back then, there were really no pageant training camps. Most of the talent scouts back then were [fashion] designers, glam people, such as makeup artists from the provinces, Metro Manila and all over the Philippines,” Mercado said in Filipino

Mercado said that unlike today wherein beauty pageant camps have a module to follow, there was no “structured training.” But since the establishment of the beauty camps, there are now guidelines to follow.

“So it became a holistic approach when it comes to training girls who join beauty pageants. Before I guess, there was no personality development training, no training for interviews of if there is, it would only be tips. But now, there's classroom trainings we do for that,” he said in Filipino.

Rodgil Flores, owner of Kagandahang Flores, formally started training ladies in 1996. He's helped by his cousin Gio. The Kagandahang Flores' camp is behind the successes of Miss International 2005 Lara Quigaman, Miss Earth 2014 Jamie Herrell, Miss Earth 2015 Angelia Ong, and Miss Earth 2017 Karen Ibasco among others.

“We were both passionate in pageantry. And then it grew- we had more people coming in from Pateros. It continued and then we had two more and eventually it just grew, until we were able to form a staple group,” he said in Filipino of the trainers and candidates for the camp.

Flores said his trainings are patterned from the pageant camps of Venezuela with some adjustments. They did a lot of trial and error to formulate modules for the training.

“It's always like that right? You get the best practices from those who have succeeded. That was the inspiration for it. It's not in a way copying it but what I mean is, when you are passionate about your craft, you're passionate about fielding girls in national pageants, eventually international pageants. Of course, you research, you study. The successful story was Venezuela at that time. You see that they have the proper training. And we kind of adopted that,” Flores said in a mix of English and Filipino.

Pageant camps have helped beauty queen aspirants improve themselves in competitions. Neesha Murjani, who competed in the local pageant Miss Cebu and national competitions such as Binibining Pilipinas and Miss World Philippines, said that when she underwent training in Aces and Queens, she had to improve her Tagalog language aside from English. She also had to go to the gym to focus on her body. Clothes, she said, were also a big factor. Before she came to Manila, she hardly knew anybody to borrow outfits to wear at events she was required to go to.

“I did not know anyone. When it came to photoshoots, I had to go to Cebu for my gowns,” she said. “Aces helped out a lot with my styling and my clothes.”

Adam Genato, writer for pageant website Sash Factor, said that in the last year, he’s observed that the Filipina candidates have become very competitive.

“I’ve noticed a lot of our Filipina representatives have become more “palaban” (fighter) in the international stage,” Genato said. “Because before, if you compared it to the last decade... I’m basing it from Miss Universe, most of our delegates this decade wants to up their notch when it comes to their A game in Miss Universe.”

Genato said that that preparations for the competition have become a “fight to the death” for the crown. He attributes the fighting spirit of the beauty queen aspirants to the training the beauty camps have given.

“Credit goes to the camps of these girls as to why they’ve been performing well in the international stage. Because like 20 years ago, I don’t know who is training the girls in their international competitions. Was it just sir Pito Moreno, or the handlers only? They were not as aggressive, not as tedious, or the training was not hard enough,” he said in a mix of English and Filipino.

He added that with pageant camps, the people behind them not only helped in training the ladies but also channeled their passion for the industry.

And with the training from the pageant camps, the Philippines experienced the second golden wave in the beauty pageant scene.

In 2010, Venus Raj competed in the Miss Universe pageant in Las Vegas, placing 4th runner-up. Raj is credited for starting the winning streak as her successors Shamcey Supsup, Janine Tugonon, Ariella Arida, and Mary Jean Lastimosa continued placing either as a runner-up or as a semifinalist in the competition. In 2015, after 42 years, Pia Wurtzbach, a Filipino-German actress and model took home the country’s 3rd crown.

The country also won its first Miss World crown in 2013 thanks to Megan Young. It was also in 2013 when two more Filipinas – Mutya Datul, won Miss Supranational and Bea Rose Santiago won the country’s 5th Miss International crown.

In 2016, Kylie Verzosa, a native of Baguio City, won the country’s 6th Miss International crown in Japan, placing the country behind Venezuela with the most number of crowns in that competition.

It’s not only Filipino candidates who take part in pageant training in the country. Several beauty queen winners from other countries have also taken advantage of the trainings. Miss International 2017 Kevin Lilia trained at the Flores camp before she competed in last year’s competition. Lilia is the first Indonesian to win the title.

Indonesia’s representatives to Miss Universe, International, and Supranational were spotted in Manila last September while watching a beauty contest. The Flores camp also did their training before they flew back.

Flores also trained Miss International 2017 4th runner-up Natsuki Tsutsui of Japan. His camp also trained Miss Earth 2018 Phuong Khanh Nguyen of Vietnam and some members of her elemental court.

Francesca Mifsud, Miss Universe Malta 2018 underwent pageant training in the Philippines in September, where she took pasarela (pageant catwalk) training under the guidance of Mharvz Napoles.

Women empowerment or sexual objectification?

Despite the honor, prestige and victories the Filipino ladies have brought to the country in winning beauty contests, some sectors believe that there are other ways to bring recognition to the country.

Aurora de Dios, executive director of the Women and Gender Institute of Miriam College, and former chairperson of the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women (now known as Philippine Commission for Women), said that she has nothing against women joining competitions but there are other ways to empower oneself.

She recalled a story wherein Gemma Cruz, the Philippines' first Miss International winner joined a rally, condemning one of the national pageants years after she won.

“She [Cruz] led the group of women - both Gabriela at the time to protest the pageant...well because you're paraded around [in] your bathing suit and you are measured by your physical attributes,” de Dios said. “To me, that is a kind of exploitative... because they are measured like a cow - for your beauty, for your hips for your butt, etc. with the idea that there's a perfect you know norm about beauty okay. And then of course the measure of your beauty, whether you are *tisay* (mestiza or white) and definitely are not supposed to be colored.

“So the idea of beauty that has been projected in this pageant is not only physically you know very physical in terms of its indicator of beauty, but also very racial even in the Philippines. So for that reason, I think if you project beauties it can be defined by any other indicator but this one is very physical and they come it's also a contest where women compete for the title.”

As to whether pageants empower women, she said: “Is it empowering to me? It has always been exploitative. That's what I think about it... and who are the judges? [They] are mostly dirty old man. Some are women of course. the other is whether is it empowering or not? You know what I think in the Philippines which abject poverty [is] such that almost 60, 70% of our people are poor, I've always believed that what makes us happy and what saves us [are] two things. People are just hopeful and that their situation will get better.

“And how do they kind of keep this hope going? One is and you see this down the line down. To the village level - one is through singing contest...the second is through beauty contests. So those are your avenues... improve yourself, to improve your situation. And the third one by the way, the last one is to be an OFW (Overseas Filipino Worker),” she added.

Nathalie Verceles, director for the Center of Women's and Gender Studies of the University of the Philippines, said that she has noticed that many of the candidates in the contests have been projected by the organizations behind the competitions as empowered women.

“We noticed that trend towards projecting our candidates and winners as empowered, but I think we need to interrogate what that notion of being empowered means,” she said. “Because empowerment in development discourse would be different from empowerment as conceived for instance by pageants.”

She observed many of the ladies used it as a starting point for a career in modeling or showbusiness.

“For us empowerment is... having control over your life, in your choices, having control over your body. If we look at it from that perspective, you have to talk to the individual candidates in terms of how they see themselves with respect to these notions of empowerment. Do they really feel free when they're winners? Because when you're a reigning reading titleholder, I think the parameters are different as opposed to after you finish your reign. I'd be interested in seeing also how this experience provided a sort of I think of point which I've heard already talked about - that they joined pageants not to win because of the opportunities that it can provide after their reign.”

Verceles said that many of the ladies join “strategically,” as they are not from well-off families.

Beauty queens meanwhile believe that despite the criticism on beauty contests and the rise of the MeToo movement, joining competitions still have good points. Pauline Amelinckx, who **won Mutya ng Pilipinas 2018 Global Beauty Queen** and a former Miss Bohol titleholder, said that it allowed her to come out of her comfort zone.

“Pageantry actually provides a very nice platform for girls of my age, even men of our age for their advocacy - to be part of something great, part of projects and that like. And also, it's not just only about us, but also about people that we bring together that support us. We fill stadiums and I think that's something beautiful. That's something I like about pageantry, especially here in the Philippines because it's such a big celebration here.” Amelinckx said.”

Miss World Philippines 2017 Laura Lehmann for her part admitted that she experienced being scrutinized for her looks but said that women wearing swimsuits onstage is a form of empowerment.

“As a beauty queen, you'll feel people judging you but what's important is you know what you want and you know why you're there. And for me, swimsuits empower women because [for] you [to] look good, you must work for it,” she said.

Conclusion

De Dios said that pageants will definitely be here to stay for entertainment and business reasons. She did commend that beauty contests have evolved and have stated to focused beyond the physicality.

“They have to be something else. They must be more than just a body. They have to have brains. And they have to have a sense of service something like that. So it's changing in that way now that it's no longer just physical and then secondly that if you're just very beautiful but you don't have anything to say about anything then you're not with in the standards It is improving but I still have to see a beauty contest that is not solely or does not exploit the body of women.”

With beauty pageants continuing to multiply every year, Verceles said that she wants to see more protection for the candidates, given the allegations and reports of sexual harassment, prostitution, and pimping in the industry.

“I would be interested in protecting the safety, the dignity, the security of all the pageant contestants, given that these pageants are going to be around and multiply.”

Contests have made changes through the years to keep up with the modern times. In the US, Miss America removed the swimsuit portion in 2018, while Miss Teen USA removed the swimsuit competition in 2016 and replaced it with athletic wear.

Miss World, which initially started as bikini contest in 1951 removed the swimsuit portion in 2014.

Advocacies have also become part of the organization's vision. Miss Universe, Miss World, and Miss Earth have tied up with various groups from children's funds to environmental causes.

It is important to know that Asia is the growing market for these pageant organizers thanks to booming economy and social media attention. This year, all 4 contests are in the Asian region. Miss Earth concluded its competition in the Philippines last November 3. Miss International was hosted in Japan last November 9, while Miss World will be held on December 8 in Sanya, China.

Miss Universe will be held in Bangkok, Thailand on December 17.

So do beauty pageants empower women or objectify them? It's a combination of both as women are now heard. They use the attention and opportunity to promote the causes close to their hearts – whether it be HIV and AIDS education, children's issues, peace, and other platforms.

But in typical human nature, there will always be comparison as to who is the most beautiful woman among the candidates. People will always debate as to whether the girl is beautiful enough to represent or if she's smart enough. It is also important to know that beauty pageants are a business. For as long as someone will watch and support them, they will put on a show.

Whatever side one may take on the issue, it is safe to say that with the Philippines enjoying its position as a powerhouse in the pageant industry, Filipino fans will continue to show support to the candidates in any way they can from power voting to cheering for them live onstage.