

# 19 women perish in garment factory fire

By JURGETTE HONCULADA

In early March, 80 years ago, 173 young women burned or leapt to their deaths in a fire that hit the New York Triangle Shirt Factory on the 18th floor of a New York City building. Exits were locked to prevent pilferage by workers, most of whom were women of migrant European families. The deaths provoked such grief and outrage that a few days later on March 8, thousands marched on the streets of New York in silent protest. March 8 has become International Women's Day, a day of protest over gender inequality, discrimination and violence, and a day of affirmation of women's sisterhood and solidarity.

On March 14 this year, 19 young women burned to death in a fire that destroyed Edral Garments Factory in Mandaluyong, Metro Manila, past midnight. One woman remains missing while eight managed to break down a wall and flee. They were "live-in" workers out of a total work force of over 200. The fire apparently started in the basement where they slept; a narrow exit and the absence of a fire exit made escape difficult. Besides, they were bone-tired. As one survivor said, "We roused them, but they would not awake so we saved ourselves." (The municipality of Mandaluyong reportedly abounds with such enterprises, unsafe establishments and homes simply extended to accommodate workers. It is no wonder they are bereft of health and safety equipment.)

Like their New York sisters, these women produced shirts (t-shirts) and other garments. Many were migrants from the province of Aklan in the Visayas. Like their New York sisters, poverty forced them to take jobs with long hours, low pay and at risk to their lives.

Women have indeed gained much in the 80 years between the New York and Mandaluyong fires: legal rights and equality, greater social consciousness about women's issues, greater organizing efforts. But we still suffer much: violence, including sexual violence, that stalks us in the work place, on the streets and at home; limited options that force young girls to sell their bodies here or abroad; subordination and marginalization in politics, the economy and religion.

It is not so much a mark of our power, as the lack of it, that in the Philippines, Women's Day is celebrated during the whole month of March. Since we do not have full gender equality, we might as well claim not one but 30 days in the year as ours. As we go through this month's activities that include exhibits, congresses, book launchings, forums and the like, let us keep in our hearts the memory of 173 women in New York whose deaths, in a sense, started it all, and the 19 women, most of them

still unburied, rotting in plastic bags and stinking like hell in some God-forsaken funeral parlor.

Through our joy let us remember their pain. Let us demand an accounting: Why did these 19 die? An export-oriented economic development strategy in the late 1970s spawned a garments industry whose shock troops were and continue to be young women workers. The need to cut costs has bred the garments industry's underside: subcontracted and home-based work at incredibly poor pay and unduly harsh working conditions. Women likewise form the mass of this underside.

We have been told: better to work though at great cost to your dignity (and life) than not to work at all and starve with your dignity intact. As women and as workers, we have to say no to this false dilemma.

Employers like David Lim (of Edral Garment Factory) must be called to task for unsafe working conditions such as the lack of fire exits or non-payment of Social Security System premiums (one family has received P11,000, another P20,000 but there are no funeral benefits). The Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) can enforce health and safety standards, though that is admittedly an uphill struggle. And public awareness and pressure can be built so that workers in the informal economy (which probably contributes as much to the Gross National Product as the formal economy) are not left to the mercies of sun, wind, rain, fire and the vagaries of global capital. Otherwise, workers, including young women, will continue to die—quick deaths as in the March 14 fire, or slow ones from overwork, malnutrition, chemical exposure.

We urge a legislative inquiry into the Edral Garment Factory fire in particular, and the situation of women workers in small garments factories in general; and the promulgation of appropriate legislation for their safety and well-being. We urge the DOLE and the National Bureau of Investigation to undertake the necessary investigation to pinpoint culpability and responsibility for the fire



and accompanying deaths.

We call on media to keep the story covered (even if a few relatives have been paid and think they have no right to speak) until some measure of justice is meted the victims.

We call on women to keep alive the pain and turn mourning into resolve so that other women need not burn in the bloom of their lives, or sell their bodies (and souls) to survive, or become bitter in their old age.

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**A** news report from *The Manila Times*, a nationally circulated daily, listed 20, not 19, women trapped and burned alive inside a garment factory basement during one of the worst fires to hit the Philippines in a decade. The women were:

Mercy Andrade  
 Delia Sabal  
 Elda Nervar  
 Merly Balatayo  
 Maria Nilse Musirable  
 Maricel Balag  
 Soledad Mateo  
 Anacita Onez  
 Marilyn Mohong  
 Elvie Remedio  
 Heidi Balbanida  
 Adelina Bambi  
 Sally Marao  
 Honey Tragwa  
 Thelma Temporada  
 Tina Temporada  
 Marites Uludin  
 Virgie Uludin  
 two others identified only as  
 Lina and Merly.