



STARGATE PeopleAsia

REAL LIVES. REAL STORIES. REAL PEOPLE.





Women can't do what men can? Atty. Marie Antonette "Tonet" Quiogue objects! A model for female empowerment and proof that women can break that proverbial glass ceiling, Tonet is the general counsel and head of transactions for AG&P (Atlantic, Gulf & Pacific Company), a global leader in infrastructure solutions for the mining, oil and gas sectors. There, she finds herself on a playing field that is dominated by men in suits.

She hammers out contracts, closes deals, and ensures that the company complies with local and international standards and jurisdictional laws. She is the woman who steers the wheel for the 118-year-old company's high-powered transactions. "I work in an industry where there are more men than women, and I work with people of varied backgrounds from different countries," she explains.

Tonet did not initially set out to be a legal eagle. The pretty and petite Pinay actually had her facetime on camera, as a host of a lifestyle show where she featured the latest hotspots and dining hubs in the metro. As a Law student, she also did part-time feature writing for a food magazine. On a more serious note, Tonet also did some traveling for a TV show that shone the spotlight on the plight of the OFWs.

After graduating from Law school, she joined the Romulo and Associates and was placed into the tech practice. "I did not have any idea about things like undersea cables and satellite receivers, but I was able to overcome that, realizing that it was just a matter of learning. This made me more confident when I joined AG&P. I knew that if I put my time into it, I would be able to figure it out." This was also something that was discussed during her job interview, and it was seen as a strength. "I would be able to explain it to people like the investment bankers in a simple way, because I did not learn it the way engineers did."

When she is at a meeting and acronyms are being thrown about, she whips out her phone to google them. Smart!

Girl boss

She does well on the job despite her lack of a technical background because of one strength usually attributed to women. Tonet is not afraid to ask questions. "It is rather like the way men don't like asking for directions," she grins. "As a woman, I feel like I don't have to pretend to know everything, and I am given more leeway to ask questions. We can communicate better, and we are good at reading body language. This, I think, helps me negotiate better," she smiles.

Tonet has dealings with people of different levels and backgrounds not only in the Philippines but all over Asia, the Middle East and the US. As someone who deals with different nationalities and cultures on the job, she feels that the Philippines is more welcoming to women in executive positions. "I think it is because we live in a matriarchal society. We have had women presidents, senators, and congresswomen and more women executives in the business sector." The local males only get surprised meeting her for the first time because she seems young.

When overseas, she admits to receiving a little bit of pushback from the male pack. "There are places where there is meritocracy on the job. They will respond to you, but there is an initial hesitation as they are used to dealing with just men all the time. Add to that the cultural

idiosyncrasies and religion as factors," she shares. Still, she believes there is nothing that women can't really overcome.

She and another female colleague once compared notes about the gender issue and she came up with some realizations. "I think I was trying so hard to act like a man, imitating how they talk and just generally tried to be one of the guys. This made me come across as impulsive and arrogant. This made me realize that it was better to act like a woman. I just have to understand that they have some sort of camaraderie between men and you just have to act like a professional and they will respect you for that."

Her challenge, she says, is gaining the trust of people. "I negotiate multimillion dollar deals, in a room of 20 men. Initially, there is some hesitation, because having someone like me there is not something that they are used to." There is also the challenge of gaining the trust of her colleagues, and she has to get the message across, which is somewhere along the lines of 'Guys, I got this.' "There is this initial feeling that you just want to go straight to work, but there is this perception of you that you have to deal with first."

She also has a higher goal in mind, that of ably representing the country. "As someone representing a Filipino corporation to multinationals, you want to make a good impression of the Philippines. This makes me want to work more."

On the lighter side, there is an additional perk of being a "skirt" in a sea of dark suits. On initial meetings, she always wear suits. But if the occasion calls for it, or if the culture is more relaxed she wears dresses after several meetings. "There is one photo where every male was wearing a dark suit, and I was in a bright yellow dress. I feel sad for men because they have no choice but to wear suits, while we women can wear what we feel like wearing," she laughs.

Setting an example

Outside the boardroom, Tonet is a single mom. She devotes much of her time to her 13-year-old son, traveling with him and getting involved in his academic endeavors. It is during his homework time that she noticed a glaring difference in how gender roles that are being taught in schools. His Filipino community textbook showed this example of a mother in her house clothes, cooking, she narrates.

"They are being taught the traditional way of thinking where the *nanay* is the '*ilaw ng tahanan*' and the father is supposed to provide the money. There were also jobs for women too, like 'saleslady'. Of course the men's jobs in the book were just as limiting, such as 'security guard'."

These limitations, she also aims to help eradicate. AG&P, for instance, has been training and fielding women welders with the aid of a TESDA program, and she is happy to report that there is a good response for them on the job market because of their attention to detail — a feminine trait. She muses, "To change perceptions, you have to start from there. You have to empower children and teach them they can be anything they want to be. I just hope that society will reach a point where people just have to forget about gender and just get the job done." ■