

A Global Forum for Women Leaders

An Interview with Irene Natividad,
President, Global Summit of Women

EDITORS' NOTE Irene Natividad Co-Chairs Corporate Women Directors International, and runs her own public affairs firm, GlobeWomen. She serves as a regular panelist on PBS' To The Contrary, and appears on CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC. Natividad has been involved for over 10 years with the National Women's Political Caucus, of which she was elected President in 1985 and re-elected in 1987. She later assumed the chairmanship of the National



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Commission on Working Women. In 1994, she was appointed to the Board of Directors of Sallie Mae by President Clinton. A native of the Philippines, she served as Deputy Vice Chair of the Democratic Party's Asian Caucus from 1982 to 1984. She has been awarded a Doctorate in Humane Letters by Long Island University, from where she graduated valedictorian in 1971, and by Marymount College (New York) in 1994 for her global work on behalf of women.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF Established in 1990 by President Irene Natividad, the Global Summit of Women (GSW; www.globewomen.org) is a Washington D.C. based non-governmental organization. The annual Summit meeting has been held every year since 1997, always in a different country around the world, and was conceived as the nexus at which all sectors – public, private, and nonprofit – would come together under the common vision of dramatically expanding women's economic opportunities globally through exchanges of working solutions and creative strategies forged by women leaders in different parts of the world. It is a business summit, whose 'business' focus is women's advancement in the global economy.

Why was the Global Summit of Women created and how has it evolved?

It was created, and still serves the purpose, of providing a global forum for women leaders in the three sectors that are necessary to create change: government, business, and civil society. I didn't like the way those sectors were separated in international forums: they didn't talk to each other and needed to in order to discover ways to collaborate. I wanted civil society to see that business is not the enemy and can be a partner in change. I also wanted women in government to be seen as possible change-makers

in a much larger way than civil society leaders had, perhaps, anticipated.

The idea is to accelerate women's economic growth by giving them the opportunity to learn from each other in a forum that is comforting and supportive.

Have there been productive outshoots that have developed from the Summit?

Yes. For instance, a woman from India started selling shawls in the restroom of the Barcelona Summit, and now, many people want to show

their products. They came to me to request a mini trade fair so they could find partners. We started the Women's Expo (WEXPO) and now the shawl vendor has partners in Iceland and Japan, whom she met at the Summit.

In Barcelona, we brought together several women's business associations, and they formed the Mediterranean Confederation of Women's Entrepreneurs Organizations.

We also now have a Ministerial Roundtable that precedes the Summit, and that came about because the Deputy Minister of Trade from South Africa told me in London that she got tired of meeting her colleagues in the hallway, and asked that we create a forum for them.

In Berlin, a group of women came to me with the idea of developing a Youth Forum. We now give scholarships to young female M.B.A. or business students so they can come to the Summit and network, and hear from women they would never hear from otherwise. We also hold a forum at a local university, before the Summit begins. This year, we're going to focus the Youth Forum on entrepreneurial leadership, since small business is the foundation of every economy in the world, including the U.S. It is where women have made the greatest mark to date, with 40.4 percent of privately owned firms in the U.S. now being owned by women, who generate \$3 trillion a year and hire 23 million people. That is the growth sector, and we want young women to know how to do that better and gain inspiration from those who've done it well.

The upcoming Summit in May will be held in China. How important was it for you to have the Summit in Asia and, more specifically, in China?

Very important. This is an Asian century, with the biggest players being China and India. To celebrate the last two decades and looking

forward to the next decade, we need to bring women – whether they're in business, government, or civil society – into the center of that activity, which is in China. We will have Chinese women entrepreneurs and big business leaders participating, as well as government officials.

You have a group of blue chip sponsors who support you. How critical has it been to find the right partners, and do corporations understand the Summit and the value of what you are doing?

I would like to think so, because many of them have been with us for years. Our Web site exists because IBM, many moons ago, invested in it. Our site gets 5 million hits per year and that's exceptional for a nonprofit that doesn't do any advertising. Microsoft has been with us for a long time and Daimler has participated from the very beginning. Clearly, they see the Summit as a platform for some of their women to not only exchange ideas, but also to meet other women leaders.

Is it a tough challenge to organize these Summits year after year?

I am fortunate. I have what I call the Summit "family." We have a planning committee, many of whom have been with me from the very beginning, like Ann Sherry who is CEO of Carnival Australia, whose first Summit was Miami 1997, as well as Sung-Joo Kim, the CEO of MCM.

We also have 80 women's business professional entrepreneurial organizations that I call "feeders" to the Summit, which have grown enormously in numbers. So I don't do it alone, but it is very difficult.

After a Summit, do you take time to reflect on the type of impact it has had, or are you already planning the next one?

I'm already planning the next one, but I try to think strategically about our impact. Chile was impactful because of President Bachelet, who is truly a terrific President who happens to be a woman. She is leaving her country on good financial footing and has supported legislation that impacts women positively. Because Chile has a stable economy and wonderful corporate governance, I also looked to have the Summit influence them. While Chile has a woman President, not a single company in the country had a woman managing director or president. So I brought many women CEOs to the Chile Summit, so they could see that women and business leadership are not mutually exclusive. ●