

Women are the Way Forward: The Rockefeller Foundation in the Philippines, 1923-1932

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The Rockefeller Foundation (RF) began its work on the American-colonized Philippine Islands in 1913. Engaging mainly in health and sanitation work, it built a strong partnership with the American insular government there and continued its charitable work long after Philippine independence in 1946. During this, my second trip to the RAC, I continued my research from 2010. Looking specifically at the years between 1923 and 1932, I explored the RF's role in a profound shift in discourses of health and national development. In that decade, RF programming helped transform Filipina women into stewards of Filipino health by replacing male sanitary health inspectors with public health nurses. In so doing, they made Filipina women central to debates about Filipino nationhood.

During the 1920s the new-Republican American regime (appointed by President Harding) endeavored to re-colonize the Philippines by reversing Harrison's policy of Filipinization, which then-Governor General Leonard Wood blamed for national decline. Led mainly by men from the original regime in early 1900s, the administration at Malacañang Palace returned to familiar colonizing methods from that period; including the use of medicine to target Filipino health. For additional help in this project, Wood called upon his old friend and former Philippine Director of Health, Victor G. Heiser (now Director for the East of the Rockefeller

Foundation's International Health Board) to repair a health infrastructure supposedly ruined by Filipinization.

Together, these two men laid plans for a new direction for public health in the Philippines to begin in 1921. Poring over reports from the Department of Health, Wood and Heiser noted that “the statistics show that things are worse than 1913 with typhoid, malaria, T.B., Beri Beri, Smallpox & rabies.” Rebuilding the Philippine Bureau of Science and the Medical School while installing Heiser as an advisor at the Philippine Health Service to oversee daily operations might not be enough. Heiser and Wood proposed that the new regime turn towards women. Current efforts — focused on training doctors and sending male sanitary inspectors into the provinces to teach basic sanitation — did not seem sufficient to stem the tide of infectious disease on the islands. These programs made men the main stewards of Filipino health. But it was these very men according to Heiser and Wood, who, left in charge through Filipinization, had ruined the health infrastructure. Perhaps by adding women as active participants in the health projects, the Insular Government and the RF could improve health and hygiene more effectively than through Filipino men. In their discussions on the steamer the two men heartily agreed “that the hope for improvement lies in the women.”¹

Specifically, Wood turned to women for help lowering high infant mortality rates on the Islands. He called a national conference on the subject in December of that year. Its proceedings not only revealed that infant mortality would become an important part of Wood's regime, but also that it had become part of the national discourse of Filipino health and racial fitness. Speakers at the conference linked lowering high infant death rates with racial development. In so doing, they mirrored American discourses which connected Filipino's medical and national health, their physical fitness with their fitness for self-rule. Teodoro M. Kalaw, the Secretary of

the Interior and presiding officer of the conference, blamed the infant mortality rate of 32% for the slow “development of the Filipino race, which has a potential faculty for expansion and advancement.” The conference would, however, try to lower this statistic. “As to its importance for the preservation of the Filipino race,” he claimed in his opening remarks, “no other can surpass it.”² Jose Fabella of the Office of the Public Welfare Commissioner (OPWC) agreed. He argued that lowering infant death rates would “result in the bringing into this world not only a greater number of babies but also of a stronger race of people.”³ Here, these Filipino governmental employees linked infant mortality with racial fitness. A racially strong country was a healthy country. While conference proceedings do not reveal whether these Filipinos believed such rhetoric or merely used it to convince Americans that Filipinos were capable of running their own nation, they do show something far more interesting: Filipina women had a very important role in lowering infant mortality and, by extension, in Filipino racial development.

Nearly every speaker at the conference echoed the same refrain: through women — specifically mothers — the Philippines would build a healthy and strong nation. Though “the men are going to help,” Governor-General Wood declared in his remarks, “the work will concern women mostly,” as nurses, as members of women’s clubs who taught hygiene, or as mothers. In fact, the country needed “more nurses” and “organizations of women, or woman’s clubs which will take up this matter.”⁴ Jose Fabella too told the audience that “protection of . . . women is of the utmost value to the nation, for they are the highest potential factor in the bringing of healthy children into their world . . . Our efforts, therefore, should be directed mostly toward maternity care.”⁵ Women would teach other mothers methods which would improve Filipino infant health. Filipinas were the key to national health according to Kalaw, who closed his speech by stating, “we need the cooperation of women particularly because the purpose of this campaign, the goal

towards which we are striving, is but one: the education of Filipina mothers.”⁶ Francisco Delgado was more specific, placing the blame for “the appalling rate of our infant mortality in our country” on the “lack of proper and intelligent care of babies. Therefore, in educating the mothers and the mothers to be along modern ways in this regard, its reduction may be assured.”⁷ All speakers, including Wood, agreed that “in direct conjunction with the infant mortality problem, the Filipino women must cooperate with the health officials in working for better health conditions.”⁸ Filipino women, either as those who trained women in proper maternity care or as mothers who practiced it, were now stewards of Filipino physical, and thus national, health.

Therefore, Heiser hired an American nurse and stationed her in Manila to help in “the production of an adequate number of Filipina nurses” for the new program to reduce infant mortality.⁹ Alice Fitzgerald — a Johns Hopkins graduate who had worked with the Red Cross in New Zealand, Bulgaria, Japan, and China — was ideal for the position. Her primary goal was “to aid in developing public health nursing.”¹⁰ Part of a new movement in international nursing, this field focused on childcare and infant mortality, is prevention, by going out into communities and homes to minister to and teach populations.¹¹ Through her recommendations, one of the first Rockefeller Foundation International Health Board programs was a school which created Filipina public health nurses. These women would educate the populace on disease prevention and infant mortality. To create and spread public health nursing, the RF, like the government under Governor-General Wood, worked with high-ranking Filipinas to expand existing Filipina-built infrastructures designed to lower infant mortality rates. The role of public health nurse would give Filipino women more control over efforts to improve Filipino health. In the process, women like Enriqueta Macaraig and Anastacia Giron, along with Fitzgerald, helped shift a discourse critical of mothers to one that lauded their possible contribution to the nation. As a

result, the Rockefeller/governmental Public Health Nursing program, like the OPWC, created a space where all Filipina women might wield greater influence in debates over national health.

But Heiser wanted to do more than just create public health nurses. He wanted to replace sanitary inspectors with them. Sanitary inspectors first appeared between 1899 and 1901. As the American military advanced throughout the archipelago, pacifying and holding conquered territory, they encountered sanitary conditions which could threaten their health and ability to maintain control. To protect its own well-being and strengthen its rule, the American regime built a sanitation infrastructure designed to enforce hygiene standards. In Manila, they divided the city into ten districts, each controlled by an American medical officer. Filipino sanitary inspectors enforced hygienic regulations, checking for and then reporting violations. As the public health program expanded over the next several decades, so too did the number of sanitary inspectors. They became the primary means through which American health officials implemented colonial public health measures.¹² By the late-1920s, Heiser, who as Philippine Director of Health from 1905 to 1914, helped expand sanitary inspectors power, was disenchanted with their effectiveness.¹³ Rockefeller employees and some Filipinos agreed. The Rockefeller representative in the Philippines, Clark H. Yeager, and Senior Medical Inspector from the Philippine Health Service, Marcelino A. Asuzano, described sanitary inspectors as a hindrance, rather than a help, to public health. “Much of the inspector’s time,” they argued in a speech to the Philippine Islands Medical Association, “is spent in an attempt to do things which help very little in improving the health of the community.” Dustbin and market inspection, garbage and refuse collection, and street sweeping were no longer urgent matters and did not advance disease prevention or lower infant mortality rates.¹⁴

Heiser's solution: replace male sanitary inspectors with those public health nurses trained by Fitzgerald's program. Beginning in or around, May of 1923, he instructed Fitzgerald to investigate "the question of training more nurses as health officers." Though Fitzgerald was unsure whether or not this would work, due to the position's pay scale and "the temperamental aptitude of the average nurses"¹⁵, Heiser was undeterred. Writing to former Philippine Health officer and then-health advisor to Governor-General Colonel Edward Lyman Munson in August of 1923, Heiser shared his plans for the colony. He had "formed the opinion that better health progress might be made by enlisting the services of women, than to depend upon the male type of sanitary inspector and health officer of the past." Heiser suggested that women were better equipped to enact American public health programs. Current male sanitary inspectors, he felt, were contributing to the "failure" of "grandiose paper plans" often seen in colonies. If public health were left in their hands, the American project would surely collapse. "I should like very much to see," Heiser told Munson, "some of the women nurses who have graduated in the Public Health Course, given a trial as health officers. Perhaps they could replace some of the municipal *presidentes de sanidad*." Arguing that "no group in the Philippines . . . does more effective work than the women nurses," he was convinced that these nurses should replace male sanitary inspectors to run governmental public health programs in barrios.¹⁶

Beginning in 1929 the RF began a series of rural demonstration units to test the viability of this plan. The first, the Laguna Health Unit began as a cooperative project between the RF and the Laguna province; the two split the first year's operating costs. First and foremost, the project enacted the "replacement of sanitary inspectors with public health nurses." "If feasible," the project would transfer "all possible duties heretofore done by sanitary inspectors to the police force, especially market inspection, proper maintenance of garbage and refuse receptacles and

collection, etc.” And while it also sought to cooperate with the new public health programs in schools, improve water supplies, vaccinate children, improve infant welfare, encourage “better midwifery,” canvass house-to-house to improve public health, and control soil pollution,¹⁷ the primary focus would remain on public health nurses. Wrote Heiser to Yeager in 1929, “the two most important features in the program to carry into effect the health measures which you have outlined are : (a) to use public health nurses instead of sanitary inspectors and (b) frequently repeated intensive house-to-house public health education.”¹⁸ Public health nurses would, of course, make those house visits.

Through rural demonstration units like those at Laguna, the Rockefeller Foundation helped frame women as keepers of national health. Public health nurses were understood by Americans and Filipinos alike as female.¹⁹ These nurses were to spread sanitation and improve public health. And because Americans understood public health as a marker in Filipino development and readiness for self rule, making women the stewards of Filipino health made them responsible for not just Filipino health, but also the health of the Filipino nation. When the nation was healthy, the Philippines would be granted independence. Thus, the RF took from men the primary role in preparing the nation for self-rule, and placed it into women’s hands.

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ENDNOTES:

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- ¹ Dr. Victor Heiser, Aug 31, 1921, "August 14 1921- Jan 21, 1922," Box 76, Series IV, Victor Heiser Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. [hereafter APS]
- ² Teodoro Kalaw, *Proceedings of the First National Conference on Infant Mortality and Public Welfare, organized and conducted by the office of the Public Welfare Commissioner and held under the patronage of His Excellency Leonard Wood, Manila, Philippine Islands, December 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 1921*. The Government of the Philippine Islands, Department of the Interior Office of the Public Welfare Commissioner. Manila, Philippines: Bureau of Printing, 1922, p. 15-16.
- ³ "Address of Dr. Jose Fabella, Public Welfare Commissioner," in *Proceedings of the First National Conference on Infant Mortality and Public Welfare*. Manila, Philippines: Bureau of Printing, 1922, p. 26.
- ⁴ Address of Welcome by Governor-General Leonard Wood in *Proceedings of the First National Conference on Infant Mortality and Public Welfare*. Manila, Philippines: Bureau of Printing, 1922, p. 18.
- ⁵ "Address of Dr. Jose Fabella, Public Welfare Commissioner," in *Proceedings of the First National Conference on Infant Mortality and Public Welfare*. Manila, Philippines: Bureau of Printing, 1922, p. 26.
- ⁶ Teodoro Kalaw, *Proceedings of the First National Conference on Infant Mortality and Public Welfare*. Manila, Philippines: Bureau of Printing, 1922, p. 16.
- ⁷ "Address of Mrs. Francisco M. Delgado, President, National Federation of Woman's Clubs, in *Proceedings of the First National Conference on Infant Mortality and Public Welfare*. Manila, Philippines: Bureau of Printing, 1922, p. 23.
- ⁸ Trinidad Fernandez, Secretary of the National Federation of Woman's Clubs and Provincial Club Extension of the Women's Club of Manila, "The Knowledge A Club Woman Should Acquire to Make Her an Effective Leader in Her Community" in *Proceedings of the First National Conference on Infant Mortality and Public Welfare*. Manila, Philippines: Bureau of Printing, 1922, p. 160; Teodoro Kalaw, *Proceedings of the First National Conference on Infant Mortality and Public Welfare*. Manila, Philippines: Bureau of Printing, 1922, p. 16.
- ⁹ Dr. Victor Heiser, Aug 31, 1921, "August 14 1921- Jan 21, 1922," Box 76, Series IV, Victor Heiser Papers, APS.
- ¹⁰ Clark Yeager, "An outline of the Rockefeller Foundation," 1932, p. 3, Folder 12, Box 1, Series 1, Subseries 242, Record Group (RG) 1 Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, New York (hereafter RAC).
- ¹¹ M. Adelaide Nutting, "Introduction," in Mary Sewall Gardner, *Public Health Nursing*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916; Mary Sewall Gardner, *Public Health Nursing*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916, pp. 1-22.
- ¹² Warwick Anderosn, *Colonial Pathologies*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006, pp. 48-50.
- ¹³ Clark H. Yeager to Victor H. Heiser, July 3, 1929, Folder 95, Box 5, Series 242 J, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RAC.
- ¹⁴ Clark H. Yeager and Marcelino A. Asuzano, "The Police Force as Valuable Aid in Sanitation Work," Folder 857, Box 70, Series 242, RG 5.3, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RAC.
- ¹⁵ Alice Fitzgerald to Heiser, June 10, 1923, Folder 49, Box 5, Series 242 C, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RAC.
- ¹⁶ Heiser to Munson, August 21 1923, Folder 2038, Box 155, Series 1.2, RG 5, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RAC.
- ¹⁷ Clark H. Yeager, "Public Health Administration and Experimental Field Studies of the Rockefeller Foundation in the part I, The Laguna Project, Annual Report for 1929," in *Annual Report of the Rockefeller Foundation for the Philippine Islands, 1929*, p. 37, Folder 859, Box 69, Series 242, RG 5.3, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RAC.
- ¹⁸ Heiser to Yeager, July 11, 1929, Folder 95, Box 5, Series 242 J, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RAC.
- ¹⁹ For more on how Rockefeller and Filipino officials gendered public health nurses female, see Clark H. Yeager and Marcelino A Asuzano, "Public Health Nurse vs. Sanitary Inspectors," Folder 857, Box 70, Series 242, RG 5.3, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RAC.