



# HARD GIRLZ

## FILIPINO GIRLS IN GANGS

By Rachelle Q. Ayuyang

Boys will be boys, but girls are no longer what they used to be. According to recent findings from "The Girl Report," published by the National Council for Research on Women, they're now smoking, drinking, using drugs and getting in trouble with the law as often as boys their age. So it's no surprise that some girls are also driving the getaway cars and doing the shooting in drug deals and territorial struggles that turn ugly. No longer satisfied with just being gangbangers' girlfriends who stand by their men, some have formed independent gangs of their own.

The growing trend of girls joining gangs has been dramatized by the movie "Mi Vida Loca," a wry look at the lives of Latina gangbangers, and documented by Gini Sikes' 1998 book, *8 Ball Chick: A Year in the Violent World of Girl Gangsters* (Anchor). According to Sikes, the U.S. Justice Department has identified 650,000 gang members nationwide, 10 to 15 percent of whom are female.

"Traditionally, cops and social workers have ignored girls because they believe women don't pose as much of a threat," says Sikes, who did research for her book by living with girl gang members in San Antonio, Milwaukee and Los Angeles. "For example, one night in South Central, I was pulled over by the police and made to get on my knees because I was hanging out with boys who were wearing gang colors. I'm sure that had I

been with girls in the same environment, wearing the same clothes in the same neighborhood, they wouldn't have pulled me over."

The California Attorney General's Office of Criminal Justice Planning estimates that by the year 2000, seven percent of the 250,000 gang members in California could be female. But there could be more. A 1992 Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department study called "Girlz in the Hood" said police departments still don't track girls' involvement in gangs. The county's active gang population is now 10 to 15 percent female.

### Only the Beginning

While society slowly comes to grips with the phenomenon of female gangbangers, some Filipino American communities are only beginning to deal with the reality of gang activity in their neighborhoods. When graffiti started showing up more frequently in Jersey City, New Jersey, where there's a Filipino population of 30,000, the local

**In New York City, Filipino gangs with such names as the Bloods of Jersey City, Boys in Crime and Liga have female members.**

police department had to organize a community forum, says Linda Repulda Rosalinda of the Hudson County Community Partnership. Gang graffiti also started cropping up in "good" communities where Filipinos live, like West Side and Franklin in New Jersey. In New York City, Officer James Osorio in the Street Crime Citywide Anti-Gang Enforcement Unit confirmed the



prevalence of Filipino gangs with such names as the Bloods of Jersey City, Boys in Crime and Liga, which have female members.

In Vallejo, California, the local police department has tracked nine Filipino gangs with no fewer than 10 members each, according to Det. Steve Fowler of the gang detail. For every valid gang member, there are two or three "strong associates" who may be female. In this suburban town north of San Francisco, the major Filipino girl gang, which was an offshoot of a Filipino male gang, is believed to have "grown up" and disbanded.

"Law enforcement could be seen as dropping the ball," Fowler explains. "But to put yourself in our shoes, the legal restrictions on us are great." A male officer will search a female less freely than a male, particularly around sensitive areas, if it could mean losing his job. Of the Vallejo Police Department's 80 patrol officers, according to Fowler, only 14 are female.

Girls are certainly becoming the aggressors, breaking out of the demure, self-effacing roles that society assigns them. "The Girl Report" found that while girls are less likely to be arrested for violent crimes, the girls' rate of arrest for these crimes increased faster than the boys' between 1986 and 1995.

### Ladies' Choice

Ten years ago, Agnes Factora, 24, was a member of the Lady Akrhos, a Filipino girl gang that grew from the Akrhos gang in San Francisco. When Factora was invited to join the Akrhos, the leaders told her they weren't a "gang" per se, but a clique or a club. They came together once a week to have fun usually at the former Canon Kip Community Center on 8th and Natoma Streets.

"It was a little confusing to me," Factora says. "While the leader was giving me this nice talk, about having fun and appreciating life, drugs were always on the side." Having fun meant boozing up, cutting class and sometimes picking change from parking meters.

"We could be mean when we wanted to," says Factora. Friends watched your back. "If a girl threw you dagger looks, all you had to do was call on a sister to send the girl a message that she was dealing with a Lady Akrho."

But if members consorted with rival gangs or stepped into the wrong territory, they were in trouble. Factora once brought a friend from another gang, the Ocean Girls, to hang out, and a Lady Akrho vice president wasn't too pleased. "She wanted to kick my ass," recalls Factora, who countered with her own toughness and avoided a run-in with the head honcho. "I told her, 'She's cool with me. So she should be cool with you. She's not sinking my ship, she's not sinking your ship. If you have a problem with her, you come talk to me. Maybe we can work it out.'"

As years went by, Factora says disputes over territory were no longer resolved just by talking it over. And forget about fights mano a mano. Factora recalls hanging out at Canon Kip with a friend who had dropped out of the gang scene. He had stepped

on another gang's (Acers) territory across the street. "He thought he could still talk it out," she says, "And we told him he couldn't do that anymore. But he was very persistent. And then, boom. He got stabbed and was in the hospital."

### Great Pressure

Most Pinay gangsters become part of the group because they're dating a gangbanger. "They get hooked into it because it's cool. They got the hype," says gang prevention counselor Kimberly Contreras of the Bernal Heights Neighborhood Center in San Francisco. The pressure is great, and it's almost impossible not to get involved or affiliated with gang activity, she adds.

A girl gangster usually comes from a home that pays little attention to her, or she may have been sexually abused. In many a Fil-Am household, according to Contreras, parents have difficulty accepting their daughter's American ways.

"You get a lot of Filipinas who are Americanized but identify with their Filipino families," she says. "Yet their families don't see them as Pinay. They're *mestiza* now. They don't fit in anywhere. They don't feel that identity in their family. The gang gives them that."

There are no comprehensive studies focusing on Filipino girl gangsters. Most of the documentation is anecdotal. According to Contreras, some gangs have a mix of Filipina and Latina members, and depending on whether the group is largely Latino or Filipino, the girls will identify with the dominant ethnicity.

The Lady Akrhos folded after a few years. Most of its members were tired of the scene. They essentially grew up. They now get together for reunions and fondly look back on old times. "We were good friends with the guys," Factora says. "We were treated like sisters, and they would take care of us. Some other gangs, you would hear that before girls become gangsters, they have to be raped. It wasn't like that at all. We were very much respected."

### Bad Turn

But things don't turn out as benignly for everyone. For six years, Angelili (not her real name) was involved with the Bloods in San Diego, California. She says: "All I thought about was my set. I didn't care if I was working as a prostitute. I didn't care if I was killing anyone. I remember a fight I got into, and my homeboys were holding this girl down so I could beat the f\*\*k out of her. I had a bat, and I was beating her and she died. I would be happy to hear another Crip got killed. I was proud that my homeboy was in jail for attempted murder and another guy was hurt. I was so involved that I didn't see what I was doing wrong."

She was a 13-year-old introvert, whose shyness was exacerbated by the fact that she was molested at the age of eight by a relative. "I thought it was my fault that I was molested," she explains, "and I thought everyone knew, and that was why everyone made fun of me in school."



She also lived in Crip territory in North San Diego, while her gang, the Bloods, was in the East. "I started hanging out with them and started smoking marijuana and drinking," she recalls. "One day one of my homegirls asked me, 'Are you down enough with us? Are you down with the Pinay Bloods?' Well, they were my only friends, so I said, 'Yeah, I'm down.'"

So the initiation started. "I got jumped in by the OGs (original gangsters or leaders) at a party. Everyone there was smoking and drinking. I had to fight five girls. I got hit by 25 girls."

Angelili also started selling drugs at 13 and got addicted to crystal meth and eventually cocaine. "I was on all these drugs," she recalls. "I got my first gun when I was 16 years old. That made me feel powerful. I was jumping in more people. I was clocking drugs. I was making a lot of money—\$400 to \$500 a day. I was the supplier. I would get pages in the middle of the night."

## Crazy Cycle

The next five years were a crazy cycle of drive-by ambushes and prostitution for Angelili, who was gang-raped by another gang at the age of 15. She became pregnant as a result but got an abortion. She says, "My set didn't back me up. It made me mad. They blamed it on me, saying, 'Why were you in that 'hood anyway. You were bound to get hurt.' So I kinda said, 'That's cool. Okay, that was my bad.'"

At 15, she also did her first drive-by shooting. Recalls Angelili: "I remember four of my homegirls. One was driving, I was in the passenger. Three were in the back. This mission had to be done. There was a party. I was peeping from the bottom of the seat."

As they approached the house, Angelili started firing. "Pak! Pak! Pak! Then we drove away. I didn't even look back. All I knew was that the girls were going crazy, saying, 'Yeah, you did it.' I thought I was hard because I had a gun. I thought I was hard. I look back now and regret it because I could've been hurting someone's family. That was the life for me. I was on the under for a long time because they knew it was my set that did it."

A year later, one of her homeboys was gunned down. "He died in front of me. I couldn't do anything about it. If I could, I would've taken the bullet for him. When I heard the caps, I was on the ground. I told the OGs we had to go on a mission to cap the m\*\*herf\*\*kers that pulled the trigger on my homeboy."

For a year Angelili was a prostitute for her boyfriend, who told her the gang needed the money. She recalls a rival gangbanger from the South who gave her her first 12-gauge shotgun and whom she had to seduce to kill. "I was hugging him, and I had

the strap behind my back. I said, 'Sorry,' and capped him. He fell, and my homeboys came in their cars, and I jet. I had to do that for the set."

Later, she and her boyfriend were also attacked in a drive-by shooting. "My boyfriend got hit. God must love me because I didn't get hit. I don't know why. I was holding him in my arms, and I thought he was going to die. That was the most frightening thing I had ever seen, just like what happened to my homeboy."

## Looking for Love

Says gang prevention counselor Contreras: "For a lot of women, there's an emotional factor. Everyone wants to be loved. If a gang does that for a woman, she'll do anything." But relationships with their boyfriends are far from stable or healthy. Angelili became pregnant a second time with her gangbanger boyfriend, who raped her at gunpoint in front of his homeboys. She wanted to keep the baby. When he walked out, however, Angelili got hooked on drugs and aborted the pregnancy.

"A lot of times for the women, it's their sex and innocence gangs want," explains Contreras. "You are their masks to help them get away with their activities." Det. Fowler of Vallejo adds that weapons or drugs can be easily concealed on girls, who are usually the last ones to be frisked in a search.

They're essentially pawns used by gang members in a dangerous game of

drugs, sex and violence. "They'll be the ones who will hold the dope for the drug dealer," says Contreras. "They'll be the ones who will take the initial step in doing something illegal. A lot of times if they're underage, the repercussions won't come down as hard on them. And because they're female, they're able to get away with a lot of things. This is the way they prove themselves to the men."

To be a part of some gangs, the girls have two options: to get "jumped in" (beaten up) or "sexed in" (having sex with gang members). For some of the girls, the feeling of control over their chaotic lives outweighs the degradation.

## Looking for Power

"I wanted the power," says Angelili, who was devastated when her mother became blind because of diabetes. "You can get anything from me as long as you have money. Other people respected me because I had a fat roll of dollars."

Angelili learned to be coldhearted. During her grandmother's



**Warning: Gang prevention counselor Kimberly Contreras says, "A lot of times for the women, it's their sex and innocence gangs want."**

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funeral, she was planning other people's deaths. She left the funeral, got high with her homegirls and went on their killing mission.

"What does gang life mean? It means guns, rape, 'jacking and illegal activity," Contreras adds. "If you look at what respect is, it usually means family life, respecting yourself. It means a lot of different things that don't parallel gang activity. What's sad about the women and men in the group is a lot of times they will discover this by getting dissed or being burned. They got shot and are in the hospital, and ain't nobody visiting them. They got incarcerated, and all their friends care about is whether they'll snitch. That really hits home for the youth."

That's what happened to Angelili. An act of betrayal by her best friend in the gang was the turning point in her life. "I took a good look at my room," she says. "Everything was in my gang's colors right down to the sheets. I thought about the gang rape. My set wasn't there for me. When my grandmother died, they weren't there for me. They didn't even protect me when they knew I was getting hurt by my boyfriend. They didn't care whether I was getting jumped every day (by rival gang members at school)."

Angelili knew she would most likely be dead by the age of 18. She even had her funeral planned out, from the color of her casket to her pallbearers.

But Angelili didn't let it play out that way. She moved north to Vallejo to build a new life that's clean and sober with legitimate friends, free of the colors of her former gang.

She visited her grandmother's grave for the strength to get out of the life of being a Blood.

Dropping out of the gang led her back to her roots. Her new sense of being Filipino has kept her going. "I went to a billiard hall one time," Angelili says, "and a girl came up to me and asked me where I'm from. I said, 'I'm from Vallejo.'" The girl persisted, hoping to get Angelili to cop to an affiliation to a gang. She asked, "What's your claim?"

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wouldn't harm me.

And so, with my very nervous security detail escorting me, car keys jangling in my pocket, the gates opened, and out I strode, alone, to confront the mob.

And what a sight I must have made, for the crowd suddenly turned to collectively stare at this apparition: a decidedly non-American-looking woman, in a traditional Indian kurta—and, get this—wearing a bright yellow Cory Aquino T-shirt with Cory's smiling face in the front, and the Laban sign in the back! Deafening silence. No one made a move.

I prayed, and I thought: Thank you, Affirmative Action Program of the U.S. Foreign Service! The enemy couldn't figure out if I was one of the devils or a Laban campaigner who somehow lost her way in West Bengal.

I slowly raised my right hand, made the "L" sign, smiled my beatific Cory smile, and unsteadily made my way toward the car. The crowd parted like melting butter. Another thought: This is how Moses must've felt ... but Moses didn't have to rescue a station wagon paid for by the sweat and labor of a single mother!

The crowd began to chant, "Cory, Cory, Cory!" There were "L" signs all around. (My

USIS staff, watching the drama from the TV monitors inside the building, would later comment that this was the first time that they had ever seen anti-American demonstrators raising the wrong fingers!) Some demonstrators patted me on the back. There were even smiles on their faces! I was actually tempted to enjoy the moment. With a grand gesture perfected from watching the Pope on TV on Easter Sunday morning, I motioned to the bodies on top of my precious vehicle to jump off. Like meek little lambs, the dear rabble-rousers obeyed. Except for a few dents, the car was left intact.

Then, a burly policeman in full riot gear approached, grabbed me brusquely by the elbow, and barked, "Apna garre?" (Is this YOUR car?) My heart jumped. Aha! He thinks I'm a Bengali maiden! Only problem was, I hadn't taken Hindi at the Foreign Service Institute, and I didn't know what he was saying!

When in doubt, repeat. "Yeah, yeah, apna garre!" I managed to say, in a voice clearly audible to the now-silent-again crowd. In other words, I simply responded, "Yeah, yeah, this is your car!" Perhaps it was the magic of the moment or whatever, but the crowd didn't catch on.

Or so I thought. As soon as I walked over to the driver's side of the car, another police offi-

cer approached. Pretending to hold steady my shaking hand as we both tried to put the key in the slot, he hissed in my ear in heavily accented English, "Where do you think you are, downtown Los Angeles? Get the bloody hell out of here as fast as you can! They're still in a trance!" I have to hand it to the Indian police. They know how to detect a California accent!

The key slipped in, the car door opened, I started the motor, gunned the accelerator to the floor, negotiated a curbside—wrong way on a one-way street—with tires squealing. (I have since assured my grandchildren that that was the only time Grandma ever drove like James Bond!)

I was welcomed at the back entrance of USIS by a very ashen-looking staff, and by a visibly upset Marine guard who was summoned to the scene (but who chickened out by slipping in through the back).

Without a word, he handed me a Security Violation Slip—actually two of them—colored bright yellow. ■

*Perla Limbaga Manapol, a proud member of the "reverse brain-drain brigade," is now working in Manila on behalf of U.S. companies that want to do business in the Philippines. She can be reached by E-mail at perlam@pacific.net.ph.*

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"I said I claim myself. I claim Pinay pride. And she asked, 'What?' I claim Pinay pride," Angelili emphasized. "She was trippin' because she didn't know what I was talking about it. She was so angry because she didn't know what it was to be proud to be Pinay."

### Leaving the Hustle

Pride in one's identity. Self-esteem. These are proven antidotes. But it's not easy to leave the "illegal hustle" that's practically second nature to hard-core gang members. Besides rap sessions, counselor Contreras sometimes takes her high-risk Latino, African American and Fil-Am youths on camping, hiking, river-rafting and rock-climbing trips, which are intended to imbue them with a healthy sense of teamwork and self-esteem.

The activities also teach them to channel their energies into positive challenges. "When it becomes hard and they can't do it, we tell them, 'So you think you're bad asses hanging out in the corner, but you can't even deal with Mother Nature. That shows what you got,'" she says.

While obtaining funding for youth programs is par for the course for most community-based organizations, Contreras believes consistent support from communities and families is what's essential to keeping youths on a positive path. It's getting the "village" to help raise today's youth. But it's also getting youths to learn to find their "legal hustle," whether it's finding a good job, taking on a new hobby, building a crib for one's child or going to school.

"They can have their blood pumping," she says. "They can feel like a bad ass, but by doing good work, capitalizing on their strengths and not their weaknesses." ■

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