

'Celebrating Women' around the world

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SPECIAL TO THE HERALD

When Mill Valley photojournalist Paola Gianturco spoke at the Outdoor Art Club on Dec. 2 she was asked why she created a book "celebrating women." She responded, "Because they're not!"

This burst of energy is what propelled her to trek to 15 far-flung countries around the world documenting festivals and pageants that celebrate female strengths.

The author brought her vision to life with a slide show of the vibrant pictures she took while on her journey. Women around the globe are seen feting their gender strengths, whether they are the strengths of a warrior, virgin, healer or flirt. Gianturco's stories are imbued with a love of womankind, wisdom and wit. She peppers her tales with salient facts that make her observations even more poignant.

When those in attendance saw pictures of Finland's annual Wife Carrying Contest they burst out laughing. The images showed the women's legs locked around their spouses' necks, the women hanging upside down and backward as their husbands race through an obstacle course. This contest is to extol the virtue of good humor. Along with the pictures, Gianturco spoke about each culture. Finland, for instance, requires that 40 percent of all public offices be held by women.

Gianturco praised the Miss America pageant, saying that the event reversed its reputation of exploiting American women. In recent years, the event has become the largest donor of scholarships for women with \$45 million, she said, and it continues to celebrate the ideal woman with more diversity than ever.

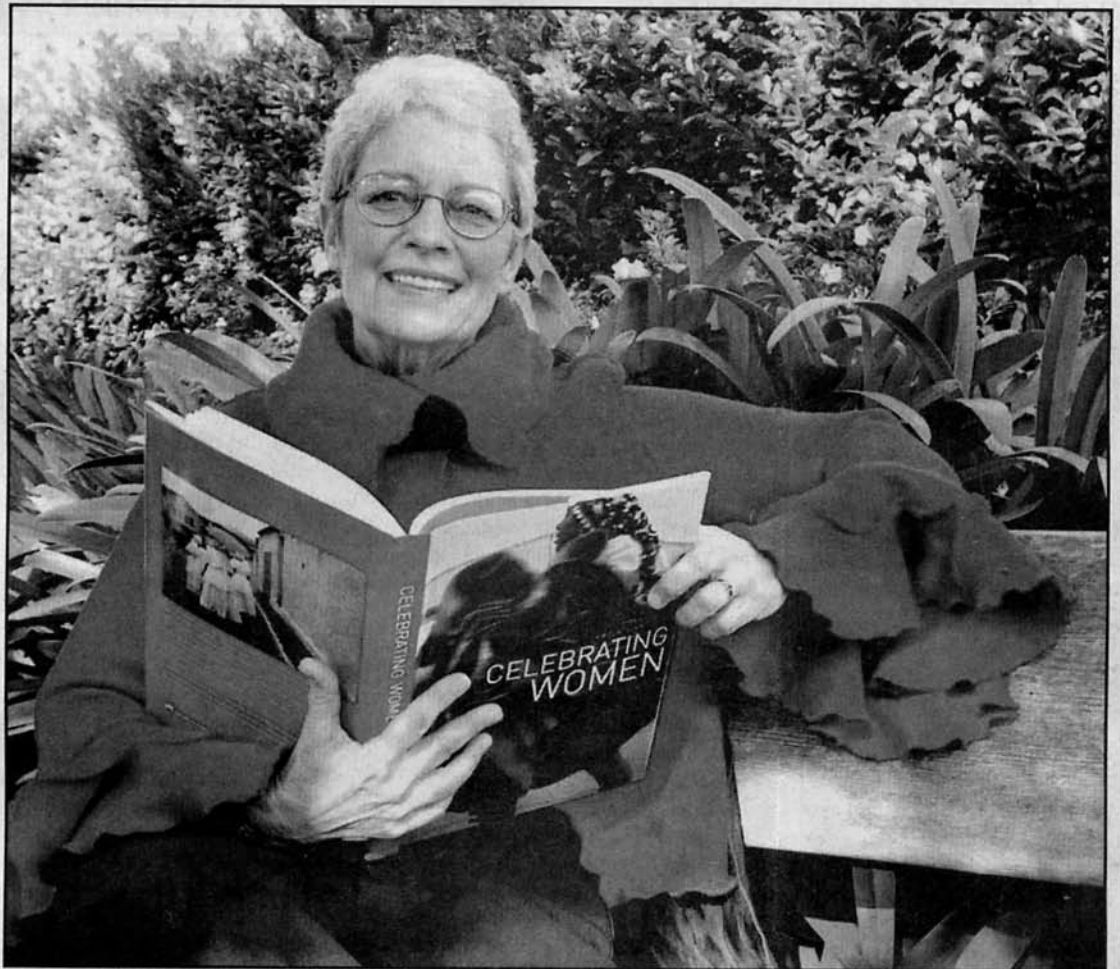


photo by Beth Koelker

Mill Valley photojournalist Paola Gianturco spoke last week about her recently published book, "Celebrating Women," at the Outdoor Art Club.

In Morocco, where photographing Muslim women is banned, divorcees of the Ait Haddidou tribe of Imilchil are empowered one day each year, according to Gianturco. They can point and pick out a husband for keeps during a special festival.

Swaziland is a country where half of all births are to teenage mothers. Each year 35,000 Swazi young women honor their own virginity with festivities. They dance in colorful costumes that leave them half naked, with the older women cheering them on, chanting, "That's right. Be proud of your body."

In Poland, Gianturco recorded one of the most romantic rites: floral and herbal wreaths floating down the river under a sky full of fireworks. The young women wore "magical" wreaths of flowers and herbs in their hair to endow them with the power to make a man fall in love with them.

A number of countries revere Mother Earth with festivities. One such festival in India features a barefoot dance where the women inch along absorbing the Earth's power with the scrunching up of their toes.

There are many interesting stories in Gianturco's "Celebrating Women," which

was published by Powerhouse Books in October.

At the end of her lecture, Gianturco said she envisions a world wherein all women honor each other daily. The nearly all-female audience at the Outdoor Art Club applauded.

Paola Gianturco's photography is on exhibit in the Steuart lobby at One Market in San Francisco. This is the first exhibit curated by the International Museum of Women, a "Museum without Walls."