Is the war on drugs a war on women?

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The war on drugs has been known to be a war on the poor. But has it also aggravated the struggles of Filipino women in urban poor communities? Photo by JL JAVIER

Manila (CNN Philippines Life) — On the day of Ryan*'s funeral, his mom, Delia*, placed chicks on top of the coffin.

"Noong iniliibing na, nanghina 'yung sisiw," she says. "Pamahiin 'yun, para yung pumatay, magsisi. 'Yung gumawa, makonsensya."

Her son died on Sept. 17, 2016, after a man in a black masked bonnet shot him seven times — one in the heart, two in the gut, and the rest across his torso.

"Nagtitinda ho talaga siya," she says, gently admitting that her son was, in fact, a drug pusher.

"Nag-usap pa kami nung araw ng Huwebes kasi Sabado po nangyari 'yun eh ... Sabi sa akin, 'Nay kaya ako gumagawa ng ganito kasi hindi niyo mapapagawa 'yung bahay at saka 'yung mata mo hindi mapaoperahan,'" she shares.

In 2015, their house in Mandaluyong was one of the casualties of a fire that burned down over 800 houses. Delia says that 34-year-old Ryan, being the eldest, had to find ways to help rebuild their home and feed their family, especially since she and her husband do not have regular jobs.

Another mother still mourning the homicide of her child is Grace*, a vegetable vendor in Mandaluyong, whose daughter, Rachel*, died in Oct. 16, 2016. Rachel was at a friend's house with four other people when a man in a black masked bonnet, again, barged in and shot all of them that night.

"Sabi ng mga kapitbahay nanlaban daw 'yung anak ko. 'Dapa!' sabi daw ng nagtokhang, sabi daw dumapa daw siya pero sabi bumangon daw 'yung anak ko, nanlaban daw," Grace recalls.

Delia's (left) son died on Sept. 17, 2016, after a man in a black masked bonnet shot her son seven times — one in the heart, two in the gut, and the rest across his torso. Photo by JL JAVIER

She admits that Rachel used shabu from time to time, but asserts that her daughter never once sold drugs. Rachel, who bore four children, had convinced her mother to sell their house because she wanted all of them to leave the city and move to the province to start anew.

The day of the incident, she found a buyer of their home, got ₱200,000 in hard cash — and the promise of a better life.

"'Wag niyong kunin 'yung pera, benta ng bahay namin 'yan. Para sa nanay at anak ko 'yan. Magbabagong buhay na ako.' 'Yan ang sabi. Wala pa rin. Binaril pa rin," Grace shares as her voice breaks.

'The war on drugs is a war on the poor'

According to the Human Rights Watch World Report 2018 (https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/01/18/philippines-dutertes-drug-war-claims-12000-lives), more than 12,000 drug users and dealers have been killed since 2016, of which 4,000 were during operations headed by the police while the rest by "unidentified gunmen." The same report states that these victims mostly come from families in urban poor communities across the country.

In these urban poor areas, victims of extrajudicial killings are largely male, and are usually the breadwinners of the family. Anna*, a member of Samahan ng Nagkakaisang Pamilya ng Pantawid (SNPP), which is a collective of beneficiaries of the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps), says that she's seen how disabling the death of a man in a household has been in the community that she helps in Mandaluyong.

She also says that most of the victims of the killings are also beneficiaries of the 4Ps, a development program led by the Department of Social Welfare and Development that provides cash grants to the poorest of the poor. As part of SNPP, Anna, together with other members, aims to give voices to other beneficiaries of 4Ps and also urge the government to include more Filipinos who need the cash support the most. At the moment, the unconditional cash transfer provided is only at ₱200 per month or ₱6 a day per family.

"Dapat naman kasi 'yung pinapatay 'yung puno," Anna says. "Hindi 'yung mga mahihirap na kagaya nila, kasi kung puno ang napatay, wala na ang shabu na 'yan."

Anna's work with SNPP typically involves talking to families in her communities and asking what else can be done to help them. But it was only when she was approached by EveryWoman, an all-female coalition that defends the dignity and rights of Filipino women, to look for female victims of extrajudicial killings that she started meeting with women like Grace and Delia.

"Kaya napunta ako sa kanila kasi alam ko 'yung limang pinatay, [kasama 'yung anak ni Grace]," she says. "Doon din ako naawa sa mga bata na naiwanan. Kaya sabi ko sige, kung kailangan niyo ng mga tao na ganon na mga EJK, ikutin ko sila dito sa Mandaluyong, gusto ko matulungan sila."

She also strongly opposes the war on drugs, saying that only the poor are being targeted. "Kaya isa ako diyan na hindi pumapayag na pinapatay sila. Dapat naman kasi 'yung pinapatay 'yung puno," she says. "Hindi 'yung mga mahihirap na kagaya nila, kasi kung puno ang napatay, wala na ang shabu na 'yan."

Her claim is not groundless, especially when cases against alleged drug lords like Kerwin Espinosa, Peter Lim, and Peter Co were dismissed (http://nine.cnnphilippines.com/news/2018/03/20/DOJ-aguirre-kerwin-espinosa-peter-co-peter-lim-dismissal-review.html). Amnesty International's investigation has also revealed (https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/01/philippines-the-police-murderous-war-on-the-poor/) how the police have systematically targeted the poor.

"Kaya kahit papaano nagpasalamat kami na pumasok 'yung mga tumutulong na 'yan," she says, referring to EveryWoman for all the help extended to their community.

"Napakaimportante 'yun, malaking bagay 'yun," adds Grace, who EveryWoman helped when her husband was rushed to the hospital.

The direct effect on women

Formed during the congressional inquiry on Sen. Leila de Lima, EveryWoman includes individuals and community groups that advocate for women's rights. One of these is Baigani, a community that helps widows, mothers, and children of those killed because of the war on drugs.

Kristina Gaerlan, a member of Baigani, says that she's been part of the feminist movement for years now, and when President Duterte took office, she also joined discussions on the feminist agenda of the administration.

"Natuwa pa kami diba kasi pro-Reproductive Health Bill siya [pero] nung nag-rape joke na siya, uh oh. Something is wrong," she says.

Grace is a vegetable vendor in Mandaluyong. Her daughter, Rachel*, died in Oct. 16, 2016. Rachel was at a friend's house with four other people when a man in a black masked bonnet barged in and shot all of them that night. Photo by JL JAVIER

During the first year of Duterte's presidency, when death tolls continued to rise due to drug-related killings, she, together with other women, initiated Baigani.

"We realized already as early as then that karaminhan na namamatay ay lalaki at ang nababalo, ang naiiwan, ay mga kababaihan. So there was really going to be a serious impact on women nung EJKs," she says.

The majority of the burden of raising children are now placed on the women, she explains. Grace, for example, is the only person providing for her family composed of three children, 10 grandchildren, and her ailing husband.

Gaerlan adds that these urban poor communities are those that do not have access to reproductive health information, so most of Baigani's beneficiaries are families with at least five children. It is also not only the women that are gravely stigmatized, but the children as well. When they would go around to ask children about their identities, some would automatically say that they're "anak ng natokhang."

There is a ripple effect on the children, and the mothers, she says, had to deal with other practical concerns first before they can even deal with getting involved with the psychological effects of the incident to their children.

"'Yung mga nanay, they barely have the time or the energy to address this," she says.

Women supporting other women

A continuous initiative that the organization does is holding what they call a "family camp," where they invite 10 to 12 families, which usually amounts to 60 heads, to go out of town (the exact place withheld by Gaerlan for safety purposes).

For three days, these women and children attend a series of activities and different forms of therapy sessions — from art therapy for children to laughing therapy for the moms — that aim to make sense of their grief, as well as share ways on how they can all help each other.

"Pinapaalala namin na grief is not linear, na akala mo 'pag naka-move on ka na okay na 'yun. Hindi. Sometimes grief comes back in waves," she says. "So tinuturo sa kanila 'yun para hindi sila natatakot para nauunawan [nila] so they can deal with it better."

The camp also has licensed professionals and counsellors that facilitate the sessions. They started the first camp in the summer of 2017 and facilitated another one in December 2017. "Ang layunin namin ay una, to provide them with a safe space para makapag-share ng mga kwento nila. Makapag-grieve," Gaerlan says. "Kahit papano, from their sharing, matuto sila how to cope."

But it wasn't so easy to have the women share, she says. The killings, she adds, has heightened the sense of distrust and fear in communities. Gaerlan recalls one woman shared during the camp that nobody from their neighborhood attended the burial of her husband because nobody wanted to be associated with them. It was just her, alone and drenched in rain, mourning.

"Pinapaalala namin na grief is not linear, na akala mo 'pag naka-move on ka na okay na 'yun. Hindi. Sometimes grief comes back in waves." —Kristina Gaerlan

She also recalls another woman who said that she was physically abused by her husband. The woman said that she had trouble reconciling her sense of relief and her sadness because of her husband's untimely death. Gaerlan says that the range of the stories and the complexities of the situations were challenging to digest, but once the women share, she says that the families were able to see similarities and particularities that resonated with each other.

"[Malaki] nga 'yung impact dun sa ibang mga nanay. 'Yung isa na medyo 'suicidal' na siya, alam mo madilim talaga 'yung mukha niya," she shares. "'Yung mga exercises, nung una, halos hindi niya ginagawa pero tintutukan siya ng facilitator tapos ayun, sabi niya, after so long, nakatawa na siya."

Where do we go from here?

For the last day of the camp, the facilitators dedicate sessions on helping women find concrete ways to move forward. The women share their skills, their strengths, and together, attendees and counsellors, suggest plausible livelihood and jobs that they could take on.

There is also resource sharing, ranging from what the other families can do to help another family to giving them a list of organizations, such as Caritas, that they may be able to ask help from.

These practical ways are doable, but the call for justice doesn't seem to be. Delia and Grace are both afraid to take their cases to court for fear of being targeted again.

"Ako sa totoo lang gusto ko mabigyan ng katarungan kaso natatakot kami," says Grace.

"Kahit umuwi ka ng probinsya, pupuntahan ka pa rin doon eh. Diba? Kung may pera naman sila, pamamasahe lang naman nila eh," adds Delia.

Nathalie Africa-Verceles, a professor at the University of the Philippines' College of Social Work and Community Development who specializes in feminist economics, says that despite efforts to help these women, the State should have the principal responsibility to respect, protect, and fulfill human rights.

"It should effectively implement and enforce the numerous pro-women laws that guarantee these rights, such as the Magna Carta for Women," she says.

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While the aid extended by EveryWoman, Baigani, SNPP, and other individuals, can only go so far, Verceles says that these initiatives by private individuals and other organizations are indispensable nonetheless.

"The best [thing] to do is to work with women in communities, organize them, ascertain their needs with them, capacitate and empower them to claim their rights from the State," she says. "Organizing women in poor communities is so critical in order for them to realize political, social, economic, and personal empowerment."

Gaerlan agrees. "Maraming grupo na thankfully nag-join. Increasing 'yung public awareness nung effect ng EJKs at 'yung kagustuhang matulungan ['yung mga biktima]. Sana 'yung tulong, sa lahat ng levels na kaya natin."

After the interview, Delia and Grace are going back to their homes to continue looking for ways to provide for their families. Their dreams for Ryan and Rachel may have ended, but they continue to hope for a better future for their grandchildren.

"Wish ko lang mapa-graduate ko man lang sila kahit man lang high school," says Grace. "Ako din gusto ko lang makatapos ngayon 'yung mga apo ko," adds Delia.

**Names have been changed to protect their privacy.*

(https://www.myhivteam.com/resources/how-to-talk-to-your-doctor-about-weight-gain-and-hiv?utm_source=taboola&utm_medium=paid&utm_campaign=hiv_tc_symtuza_janssen_taking-care-of-yourself&utm_content=How+To+Talk+To+Your+Doctor+About+Weight+Gain+and+HIV&tbclcl=GiCDUaS8RZ3-OJKoD2VEDYKX07XuH-ygPnLn_zahSavECDF9D4oMyeBcf23bQdIFBsbGiCDUaS8RZ3-OJKoD2VEDYKX07XuH-ygPnLn_zahSavECDF9D4oMyeBcf23bQdI)

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