

In Payatas, a sewing facility employs drug war widows and orphans

Written by Portia Ladrado

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The sewing facility in Payatas was put up by Project SOW, a community initiative by the Ina ng Lupang Pangako Parish, Vincentian priests, pastoral workers, and various private groups and individuals, with the goal of providing rehabilitation and livelihood programs for left-behind families of EJK victims. Photo by PAU VILLANUEVA

Manila (CNN Philippines Life) — In the Bible, an area in ancient Canaan to the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea is said to be “the promised land.” It is a place believed to be given by God to the chosen people, the descendants of Abraham; a place interpreted to guarantee eternal happiness.

“The promised land” takes a different form in the Philippines. In Filipino, the phrase translates to ‘lupang pangako’; however, in Quezon City, a barangay called Lupang Pangako in Payatas does not invoke an image of paradise. Instead, it is teeming with slums; its scope serving as a major solid waste dumpsite; its neighborhood a witness and a victim to the extrajudicial killings (EJK) of the government’s drug war.

Ina ng Pangako's side streets is a small, inconspicuous one-storey structure made with unevenly finished blocks and corrugated metal roofing. "Tuloy Po kayo" is plastered on its derelict, wooden door, and inside, the women are busy cutting fabrics, threading sewing machines, and piling circular rugs on top of each other.

"These are lolas, mothers, orphans, and widows of EJK," says Dolly Eliorlaga, a member of Project SOW [[Support for Orphans and Widows](https://projectsow.weebly.com/) (<https://projectsow.weebly.com/>)] — a community initiative by the Ina ng Lupang Pangako Parish, Vicentian priests, pastoral workers, and various private groups and individuals, with the goal of providing rehabilitation and livelihood programs for left-behind families of EJK victims.



The sewing facility has employed 11 women as of this month. Not everyone can sew, so some of them do other jobs, such as cutting and sorting out fabrics. Photo by PAU VILLANUEVA



...in be of i...ct SOW, who started the feasibility study to identify what kind of livelihood program the women needed. ... of meetings with the widows, mothers, and orphans, they saw that a sewing production may be a viable option. Photo by PAU ...ANUEVA

Rodalyn Adan, a 32-year-old widow, lost her husband, Crisanto Albiter, on Oct. 2016. She recalls details of that day vividly. “Tumawag ‘yung stepmom ko na puntahan ang asawa ko po kasi may tama,” she says, “may tama ng baril.”

“Dali dali ako. Iniwan ko ‘yung one-month old baby ko. Sumakay ako ng tricycle para mabilis,” she continues. “Pero hanggang sa tricycle lang ako kasi hindi ako pinababa ng mga kakilala ko dun. Lahat kasi na nandoon sa drug den pinagpoposas na nila.”

She didn’t see her husband. She went home for fear of also being suspected to be a user or a pusher. “Unang-una iniisip ko kung magpupumilit akong pumunta doon, kahit na sa puso’t isip ko gusto ko puntahan ang asawa ko, mas nangibabaw po ang mga anak ko sa akin,” she says, blinking back tears.

She was still hoping her husband was alive; that perhaps after she left, he was rushed to the hospital and survived the bullet. Later that day, however, her sister-in-law called, telling her that her husband was already dead.

She, like all the other women whose husbands or sons died because of the drug war, has now been bearing the burden of having to provide for their children.

According to the latest [data](http://www.philrights.org/the-killing-state-the-unrelenting-war-against-human-rights/?fbclid=IwAR1i6JJM36quFLgp1UBiNJ9iFobhcDiZyPiBsOYQzcRqLB9hQoIDUO7v0YI) (<http://www.philrights.org/the-killing-state-the-unrelenting-war-against-human-rights/?fbclid=IwAR1i6JJM36quFLgp1UBiNJ9iFobhcDiZyPiBsOYQzcRqLB9hQoIDUO7v0YI>) gathered by the Philippine Human Rights Information Center (PhilRights), one in four of the EJK victims is a primary breadwinner. “Most are seasonal workers as well, with irregular and fluctuating incomes. Since most of those killed are already in abject poverty, their deaths have profoundly impacted the ability of the families left behind to meet their daily needs,” says Nymia Pimentel-Sibulan, the executive director of PhilRights.

“With already limited livelihood opportunities, plus the financial burden of funeral and burial costs, and for some, the need to relocate to avoid being further targeted and stigmatized, many families are driven further into poverty.”

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Rodalyn Adan, a 32-year-old widow, lost her husband, Crisanto Albiter, on Oct. 2016. She is now the sole breadwinner of their seven children.
Photo by PAU VILLANUEVA



"...nang buong buhay kasi may sakit 'yung anak ko. Hanggang ngayon, umiinom pa rin ng gamot," says Violeta Isip. "Gumagawa din talaga ako ng paraan para mabigyan ng baon 'yung apo ko." Photo by PAU VILLANUEVA

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Violeta Isip, a 64-year-old grandmother, has also taken the role of a breadwinner after her son-in-law was shot to his death. Before even having time to grieve, she had to confront the financial responsibilities herself because her daughter was and is still unable to get out of their house because of a pulmonary disease.

"Biro mo 'yung pinatutubos sa amin [para makuha ang bangkay] nasa disisyete mil," Isip shares, explaining how SOCO [crime operatives] had already arranged for the embalming of her son-in-law without their knowledge. "Hindi raw pwedeng ilabas 'yung patay na hindi namin babayaran 'yung patay."

The parish in Lupang Pangako helped her with the expenses. However, until now, Isip is carrying the weight of having to pay for her daughter's medicine and the education of her 17-year-old grandson. "Ako na lang naghahanapbuhay kasi may sakit 'yung anak ko. Hanggang ngayon, umiinom pa rin ng gamot," she says. "Gumagawa din talaga ako ng paraan para mabigyan ng baon 'yung apo ko."

Keenly aware of the reports and the stories of families left behind from the drug war, Elorliaga says that Project SOW initially offered many forms of aid; however, they knew that it wouldn't be sustainable to only give dole outs for a long period of time. In June 2018, Elorliaga was asked by Fr. Danny Pilario, a Vincentian priest who has been helping the Lupang Pangako Parish, to make a feasibility study for what kind of livelihood they can supply.

"Marami kaming inisip. Magtinda, mag-canteen, pero masyadong perishable at mahirap hawakan 'yung ganoon," she shares. "Mineeting ['yung mga widows and mothers], kung sino ang marunong manahi kasi 'yun na 'yung nasa mind namin na hindi perishable dapat 'yung item."

"Kahit papaano may nakakain kami. Hindi kagaya noong hindi ko pa alam itong panahian, naghahagilap ako ng pera."

Project SOW then hired a seamstress who can guide and teach women like Adan and Isip on how to sew specific products. The small-scale production now has 14 sewing machines, and over a year on, 11 women have been receiving ₱250 per day for however many products — from tissue holders and small bags to rugs and wallets — they can finish. These products are then sold at a retail store in Quezon City, and during events for drug war victims across Metro Manila or during holy celebrations at the Lupang Pangako parish.

The project also hosts psychosocial rehabilitation sessions held in the parish every first and third Saturday of the month. Elorliaga says this has to go hand in hand with the sewing facility in order to have a more holistic rehabilitation for the women and their children. Other initiatives that help drug war victims are also doing psychosocial rehabilitation — such as the women's group Bagani that holds a ["family camp"](https://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/2018/03/22/Duterte-war-on-drugs-women-Philippines.html) (https://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/2018/03/22/Duterte-war-on-drugs-women-Philippines.html) out of town — because it is essential for their healing. Through these sessions, the women are able to process their grief, stand up to tired and painful memories, and share their very personal trauma in a space where they are truly understood. This sense of community and belonging has been a vital part of their ongoing recovery, especially since the drug war [has also broken up ties, communities, and relationships](https://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/2019/10/22/pcij-drug-war-part-one.html). (https://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/2019/10/22/pcij-drug-war-part-one.html)

"Pag nagsalita kami sa kapitbahay namin, huhusgahan pa kami," Adan shares. "Hindi ko nga makalimutan, 'yung kaibigan ko pa siya na sinabi niya pa mismo, galing pa po sa bunganga niya, na dapat lang daw papatayin 'yung asawa ko kasi nakakasira ng buhay ng tao. Masakit po pakinggan."



The products that the women have been able to finish since the facility opened in 2018: bags, tissue holders, and pouches, among others.
Photo by PAU VILLANUEVA



products are sold at a retail store in Quezon City, and during events for drug war victims across Metro Manila or during holy at the Lupa, Pangako parish. Photo by PAU VILLANUEVA

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usually face is absenteeism, since these women are usually the sole guardians of their children or grandchildren. If a family member gets sick or needs attending to, they also have to skip work. This may make it difficult for the production to take larger volumes of products. The women are also not highly skilled workers yet, so scaling the production into a bigger, more profitable enterprise can be challenging.

Besides the practical, tangible hurdles that should be overcome, the trauma left in these women is also a strain that may continue to be difficult to address, since at the heart of this problem is a drug war campaign that persists. Pimentel-Sibulan says that the government must first put an end to the war on drugs. “The government must take seriously the proposals from various sectors for a public health-centered approach to curbing illegal drugs, which should be anchored on human rights standards and principles,” she explains.

Pimentel-Sibulan suggests that the Department of Social Welfare and Development should lead a program that would have direct services that are responsive to the needs of these families. She adds, “The government also needs to recognize that, on top of immense grief, losing a loved one due to the so-called war on drugs also carries with it a stigma that essentially limits the families' access to key government services and places them in a constant state of fear and insecurity.”

For now, a project like the sewing facility is a small but necessary step toward rehabilitation. “Kahit papaano may nakakain kami. Hindi kagaya noong hindi ko pa alam itong panahian, naghahagilap ako ng pera,” Isip says. “Pupunta ako sa kapatid ko, maglalaba muna ako, para bigyan lang ako ng pera. Para akong namamalimos sa mga kapatid ko.”

Adan says that the sewing initiative has also been a massive help to her household. “Di ko na poproblemahin na maghapon unlike dati, nangangapa ako kung anong pambaon ng mga bata. Pamasaha nila, 'yung uulamin namin,” she says.

“Ngayon sure na may ₱250 kami so napakalaking kaluwangan bilang magulang, bilang ina. At the same time, nalilibang din po kami, nakakalimot kahit papaano.”

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