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# Rebuilding Lives Amid the Ruins of Duterte's War on Drugs

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**ABSTRACT**

President Duterte's War on Drugs in the Philippines, locally known as *tokhang* (summary killings) has been widely criticized, with civil society and human rights groups, as well as Western democracies and international groups like Amnesty International, condemning its brutality and impunity. There has been uproar over the ruthless killings of suspected drug 'addicts' who were mostly male, from urban poor communities. The paper looks at the class and gendered dimensions of the drug war using a feminist frame. It examines in particular the experiences of left-behind women of *tokhang* victims, and how their victimization consequently affects their political agency. The paper utilizes women's testimonies and their significance in breaking the culture of fear and silence. These testimonies are also important in raising consciousness and building solidarity among victims of state violence, as well as appealing for collective action against state violence. These testimonies also reveal challenges women face as they confront state violence, literally executed by male state agents. This paper shows the asymmetries of power between State and its victims and brings to light the ways in which women in solidarity with civil society organizations are rebuilding their lives amid the ruins of Duterte's war on drugs.

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"The first year of the Duterte government is a dangerous year to be a woman. It is marked by colossal human rights crisis. It is the year of misogyny and extra judicial killings. It is a year of national grieving."

— *Senator Risa Hontiveros*

"For every *tokhang* victim, there is a woman wailing beside."

— *Neri Colmenares, human rights lawyer and activist*

"Either our husbands or sons die in the drug war that is why it is us women who are here."

— *Nanette, #WomanLaban*

## I. Witnessing State Terror

> The past lives in the present, and traumatic pasts still throb and ache. (Sutton, 2018)

> Others just don't see it, but every night I still cry for my son, Aldrin. It has been 1,011 days since my son was killed. Until now I can still remember the night he was killed on October 2, 2017, 10:30 in the evening. My son was talking with his friends, when *three to four* motorcycles arrived. They let my son kneel at the center of the street and gunned him down *five* times – *two* on the head, *one* on the neck, *two* on the chest. He was killed on the spot as all his wounds were fatal… I cannot forget that night, when I saw my son sprawled with eyes and mouth open. It is a most difficult memory, I think of him every night, even in my sleep… I am seeking justice for my son, for us, and for other families who lost their loved ones just like that. To tell you the truth, we are from poor families. It is hard to obtain the necessary papers. Most of us have chosen to be silent. They even told me to "leave it up to God." I have entrusted my son to God but it is I who shall seek justice. I need to speak out. I need to let others know what is going on – how violence has escalated to the point that people can be killed just like that. This is unjustifiable and unnatural. That's why I have become a human rights defender because of what is happening around us. First, because of what happened to my son, and to other families who are also seeking justice (Castillo, 2020).

Nanette's life has changed since the gruesome murder of her son in 2017, from being a devastated witness to the atrocity of state violence, she is now a human rights defender seeking justice not only for her slain son but on behalf of other victims of extrajudicial killings of Duterte's war on drugs. Her narrative reveals her anguish, anger and resolve to tirelessly pursue justice and defend human rights.

This paper examines the narratives of women – widows, mothers, and daughters — who lost their loved ones to the ongoing Philippine war on drugs. Women's testimonies are significant because they reveal the brutality, atrocity and injustice of State violence through *tokhang* vis-a-vis State narratives about its war on drugs. These testimonies help piece together the different versions of "truth" that often clash as they are told by different actors — the police, victims, witnesses and media

With the Philippine war on drugs resulting in 6,000 (Gonzales, 2019) to 27,000 deaths (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Aljazeera, 2019; Philrights, 2019; Simbulan et. al., 2019; Johnson & Fernquest, 2018; Arguelles & Gregorio, 2020), there is overwhelming evidence that the killings are now a standard operating procedure of the State's exercise of violence. As the Philrights (2019) documentation report indicates, "extra-judicial killings have become the hallmark of the Duterte administration's governance" (p.5). On the one hand, a punitive style of governance promotes the proliferation of various forms of violence by the State against its citizens (Lancaster, 2010, p.74). On the other hand, weak laws, strong executives, and fearful and frustrated citizens are likely to give rise to something akin to the drug war and its extrajudicial killings (Johnson & Fernquest, 2018, p.361).

There has been public outcry against the gruesome manner by which the State, via the police and State-sanctioned vigilantes, utilizes the politics of humiliation and violence (Reyes, 2016, p.111). For example, placing placards on dead bodies to identify them as criminals and sow fear, as well as tagging these bodies as deserving of death. I am reminded of Judith Butler's (2004) notion of the "ungrievable," which in this case, are the suspected drug users, mercilessly executed, deprived of the right to due process, and even their humanity. The State itself has removed the rights and liberties of certain groups of people it

has tagged as "criminal"; their crimes deprive them of their "humanity", thus giving the State the right to kill them. This is similar to how notions of citizenship are defined by the way that the State categorizes its populace, especially those at the margins, or what Agamben (1998) calls "bare life." Bare life postulates a kind of existence whereby one is reduced to the basics of human life, at times already indistinguishable from animal life. Worse, the Philippine President Rodrigo R. Duterte has ordered citizens to become killer-vigilantes themselves, telling them that "if you know of any addicts, go ahead and kill them yourself as getting their parents to do it would be too painful" (The Guardian, 2016). Drug addicts have been referred to as "worse than animals" by both ordinary people and government officials. In defending a cabinet secretary, for example, President Duterte angrily declared "[W]hat crime against humanity? In the first place, I'd like to be frank with you, are they (drug users) human? What is your definition of a human being? Tell me." Given such views about drug addicts in Philippine society, what chance do drug suspects have of invoking their human rights if they are ruthlessly othered, especially by the State?

The Latin American feminist collective has taught us the importance of testimonies (*testimonio*) as "a crucial means of bearing witness and inscribing into history those lived realities that would otherwise succumb to the alchemy of erasure" (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Santos & Morey, 2013). Likewise, testimonies provided by Argentinian women showed the importance of women's role in bringing to light the atrocities of state violence and holding state agents accountable for the gross violation of human right (Sutton, 2018).

From a feminist perspective, differences in privilege (power wielder versus marginalized) and worldview (authoritarian versus democratic) are important considerations for knowledge production. Testimonies against power-wielders should be given more weight in the context of impunity and extreme state coercion. As a feminist and engaged anthropologist, I task myself to write on behalf of marginalized women who are speaking courageously against state terror and violence.

The centrality of the role of women in bearing witness and speaking truth to power cannot be disregarded in the light of contemporary movements ignited by women's anger

and rage like the MeToo Movement and Black Lives Matter. The gendered aspects of emotions, in particular women's long held anger, has taken a new turn with the above-mentioned movements, escalating into the Women's March in America a day after a misogynist US President was elected into office, and spilling into other countries like the Philippines as resistance to a misogynist president.

The paper also examines the impact of the war on drugs on left-behind family members, mostly women, who are resisting masculinist myths propagated by state agents that justify extrajudicial killings by portraying victims as "aggressors" or *nanlaban*. Women's resistance narratives counter the State narrative and in effect becomes a way to fight back (nanlaban) against State violence. The word nanlaban has been appropriated by activists to enjoin the public to resist the State narrative that justifies the killings of suspected drug addicts by portraying them as criminals, instead of people in need of treatment and rehabilitation. For activists, manlaban (to resist) is an imperative against State impunity.

I argue that the war has gendered as well as class dimensions, reinforcing the precarity that underlies the life of the urban poor — deprived of their basic human right to survive and mercilessly executed, their families mired in fear and poverty. As one bystander in an urban poor community said after witnessing the brutal murder of an alleged drug addict, "they are slaughtering us like animals" (Berehulak, 2016). In the aftermath of the extrajudicial killings, it is mostly women family members who are left behind to rebuild their families' lives amid poverty, prejudice, stigmatization from being associated with *tokhang* victims. Butler (2009) shows the links between precarity and politics and how certain lives are rendered abject and meaningless, ill-treated and blamed for their moral failures, instead of questioning the power structures responsible for their oppression.

The paper utilizes the concept of *taguyod*, (to sustain the existence of family usually by older members, like a support that carries on), to pertain to the multiple burdens as well as the resilience of women in dealing with such a heavy load as household heads and as activists seeking justice for the deaths of their loved ones. Through the lens of these women's stories, I argue that women's consciousness and agency are transformed as a consequence of

their victimization. Their emotional states become a significant dimension of their struggle in the face of suffering and injustice. These frame the ways in which they participate in protest actions and progressive movements enhancing their potential as agents of change. The progressive movement consists of a broad alliance of organizations belonging to the left wing in Philippine politics that have been at the forefront of protecting Philippine democracy since the authoritarian regime of Marcos.

Finally, the paper also considers the potential as well as limits of women's involvement in these political engagements as the constraints of poverty, multiple burden, cultural scripts (gender and class) weigh down options available to them. The resulting struggle of these women due to the war on drugs warrants that the war on drugs be considered a violence against women, and warrants that these women be included in the category of Women in Especially Difficult Circumstances (WEDC) by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD).

The primary data in this paper take the form of testimonies gathered from a variety of sources: a focus group discussion (FGD) with women leaders of ZOTO (Zone One Tondo a federation of urban poor groups; the testimony of Ms. Nanette Castillo at the In Defense of Human Rights and Dignity Movement Live Forum, a national movement for the defense of Human Rights and the realization of a life of dignity among Filipinos (July 9, 2020); the testimonies of women in the forum Rise Up for Life and for Rights and #WomanLaban during the launching of the Mga Mananangol Laban sa Extrajudicial Killings (Manlaban sa EJK or Resist EJK) at the UP College of Law (March 7, 2018); and an interview with a member of the National Acupuncture Detoxification Association (NADA) working with *tokhang* survivors. In addition, secondary data from reputable media agencies have been collected and presented as vignettes.

## II. Gendering the War on Drugs

Muehlmann (2018) analyzes how gender relations have structured the war on drugs, how state repression has also been gendered, and how drug wars affect men and women differently. In

the Philippines, the drug war has predominantly targeted males. From the names of suspected "addicts" that are on the watch list, and the mass interrogations of tens to hundreds of (mostly poor) men are called out of their homes, lined up, arrested and questioned. Some of them end up dead, reportedly after resisting (*nanlaban*) the police. In fact, in several news and documentation reports, the common profile of *tokhang* victims are male adults of working age, often family breadwinners, and low-wage and irregular-wage earners from the informal sectors of the economy, are of low educational attainment, and are residents of urban poor communities (Philrights, 2019, p.7).

### A. "War Widows": Women-left-behind are Women in Especially Difficult Circumstances (WEDC)

While the drug war usually conjures the image of male drug addicts, there is a pressing need to look at the gender dimensions of the drug war from the perspective of the women-left-behind. With their men and boys violently taken by the drug war carnage, there is an increase in the number of "war widows" (Agence France-Presse [AFP], 2017) from Duterte's Drug War. "For every *tokhang* victim, there is a woman wailing beside," said Neri Colmenares (2018), a former congressman and human rights lawyer, during a forum on the impact of the drug war on women. He adds, "Out there are ten thousand mothers who have borne the personal brunt of the loss of a husband or a child… women must take on themselves the breadwinner mantle and teaching the children how to cope with grief and anger, with dignity and honor." Colmenares' observations are shared by a focused group discussion of urban poor women (ZOTO women leaders on April 7, 2018) whose leader spoke out about the plight of women in the midst of the drug war. She showed how the deaths of fathers mean a corresponding loss of breadwinners in their families, creating not only orphans but orphans who now have to contend with even more poverty, sometimes even hunger.

Section 30 of Republic Act 9710 or the Magna Carta of Women states that WEDC "shall refer to victims and survivors of sexual and physical abuse, illegal recruitment, prostitution, trafficking, armed conflict, women in detention, victims and survivors or rape and incest, and

such other related circumstances which have incapacitated them functionally." Stories upon stories of the extreme situation of war widows or women-left-behind warrant the inclusion of *tokhang* or the drug war as violence against women which the Magna Carta of Women defines as:

> "VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN (VAW) refers to any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life." Section 4 Magna Carta of Women (RA 9710)

The vignette of Sally Antonio (a pseudonym) in 2017 tells us how war widows and women-left-behind are WEDC: "I'm angry… Why did they have to kill my husband and son, and leave families like ours to sacrifice? When they killed my husband and son, they also killed me." Providing a narrative replete with her difficulties in sustaining her children after the loss of her husband and son who were both breadwinners, Sally's story caught media attention (AFP, 2017). Sally lost two men — a husband who used to take care of their children at home and her 19-year-old breadwinner son who was a waiter. The police raided their home on September 2016 and killed both men, with the narrative that the father and son fired the first shots, which Sally refuted. Sally admitted that her husband did use drugs but was not into selling. Her son, not a drug user, was killed when he begged for his father's life during the drug raid.

Life thus became more difficult for Sally and her children. She needed three jobs — washing laundry, running errands for neighbors, and being a community security officer to feed her family as well as buy her son's medications because of his heart condition. "Sometimes I am so exhausted and my hands are too painful. I have to stop for one, two days. Then I have to borrow money from neighbors and we have to scrimp on food." She lacks sleep — at times only two hours a day to finish her jobs. Her 18-year-old daughter had to drop out of university to take care of her younger siblings. Sally's dilemma, apart from the difficult task of

making ends meet, is the mental anguish that her children will grow up without a father figure. More than the economic burden of putting food on the table daily, she emphasizes that her family has been deprived of their father's care and guidance, which is "irreplaceable".

The war has already made orphans of 18,000 children (a conservative estimate) according to the DSWD (See, 2016). This has forced a growing number of older women and grandmothers to care for orphans, as their mothers could not be a fully functional breadwinner, or have been killed themselves or jailed. But being between 60 to 90 years of age, these women could not really be active caregivers of the children. Despite their debility, these grandmothers (*lolas*) find themselves looking for gainful employment to support their orphaned grandchildren. In interviews with social workers from Project SOW (Support for Orphans and Widows) and Rise Up for Life and for Rights Philippines, it was found out that elderly people have resorted to doing laundry and selling vegetables just to sustain the family (*maitaguyod ang pamilya*) (Malig & Tangines, 2017).

**B. Teenage Widows**

Santos (2018) points to an epidemic of teenage widows and single mothers, left to fend largely for themselves and their offspring. They are known as the hidden cost of the drug war, facing a bleak future without government support nor jobs available to them as minors. He cites the case of a 16-year old Jazmine Durana, whose story was featured in the media as among the teen widows of Duterte's war on drugs (Jimenez-David, 2018; Santos, 2018). In a country with the highest teen pregnancy rates in the region, Jazmine is a teen mother. She has lost her co-parent and breadwinner to a state-sanctioned drug war. She made several attempts to find a job to support her now two-year old daughter, who was only a month old when her partner was gunned down. She looks younger than 16 with her diminutive figure, making it more difficult for her to find a job as prospective employers see her as a child that could lead them to violate laws on child labor. Though she was too young to officially marry her boyfriend, Jazmine is now essentially living as a teen widow. On paper, she is a social anomaly. As a minor, she cannot access two important things she badly needs: a job and birth

control (Jimenez-David, 2018). Yet as a widow and a mother, she needs to get a job and take over the responsibility of being a breadwinner after her husband's death. Her situation, as well as many of teenage widows have finally caught the attention of many including a former Commissioner of the National Youth Commission, Perci Cendaña, who speaks of the "intersectionality of the problems on public health and welfare, security and social justice, and an indication of the failures as a society" (Santos, 2018). Young widows are becoming part of a demographic trend that needs government attention, if not compassion. This is further exacerbated by State's failure to implement its Reproductive Health Law that could have stemmed the rise of teenage pregnancy such the case with Jazmine.

**C. Bullying and Stigmatization**

Apart from the pain of losing a loved one, the stigmatization of their death is even worse as shared by Nanette:

> "I realized how cruel people can be, when my son died. I read their comments when the news broke out about what happened to my son. One even commented, 'That should be, because your son is an addict.' This was followed by another stinging comment, 'that should be because your family is part of a syndicate, and you're a negligent mother!' These kinds of remarks. 'You too are an addict, your family is like a plague.' I could not understand why they said these things, during my son's wake." (Castillo, 2020)

Even the traditional manner of mourning the dead through a *lamay* (a wake) has changed due to the stigma that these deaths cause, oftentimes avoided even by kin for fear of being associated with suspected drug addicts. Such fear is not without basis. Relatives are often hounded to squeal more names to add to the drug list, which effectively make them next targets for execution.

Given the manner of death of many suspected drug users, their families bear the stigma and fear brought on by being associated with a victim of *tokhang*. A culture of silence has pervaded survivors for fear of retaliation. Some families have been especially wary of police

hunting them down as witnesses to brutal killings. As such, some have to seek shelter elsewhere until after the danger of reprisal has passed. This is how sinister State violence has seeped into the homes of the poor. Left-behind members live to tell their horrifying tales, and many of them are women.

One *tokhang* widow shared a poignant story about how she bitterly wept when none of her kin and neighbors came to the wake of her husband for fear of being associated with a *tokhang* victim. Not only is she suffering from a lack of moral support, the failure to hold a *lamay* means an inability to raise the much needed *abuloy* (donations) for expenses that include the burial. They often rely on earnings from small-time gambling during a wake. Some reportedly have no funds to pay for the casket and the formaldehyde needed to preserve the body. The more the body stays in the funeral parlor, the more indebted they become. In death, the poor are mired in even more indignities that they have to bear. Another problem that has been spurred by the deaths of drug suspects, is the reality that some family members, who are mostly women, risk selling drugs themselves to be able to survive financially. As Mr. Dennis Febre, who has been active in community programs intimated, "some of those left behind also sell drugs while others go into prostitution because it's a matter of survival." This was validated by women from ZOTO, admitting that women in their areas have been forced to go into the drug trade due to the lack of other options to support the family.

Rehabilitation of drug users should also be pushed, without fear of being targeted for *tokhang*. There have been cases where the fear of *tokhang* impedes a family's decision to let a loved one surrender and be rehabilitated. In the end, some of them end up dead. This happened to Irene's husband, Gerry, whom Irene wanted badly to be rehabilitated but was dissuaded by a barangay official, telling her they could do it on their own (Villalon, 2019). Irene narrated the difficulty of self-rehabilitation on the patient as well as family members who are not professionally equipped.

There is also the problem of psychological and emotional trauma. Psychologists and civil society groups have brought public attention to the difficulty of addressing the trauma of families of *tokhang* victims, especially those who witnessed the killings. Some civil society

organizations like Baigani and Rise Up for Life and Rights have started their own rehabilitation programs, conducting psycho-social support in rehabilitation camps to alleviate the psychological wounds of these families, and start their healing journey. NADA Philippines has been offering acupuncture sessions that address both drug and trauma cases. According to one acupuncturist who shared the impact of ear acupuncture on *tokhang* survivors, her patients come in with much anger and then gradually heal from their trauma.

**D. Palit-Puri: Sex-for-Freedom Scheme**

Jean Enriquez, Executive Director of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women — Asia Pacific (CATW-AP) exposed the *kama o kulong* (bed or prison) scheme of errant policemen where women who were either caught violating the law or had relatives facing charges, were forced to have sex with them (See, 2018). According to her, this sex-for-freedom scheme has been a "common practice" among policemen, but has worsened under Duterte's war on drugs. Known as *palit-puri* (sex in exchange for freedom) in street lingo, this scheme resurfaced in the news when a certain Police Officer 1 (PO1) Edgardo Valencia was apprehended for raping a minor in exchange for the release of her parents who were alleged drug pushers. The victim's mother claimed that when she and her partner were apprehended in the drug operation, Valencia and other law enforcers also brought their daughter to the police station where she was forced to drink liquor. Valencia then compelled the girl to have sex with him in exchange for clearing her parents from drug charges. Valencia offered to take her home but took her to a hotel instead and raped her. When confronted by his superior (which was incidentally aired on TV), Valencia denied the crime but retorted, "This is not new for our operatives when we arrest drug pushers." Valencia's response garnered a lot of reactions in social media, condemning how poor women become vulnerable targets of fascism and patriarchy.

CATW-AP has documented two cases of former prostituted women who were coerced into this scheme. One of them was married to a man who was arrested on trumped-up charges in 2016. The policemen demanded PhP30,000 (USD 616) for his freedom, but she was only able to raise PhP17,000 (USD349.50). Unable to resist the proposition out of fear and

desperation, she was brought to a hotel and became a sex slave for three policemen for three days. She was then given PhP100 (USD 2.06) and asked to go home, then her husband was released. Subsequently, she continued to be arrested for vagrancy, and would be coerced into sex for her freedom. Sadly, she was infected with HIV by one of the policemen. She never filed charges for fear that the police will kill her, including family and friends. According to Enriquez, the victim's hands are tied in these situations especially those from poor families, and some are prostituted women. Some may even be using drugs themselves, common in the sex trade for women to get rid of their inhibitions, as well as cope with their situation. Unlike in the past where women did not succumb to such coercive schemes and would rather opt for temporary detention, in the context of the war on drugs, these women tend to give in more easily because of the possibility of death. The rampant executions and culture of impunity looms ominously.

## II. Of Drugs, Gendered Ideologies and Scripts

Though not explicitly discussed in the literature, there are speculations about family members' alleged involvement in the drug trade — as runners and lookouts and even mules, and whether their involvement is volitional or not. A case in point that made headlines was that of a Filipina overseas worker, Mary Jane Veloso, who was sentenced to death in 2010, for unknowingly smuggling heroin to Indonesia. It is similar with children allegedly as young as eight years old, who are given a "package" or "item" to be brought to someone, unknowingly acting as "runners" in exchange for PhP50 (less than one USD).

It is mostly males who are lured into the drug trade, given the gender scripts that allow more liberties for boys to take risks (try new "tripping" such as drugs), or do "errands" (deliver "items") for their folks. A celebrated case of a mistaken "runner" in the drug trade was Kian de los Santos, a 17-year-old boy who was gunned down by policemen on allegations that he was a runner.

Data from other countries show men's control over the drug trade and the masculinization of the drug crisis (Muehlmann, 2018, p.317) particularly in the US and Latin

America. This seems to be true for the Philippines as well, with the State's propensity for targeting men and boys. The skewed number of deaths involving males is evidence of this, as well as the previously mentioned drug watch list. Another evidence is statistics from the Philippine National Police (PNP) in 2016 that showed the following child surrenderees within the first two months of the drug war according to gender: 18,902 males; 1,273 females, 63 gays and 346 lesbians.

It is mostly male State agents who implement the drug war — whether they are uniformed police, masked vigilantes who ride in tandem on motorcycles, or cops in civilian clothes who carry out the killings. Men, like Duterte, the institutions involved in drafting of the drug war policy and its implementors, chose a militaristic approach, that often is imbued with abuses by implementors on the ground, particularly the police and the armed vigilantes. Meanwhile, female police officers were tagged "top performers" in the anti-drug campaign. Police superintendent Lea Supelana was described as having "bested even her male counterparts with a high number of surrenderees" (Barcia, 2016). What this implies is that although there are gendered approaches to the current drug war, it has been masculinized.

A female Vice-President's short stint in the drug war campaign, showed a more comprehensive, humane approach by treating the drug problem mainly as a public health issue. The previously mentioned woman superintendent seemed to be on a similar path and was actively advocating for a more comprehensive and rehabilitative rather than militaristic approach. Muehlmann (2018~~, p.316~~) notes how the militarized language of the policies "contributes to producing the violence it purportedly seeks to cease by conscripting the public into supporting a "war" (p.316; Campbell & Herzberg, 2017). She notes that this militarization has been particularly dramatic in countries such as the United States, Mexico, Afghanistan and, more recently, the Philippines. Though it may seem that militarization and masculinization of the drug war is evident, this view obscures the 'complexity' of the gendered nature of the drug crises (Muehlmann, 2018; Franco, 2018). Literature in many countries including the Philippines shows how gendered ideologies can impact drug policies. An example is how

notions of masculinity are tied to respectability among Puerto Rican men and the crack economy in Harlem (Bourgois, 2003).

Women's drug use on the other hand, had largely been tied to their identity and role as mothers — a role that can be impaired by drug use. Scholars have critiqued such an essentialist conception of women as well as the dualist notions that pin men as "pushers" and women as "passive users" (Muehlmann, 2018, p. 318). I agree with Muehlmann's point that this highly masculinized view of illegal drug use that has escalated into a drug war, largely obscures women's presence and agency in these domains as the following section discusses.

**A. Framing Women's Sorrow and Suffering**

The banality of violence and its impact on the women had been poignantly captured in an iconic photo now dubbed "La Pieta" by the media. The photo, which was captured by Filipino photojournalist Raffy Lerma, shows Jennilyn Olayras cradling the body of her dead partner, Michael Siaron. Diaz (2019) writes that, apart from revealing the ruthlessness of Duterte's drug war, the photo redirects the viewer's attention not to Siaron's dead body, but to the suffering of Olayres (pp. 693-694). The powerful image evoked the plight of mothers and wives who lost loved ones to the drug war. Even Duterte had to admit the power of this image, lashing out at the media during his State of the Nation Address (SONA) for "sensationalizing" the drug war with this Madonna-like image. The evocative image had effectively unsettled Duterte's narrative of the drug war and what McCoy (2017) calls Duterte's penchant for performative violence, using bodies of addicts, usually taped, tied and dumped in the streets, with placards bearing the sign, "I am an addict, do not emulate me." Often included in the crime is a.38-caliber gun, and a sachet containing shabu, allegedly planted by the police to justify the killing. This type of performative display reeks of a macho narrative that has become doubtful for its uncanny uniformity.

Two cases illustrate how women's embodiment of sorrow and suffering, represented by media, have the capacity to move people into action.

The widely criticized killing of a teenager and alleged drug runner, Kian de los Santos, was an example of how evidence derived from CCTV can refute such a narrative. This particular case angered the nation which saw how policemen mercilessly murdered a schoolboy who pleaded for the police to "please stop, I still have a test tomorrow." Kian's tragic demise was made even sadder when the public learned that his mother was an overseas Filipino worker (OFW), whose sacrifice for her son's future was all for naught when his life was brutally ended by the police. Lorenzana, who worked as a domestic helper in Saudi Arabia, had to beg for her employers to let her come home and bury her son. Her tearful homecoming was all over the news, with politicians, including the President, condoling at the wake. She vowed to get justice for her son no matter what it took. The family sought the help of the Commission on Human Rights, which opened an investigation. A Church organization offered legal and financial assistance. "Like us, they also want answers to why this government is killing poor, innocent people," Lorenzana said (Subingsubing, 2017). The couple was also granted an audience with President Duterte two days after Kian's burial. The President promised them justice for their son Kian. In 2018, the three policemen were convicted by a local court to *reclusion perpetua* equivalent to 20 to 40 years of imprisonment. Lorenzana felt vindicated, I'm very happy because this proves that my son is innocent. He was never involved in illegal drugs. Kian's father, Saldy said, "I'm also happy because we got justice for our son."

This particular case had a speedy resolution upon the intervention of the President himself, who was pressured due to public outcry as thousands marched for his burial, turning it into a protest. Kian became a rallying cry against the abuses of state agents executing the war on drugs, and was a grim warning for families that young innocent sons like Kian can easily be targeted and killed. Duterte's paternalistic narrative of being a protector of the nation was shattered with the death of a young innocent son, who ironically had big dreams of becoming a policeman. The sorrow and anger of a mother demanding justice for her young innocent son fueled the anger of a nation over the death of minors, something the government considers a mere collateral damage of the war on drugs.

**B. Of Stoic Fathers**

Gendered ideologies also lead to double standards that can impact on notions of grief and suffering. While women like Nanette, as well as other war widows have been shown to mourn their sons and husbands, there is little written about the fathers, who according to one article, "have been silently mourning" (Santos, 2020). Santos contextualizes this within "deeply entrenched norms that equate male strength with stoicism that leave Filipino fathers struggling to cope with loss" (Santos, 2020). While women come together to show their grief at support group sessions, and even seek help to ease their trauma, men purportedly are left to grieve silently and take it like a man. Boys have been socialized "not to cry" for fear of being branded as "bakla" (gay). Adding to the problem is the ideology of parenthood that puts a premium on motherhood and that asserts that there is no grief like a mother's. Hence, it seems that social norms define how a mother's rage is justifiable and expected. So how has this rage mobilized the women?

**C. #WOMANLABAN: Women Rising Up**

An important event that featured the voices of women who are fighting against the Drug War was the forum Rise, Resist, Unite against *tokhang* and Tyranny, a forum on the human rights implications of President Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs, organized by a new network of lawyers called Mga Mananangol Laban sa EJK or MANLABAN sa EJK. In this forum, women survivors' riveting testimonies were heard.

Nanette has been working with faith-based group Rise Up for Life and for Rights. In her testimony, Nanette states that she owes it to her son to speak out not only about his fate, but also on behalf of those who cannot or who would not speak. "Other victims are scared," Nanette said. "I want them to be empowered, I want mothers to be enlightened. You have to stand up because you are victims, you have nothing to be afraid of. And even if you aren't victims, you should speak up."

Other women, like Angela and Normita Lopez, chose to file cases against the police who killed their sons in separate drug operations. As Normita says, "they are our families and

we love them, we fight for the people we love." Angela is represented by the National Union of Peoples Lawyers (NUPL) through Attorney Krissy Conti, who considers these women as the "moving force" of this fight against EJKs. Atty. Conti and her fellow advocates against EJKs coined the term "WoManlaban" to emphasize what it means for every woman to fight in this war on drugs. It also a play on the word "nanlaban" (fought back), the reason almost always cited by cops for killing drug suspects (Lopez, 2018). The force of women is not lost on Atty. Conti and her fellow advocates, acknowledging the fact that women hold families together and there is potential for them to mobilize other family members to join in their fight. The danger posed by this statement however, points to a tendency to dichotomize between men and women's methods of struggling or leadership that categorizes women as relationship-oriented and men as task-oriented. This is a contentious dimension of women leadership (Kim, 2018) – one that categorizes women's leadership as feminine leadership, as opposed to feminist leadership.

Women's affect may be key to their political agency. Just like the mothers of Latin America, their anger can help bring an end to authoritarian rule. The remarkable mothers (and grandmothers) of Plaza de Mayo were able to turn military ideology against the regime (Sutton, 2018). Recent literature on anger reveals its potential political impact (Traister, 2018; Cooper, 2018; Chemaly, 2018) like the anger that launched the Women's March in America and Black Lives Matter, and MeToo Movement. As Jean Enriquez, co-convenor of Women's March and #BabaeAko Movement in the Philippines says, "there has been a lot of anger already percolating inside of women, and it was the perfect moment, the hashtag is something we all can identify with."

Another interesting group that has caught public attention is the Women's Patrol in Pateros, a volunteer group made up of mothers, housewives and even grandmothers who patrol their communities from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m. They remind curfew breakers or those drinking alcohol to go home. According to women's accounts, they started the women's patrol after two deaths in their area. The mayor only learned of them after their establishment and was skeptical about them. They told him that this initiative was borne out of their trauma which

made it difficult for them to sleep, and the children acting nervous upon seeing motorcycle riders. A manifestation of their trauma was that no one roamed the streets as early as 7 p.m. Since they started this initiative, the *tokhang* has stopped. The group has since grown from the original 16 to 300, with volunteers from other areas. As Jimenez-David (2019) writes, "And so it has come to this. Mothers leaving their families and homes in the dead of night, risking their lives, sheltering under the friendship and sisterhood of other women, and walking through their neighborhoods just to make sure one is abruptly arrested, shot at or killed in the name of the war on drugs."

When asked if women can make a difference in resolving these problems, including the drug war menace and Duterte's tyranny, ZOTO women leaders responded that they can indeed make a difference especially at the grassroots or marginalized areas. The key, according to them is solidarity. They also believed in a separate organization for women to advocate for women's issues such as violence against women and children. In some instances, it is the experience with such violence as *tokhang* that drives these women to join protest movements. It is also the need to be in solidarity with other similarly-situated women and journey towards their healing and eventual empowerment. However, despite their desire for active participation, they are often curtailed by economic difficulties and sustainability. Hence the need for a holistic approach that includes income-generation for the group's sustainability and a solid educational program that focuses on women's rights and realities that show the intersections with other societal issues. Support networks are likewise important that can be tapped by the movement or organizations for mutual assistance based on their specialization (e.g., training, healing, etc.) for sustainability.

Rowlands (1997) who worked with rural women in Honduras, in her book, 'Questioning Empowerment 'refers to different forms of empowerment that women gain within the context of their struggles. *Power* within, or the personal inner strength, transforms women's disposition and motivation to become an agent of change, as shown by Nanette's resolve to become the voice of the voiceless. A social media post by a woman who is part of a survivors' collective,

a great part of their healing comes from being heard and acknowledged as persons worthy of respect. It comes from knowing that their lives matter.

The women of ZOTO believe women can be a potent force when they come together and advocate for change. Rowlands (Townsend et.al., 2000) refers to this type of empowerment as *power with*, or the realization of solidarity among women who have similar struggles as mothers, urban poor women, though not discounting their differences in terms of class or ethnicity. The potential of women to be catalysts for change and as political actors are immense. The crucial aspect of women's testimonies would be that these will be used to file charges at the International Criminal Court (ICC) as documentation for the brutality of the war on drugs unleashed by the Duterte administration. The process has actually started with 58 submissions of cases filed at the ICC. Furthermore, locally, this can serve to refute police narratives that always put the blame on the victims and their supposed resistance.

The Latin American experience likewise strengthens my view that Filipino women particularly, in highlighting the maternal symbol, may be able to bring in a significant contribution to the current debacle and rally against social issues such as the *tokhang*. As Neri Colmenares (2018), remarked at the RISE UP forum, "it will take feisty and consistent female courage to take this administration and all perpetrators and enablers to account." For him, it may be these same women who have been victimized who will eventually put an end to the war on drugs, and this brutal authoritarian administration.

The women likewise bring in a different approach to traditional protests that includes symbols and narratives of love, sacrifice, empathy and solidarity. These values inspire their journey toward healing (*paghilom*), so they can really sustain (*taguyod*) with their quest for justice. Without reifying the maternal, performative displays of motherhood, akin to the powerful image of La Pieta may be invoked as a symbol of women's resistance. Reynaldo Ileto (1979) talks about the importance of symbols like these that rally people towards dissent and nationalism – for *inang bayan* (literally, mother country).

But this does not preclude other types of identity politics that recognize intersectionality and solidarity. Among the groups that have been established is the

Empowered Women Survivors Collective, a group of women survivors of different kinds of violence (prostitution, rape and extrajudicial killings). The collective has recently established income-generating projects and is active in political rallies like the recent anti-terror law that is further violating the fundamental rights of Filipinos.

As the Drug War continues its catastrophic path and continues to wreck families, the women are left to fend for themselves and their communities. This should not be. Civil society groups should push for legislations like the Magna Carta of Women, which provides special assistance to WEDC, and the Solo Parent Act of 2000 (Republic Act 8972). Moreover, there are other statutes and laws that can be used to formally institute women's entitlements that would solidly push for concrete and comprehensive aid for families of *tokhang* victims. Many civil society initiatives that are more comprehensive have helped tremendously.[2]

## IV. Taguyod: Transforming Grief into Courage

Emily, a mother of a *tokhang* victim has been on a healing journey after losing her teenage son in 2016. In 2017, during the observance of her son's first death anniversary, she was hysterical before her son's tomb and called out to him to "grab their (perpetrators) feet and bring them with you!" Two years hence, Emily was a different person, who had turned her grief to courage and called on fellow victims to help in documenting new cases of extrajudicial killings. Seeking justice for loved ones lost have been a battle cry for women like Emily and Nanette. As Emily said,

> "It still hurts even though it's been three years. And yet, here I am, I still could not stop myself from crying, as a mother who continues to fight," "We need to act now to achieve justice. Let us not be afraid. We need to unite in documenting new cases, new victims. We are old now. When should

[2] Like the Baigani, Rise Up for Life and for Rights, NADA, Coalition Against Trafficking in Women-Asia Pacific (CATW-AP) and their efforts have resulted in the formation of organizations or groups like the Organisasyon ng mga Kababaihang Survivors (OKS), formed in the three cities of Caloocan, Quezon City and Manila, and the Empowered Women Survivor's Collective (EWSC).

> we start fighting but now, why should we stop just because we are afraid to die?"

The grieving mother had found courage to sacrifice even her life to the cause:

> "Me, I am ready to sacrifice myself. Since I joined Rise Up, I have dedicated my life to this cause, not just to this group, but to you and your loved ones. I will fight for them because I am no longer afraid to speak."

The sustainability of these types of struggles, with assistance from civil society organizations, can be valuable as a conjunctural event that helps galvanize more collective action. These struggles may start out with personal agenda (e.g., seeking justice for loved ones) but can further evolve into a deeper commitment for social change.

The women of ZOTO emphasized that being in a democratic country means having an effective government that addresses the needs of majority of its citizens like basic services and transforming its priorities to include recognition of social rights and advancement of economic equality. It also means allowing women's representation in electoral politics especially at the barangay level[3] to directly benefit them. The ZOTO women leaders recognize the importance of their representation in barangay activities such as the State of the Barangay Address (SOBA), where they make their presence felt to push for women's agenda and include women's issues such as VAWC (Violence Against Women and Children) and the fight against impunity. For them, the war on drugs is not the right solution and merely compounds the vulnerability of the poor who are the targets and bear the brunt of state violence.

As the onslaught of the war on drugs continues, the process of rebuilding amid the ruins of the drug war portends to be long and difficult, but those in #WomanLaban and their allies are resolved to transform their grief and anger into courage and carry on the fight (itaguyod) towards justice and accountability for the ravages of *tokhang*.

[3] Barangay is the smallest political unit in the Philippines.

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