

CASE STUDIES

PHILIPPINE WOMEN LOCAL HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP





Bayinihan

Bayi in local humanitarian leadership

The Bayinihan Local Humanitarian Leadership Local Workshop forms part of the “Women in Local Humanitarian Leadership (WLHL)” research–based feminist project of Bayi Inc. in partnership with Oxfam Pilipinas. WLHL intends to surface a localized, decolonial, gender-transformative awareness and understanding of local humanitarian leadership experiences to eventually influence policies that will encourage and capacitate local humanitarian leaders who are women and from gender minorities.

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This publication has been produced with the financial support from Oxfam Pilipinas. Its contents are the sole responsibility of BAYI, Inc., its editors, authors, and contributors and do not necessarily reflect the views and standpoint of Oxfam Pilipinas.



Project Background

The gender gap in humanitarian leadership is a concern in the Philippines, considering how the country is no stranger to conflict and disasters. From 2015-2019, the Philippines has been ranked consistently amongst the top three most vulnerable in terms of susceptibility to climate change and multiple climate hazards in several global indices (Heintze et al., 2018; Institute for Economics & Peace, 2019; Paun & Acton, 2018). Forty seven percent of the country's population live in areas highly exposed to climate hazards such as earthquakes, tsunami, floods, tropical cyclones and drought. The latest Global Risk Report outlines the following perceived risks in the Philippines: "Prolonged economic stagnation, digital inequality, extreme weather events, employment and livelihood crises, failure of public infrastructure" (World Economic Forum, 2022).

In the Philippines, local women's organisations, local government, civil society and community-based organizations are first responders in the time of conflict and disasters to fill in gaps that the national government are unable to address (Oxfam, 2020; Martin & de la Puente, 2018). In urban poor communities, women have been observed to be over-represented in disaster risk management, although unpaid and not always in positions of authority (Ramalho, 2019, p. 130). Grassroots women's networks have also been active in gender-responsive disaster risk reduction and resilience building efforts in communities (Villaceran & Jimenez, 2020). Capacitating local humanitarian actors and leaders should then be a priority, especially if building on the belief that, "preparedness and response actions before, during and after a crisis should be led by local humanitarian actors whenever possible" to ensure a more inclusive humanitarian process (Oxfam, 2020).

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This project seeks to address the observed gaps in research on women local humanitarian leadership, which has been noted in several studies (Black et al., 2017; Martin & de la Puente, 2018; Patel et al., 2020). It also seeks to challenge the conventional Western frames of reference in gender studies related to disaster risk reduction and management that focus on women due to the men-women binary.

Gender minorities (such as the bakla, LGBTQI, and non-heteronormative identities) not only face increased vulnerability during disasters but are also erased from reports and studies that should document their own humanitarian activities and efforts during times of conflict and disasters (Gaillard et al, 2017).

The project intends to surface a localised, decolonial, gender-transformative awareness and understanding of local humanitarian leadership experiences to eventually influence policies that will encourage and capacitate local humanitarian leaders who are women and from gender minorities. It specifically aims to:



Identify the barriers and opportunities for women and other gender minorities to take leadership positions in local humanitarian organizations or groups;



Expand and deepen informal networks of WOs, LGBTQI organisations, and women leaders in the humanitarian sector;



To develop an evidence-based practice model to understand the complex processes involved in capacitating and encouraging women and LGBTQI leadership in the humanitarian space;



Develop policy recommendations encompassing Women's Disaster Risk Reduction and Local Humanitarian Leadership agendas to influence National policy;



To ensure that intersectional feminist perspectives and principles are included and practiced in all stages of the project.



CASE STUDIES

BUTUAN WOMEN LOCAL HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP



Case Study: Lotha Torralba

A PWD Federation President who Calls on her Ability to Serve



“ I’m happy I’ve accomplished something, even with a disability. I hope that I inspire others with disabilities to serve. So many just stay home, but there is so much they can do in the community. ”

After a bout with polio as a child, Lotha was left with mobility issues. She was raised by her aunt and uncle, and she was able to finish her studies through college, unlike most people she has come to know in her work.

Lotha recognizes her privilege in that many other persons with disabilities (PWDs) face challenges in access and/or discrimination that prevent them from completing even their basic education. She also recalls a personal feeling of fear and now retrospective gratitude that she did not suffer the abuse for which PWDs, particularly women living with disabilities, are at especially high risk.

Although Lotha graduated with a degree in accounting, she did not apply for work because she did not feel that she could find employment due to her disability. Instead, she focused on family and her family’s businesses—

—which included boarding houses, bus terminals, and her husband’s political career as barangay kagawad. She also maintained an active role in her local church, beginning in 1996, where she was able to fulfill her desire to serve the community by receiving a certificate that allowed her to facilitate seminars primarily on responsible parenthood and communication.

For the last ten years, she has served as treasurer and acting president of the church’s *dayung* program, a mutual fund that members join by contributing P150, so that their families may avail of a lumpsum in case of death. This program exists as many of her churchmates work in the informal sector and have no access to life insurance. She enjoys the purpose this has provided her and believes that this is God’s way of having her use her formal education, even if later on in life.



In her volunteer work in the church, she has often filled in for the titled leaders, who happened to be men, because their paid commitments were prioritized over their parish commitments. Lotha only began to see herself as a leader when she assumed the role of president of her barangay's PWD association in 2016.

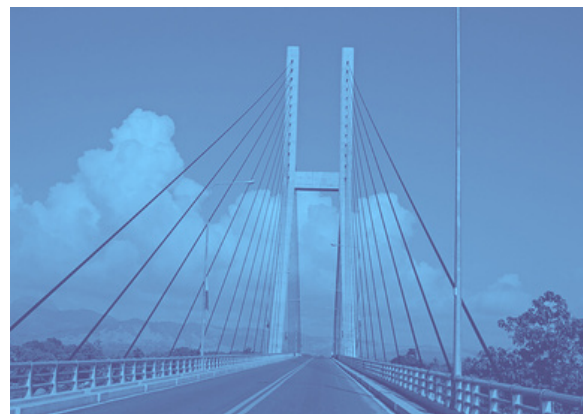
In 2021, she gained employment with the Persons with Disabilities Affairs Office (PDAO) of Butuan, and in 2022, she also became the president of Butuan City Federation of PWDs. Following her late husband's passing in 2022, her community encouraged her to take over her husband's work as *barangay kagawad*, but she chose to remain in her role in PDAO and with the PWD community in spite of the significant pay increase that would have come with the elected position.

She expressed hesitation to take on the barangay position since PWDs are not eligible for the civil service examination (CSE), and also because she could not ignore the marginalized voices of the PWDs she represents across the municipality.

“—————
A leader should be responsible and committed, with the goal of making the group productive.
—————”

As a leader, she prides herself on being approachable, and she is constantly taking calls for help on how to activate PWD associations.

Her unique experience as a PWD, as a barangay association president, and as an employee of the Butuan City PDAO begets her a comprehensive basis to give advice on how functioning local PWD associations may access the mandated share of one percent of the barangay budget, something that most she individuals or organizations she speaks to are surprised to find out.

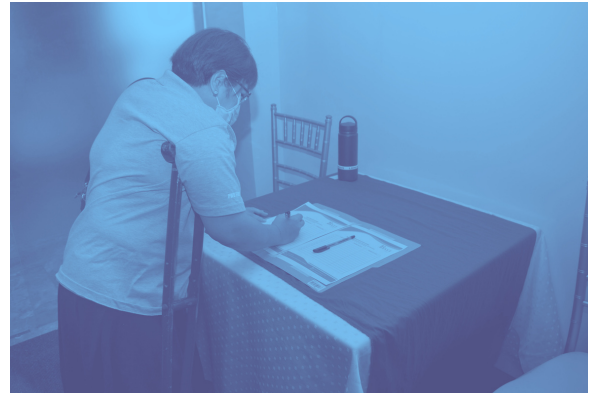


There are 86 barangays in Butuan, and Lotha's proudest accomplishment as a leader is seeing so many more of those barangays establishing or reviving their PWD associations because organizing is the only way that PWDs are able to assert their rights or gain access to programs mandated to benefit them.

She also encourages her constituencies to register complaints because she sees this as the first step to addressing problems, such as public buildings without PWD access, pharmacies that fail to comply with the required discount on medication for PWDs, or businesses practicing discriminatory hiring practices.

PWDs experience particular vulnerabilities every day, and these are only exacerbated by disaster or conflict. Evacuation centers, with crowded areas and obstructed access to makeshift bathrooms and showers, are not designed for PWDs.

Relief goods are also only distributed through evacuation centers in many places, with the assumption that the PWD has caregivers in the household to collect the household's relief packs at the evacuation center if their families have chosen not to evacuate in the first place.



Barangays should be prepared to assist in the evacuation of PWDs come disaster or conflict, but this requires accurate and relevant data collection that informs the local government of its population's needs—where PWDs reside, who their companions in the household are, what disability the PWD lives with—and comprises what are referred to as the “listings”.

The “listing” is a powerful census tool that determines which families receive aid or relief, how many PWD live in a particular area, who may be eligible for various government assistance programs, and so forth. Yet, in the case of the PWD community in Butuan, it is unclear how the data is gathered and utilized judiciously. For example, a national government agency provides a temporary employment program where a certain percentage of hires should be guaranteed to PWDs, but ultimately no PWDs were granted the opportunity because they were not included in the listing submitted for consideration of hires.





Another complication with the listing is more deeply rooted in systemic disregard for inclusivity. Lotha's main challenge in organizing local PWD associations is gathering people for the supposedly consultative process.

A major factor in this is the challenge in mobility and a lack of affordable and accessible transportation for members of the PWD community. When asked how much she thinks she should receive for her work, Lotha did not respond with an amount, but instead said she would like subsidized transportation for her and fellow PWDs.

The formation of PWD associations is crucial not only because it serves as a method for participation in governance, and consequently humanitarian response, but it also opens the door to a share of the barangay budget that could enable mobilization and/or government assistance programs that require a collective request to be availed.

An additional component is the problem in acquiring a certificate of disability, which is a prerequisite for registering as a PWD with the local PDAO. In Butuan, funding is limited, and there are not enough doctors available to make house calls for certification. Without public doctors to do this work, PWDs must pay their way to a clinic and then city hall to register as PWDs.

Considering the costs of a clinic visit and the transportation required, compounded by the lack of livelihood opportunities for PWDs, this is not often a viable option, especially for those from farther-flung areas.

It is due to this that Lotha claims that, unlike seniors who were incentivized to register after social pension became available, many PWDs have not found the process of registering worth the effort. Without registration, the pertinent data for the listing is left solely to the barangays, and the listing can sometimes be influenced by barangay politics.



In spite of these circumstances, Lotha has been a resourceful leader. As a self-proclaimed “plantita,” she sold homegrown rubber plants to donate to the relief efforts following Typhoon Odette, and she sewed face masks for members of her community to use during the pandemic.

Even with the PWD Federation receiving no government funding, the PDAO facing a lack of resources in comparison to the community’s needs, with direct opportunities for PWDs being limited, and with the PWDs she’s working with often becoming disillusioned by their experiences, when Lotha is asked how she continues her work, she says she is simply grateful to God for her own life and thanks him by serving the community.

She claims that she has already received the best paycheck in the success of her four children, and she smiles when she mentions that there are two doctors among them.



The case study at the intersection of humanitarian efforts and PWDs highlights the blurred line between development and humanitarian work. If there was better focus on making the pre-disaster world more equitable for PWDs, then perhaps they would be even marginally safer come disaster—and that would still be worthwhile. Here are a few suggestions, based on Lotha’s experience as a PWD and as an advocate for PWDs:



Access to fair and equitable education and livelihoods



Awareness-raising on PWD rights



Subsidized transportation for PWDs



Holding governments and businesses accountable to comply with the law, including at the barangay level and in evacuation centers



Bolster organizing of local PWD Associations to access the budget share, benefit programs, participatory processes, and mobility



Sufficient support for PDAO to meet needs for and even incentivize PWD registration



Government agencies with empowerment programs should consult with stakeholders so that beneficiaries of programs will truly benefit

Case Study: Anessa Tiburon

The Accidental Leader with a Long Life and a Longer List of Ideas Ahead of Her



“—————
If no one will start it, who will follow? Someone needs to blaze a path...I’m a
first-generation progressive. —————”

Anessa is a 23-year-old student of biology who hopes to become a compassionate cardiologist someday. She was born and raised in Butuan, but she considers herself a proud Mindanaoan, in part because she believes that no one has heard of her hometown.

Historical evidence, however, has determined Butuan to be the home of the first civilization that predates the country now known as the Philippines. She was born to a Catholic mother and a Muslim father, and she laughs when she says that, as the youngest and only daughter, all the chores fall on her. Anessa is navigating her religious identity, but she also appreciates the marriage of art and science.

When Anessa was in kindergarten, her mom signed her up for the Girl Scouts of the Philippines (GSP). She credits the Girl Scouts for all the learnings and values that have shaped who she is today. She also credits the organization for her origin story as a humanitarian worker, even though it was by sheer accident.

At 16 and seeking the thrill of adventure, Anessa took on the Chief Girl Scout Medal Scheme (CGSMS), an eight-point challenge where scouts develop and implement a year-long service project. To be awarded the medal, the national assessment committee must determine that the scout effectively engaged the community in the project.

In previous training sessions with the Agusan Council of the GSP, she learned that it was important to survey the members of the community to figure out their needs before implementing a project. Anessa took a look around her own neighborhood, and saw that many children played unsafe in the streets, and the barangay did not have a state-mandated daycare center.

She also observed that there was an abandoned building with the potential for a safe play area, or even a meeting place for the purok leaders who did not have a space either.

Anessa began her proposed beautification project by writing to the Sangguniang Panlungsod, who then called her to give a privilege speech to the council. She discovered that the reason the building had been abandoned was because there had been a land dispute between two barangays over the property for the last 10 years.

Following Anessa's privilege speech, the council called in the two barangay chairpersons to make peace. Anessa then spoke to each of the barangay chairpersons and got their support for her project. Instead of fighting over the property, they were now working together to rehabilitate the building.

No party of the local government units pledged financial support, so Anessa solicited support from the community and local businesses to lay cement, turn on the electricity, and fix the landscaping.



Once the project was completed, Anessa moved to turnover the project, and it was determined that her own barangay would take ownership of the building for exactly the problem she had pinpointed—the lack of basic facilities her neighborhood so desperately needed.

Two years later, and just a few months after Anessa's 18th birthday, Martial Law was declared in Mindanao due to the Marawi Siege. Anessa's father was born in Marawi, and she is a proud Mindanaoan, so she could not understand why there was Martial Law when the Mindanao she knew and loved was a peaceful place.

She thought she would fly a kite, with the colors of the flag, as a childhood symbol of peace and freedom. She took to social media to invite others to join her, and the activity between eight friends quickly turned into a city-wide fundraiser to benefit victims of the Marawi Siege.



In one day, they sold P150,000 worth of kites, and another P100,000 worth in kind. To some, “Ka-FLY-apaan,” a play on the Filipino word for peace (kapayapaan), came across as an act of protest, and even Anessa’s parents were concerned with the potentially contentious message.

The friends pressed on and quickly turned the kite-flying into a fullblown event of inclusivity. With just two weeks to organize, the “research” team worked to solicit local businesses, elected officials, NGOs and schools, and other members of the core tapped other youth organizations, from Scout Troops to sororities across Butuan, to help organize.

They asked the police for assistance in marshalling the event, and Anessa is again surprised when she recalls that they, too, ordered kites for the fundraiser. Ka-Fly-apaan was permitted to use the sports complex, and brought together PWDs, the youth, the diverse citizens of Butuan, and even the military to raise kite-flags as a vigil for Mindanao.

Anessa remembers the event as “utopian level unity.” Shortly thereafter, with her team of volunteers where no one is over twenty years of age, Anessa journeyed to Iligan to directly distribute the funds they had raised to the chosen community in Iligan.

Now that five years has passed, Anessa has co-founded several more advocacy organizations, but her main focus is on what she regards as the most neglected crisis that affects us all—the climate crisis. The project started after she built a relationship with the tribe in Miyapay, following her best friend’s thesis assignment.


The tribe lives in a cradle of biodiversity, and Anessa acknowledges their true understanding of conservation. She believes that the role of her new organization, Women of Green, is to write what the tribe knows. Women of Green is not yet an officially registered organization due to the lack of funds required by the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), but they do want to take advantage of the growing funding in climate justice.

Regardless, the environmental organization partnered with the local SK and CENRO and an individual living abroad to move forward with tree-planting activities, after a failed request from DENR.



Anessa continually gives praise to her mentors and the supporters of her initiative, and gratitude towards her barkada, or group of friends, who are similarly service-oriented.

She believes that there need to be role models, especially when so many do not have healthy role models in the home. Anessa's understanding of a job well done in her work as an advocate and humanitarian is when others join and emulate, and go on to design their own initiatives. She may see herself as a leader by accident, but an activator by nature.

“ She is always willing to blaze the path. _____”



In spite of the many things that Anessa has accomplished already in her young life, she has never been paid for her work. She says she has a heart for it, and only wishes that there was insurance and emergency emergency fund for her and her team. She also wishes that they had access to grants and a wider network to help find funders, so that they would not have to do so much fundraising. She recalls the struggles in her work as the times that she tells all the volunteers to eat at home before they leave for the field because their beneficiaries need it more, or the ageism she is sometimes confronted with in order to access the resources of older partners.

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She also worries about the times when her personal context does not allow her to embody her advocacies fully. Yet, she perseveres, and it all ties beautifully into her definition of resilience—resistant with the added desire to rise up.

Anessa's story as a young woman in humanitarian work emphasizes the need for actual empowerment.

She also provides a perspective of a crisis inherited, and especially relevant to her generation in the Philippine context. Given that women comprise the majority of those in community service, young women should be supported beyond serving as tools for humanitarian work.



Mentorship programs and network building for possible partners



Give young people, and especially young women who are pushing the boundaries of social norms, a seat at the table of decision-making, and not just use them as tools to fill in the gaps, e.g. digital/tech-related needs, relief repacking and distribution



If using them for risky jobs, provide some kind of insurance or emergency funds, and mental health services



Assist youth organizations in accessing grants and other funding that they cannot access due to formal bureaucratic processes and requirements



Encourage youth efforts of inclusivity, as this may be the most considerate generation yet

CASE STUDIES

SIARGAO WOMEN LOCAL HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP



Darisa L. Panerio:
Child Development Worker and People's Organization Secretary



“



**Children do learn what they live. Then they
grow up to live what they've learned.**

”

Darisa is a 33 year-old child development worker and the secretary of a people's organization based in Del Carmen, Siargao. Her journey into humanitarian work started only recently during the pandemic; she had initially thought herself to be quite timid and unfitting to be a leader but she gradually learned to assert herself and advocate for the needs of others when she started working to supplement her husband's income.

Her tasks as a child development worker go beyond teaching children— she is also in charge of maintaining her classroom and gathering funds for school supplies due to a lack of support from the LGU. She balances these tasks with her role as a secretary for *Kaanib ng mga Mangingisda at Magsasaka ng Numancia Aqua-Agriculture*, a people's organization concerned with mangrove conservation in the municipality of Del Carmen.

It is in this role that she learned how to bring people together while asserting her voice in important matters. As secretary, she checks on the status of the members and makes sure that everyone's contributions are noted and their needs accounted for. Darisa emphasizes how her new-found confidence and her passion for helping others have allowed her to thrive in these roles despite all the challenges that come with them.

A core part of her leadership is her ease with and care for people, for it helps her reach out to potential partners and sponsors for the material needs of her community. Government bureaucracy and corruption has kept her from immediately accessing funds for the daycare center, urging her to solicit money and spare supplies from people that she knows could help: parents of her students, professionals in the community, etc.



Though she is happy to do this, she hopes to partner with an NGO that could more effectively provide for the needs of the center and her organization. Her efforts to help the community extend beyond these roles, as she also often acts as a point-person for livelihood projects. She actively seeks out women that could benefit from alternative sources of income, especially after Typhoon Odette and through the pandemic. All of these roles overlap during her day— she had lovingly shared how she would often answer calls while planting mangroves.

“



Leadership is hard to define, and good leadership even harder. But if you can get people to follow you to the ends of the earth, you are a great leader.

”

When asked about gender-based discrimination, Darisa mentioned that she has not experienced it first-hand as a woman leader but it is rather her age that proved to be a struggle. Because she is one of the youngest members, she has to be more assertive in her setting of agenda, especially given the complicated histories and relationships among the members of the organization.

Her organization has consistently been led by a man while the secretary role has always been a woman but when it comes to the composition of the members, there are more women and men. Despite this disparity in leadership, Darisa emphasized that decision-making is more democratic now than it used to be. Women’s capabilities are also adequately acknowledged and supported.

She helped foster these changes in the organization through being open to people’s stories and building caring relationships through these conversations. She strongly believes there should be “no gap” among people and that women should be able to organize within the spaces they find themselves. Another dimension in which this could manifest, according to Darisa, is through



Deny V. Comon: Teacher and Humanitarian Leader



“



Do not sit and wait for a savior to come, be the savior for the people in despair. ”

Deny is a 56 year-old humanitarian leader based in Del Carmen, Siargao. She currently works as a professor and as the executive director of Siargao Islands Wildlife Conservation Inc., a non-profit organization that engages in conservation efforts of the mangrove areas in Del Carmen, as well as enriching the livelihood of surrounding communities.

Her humanitarian work started when she was appointed as the Community Extension Officer in her university. In this role, she was able to start building her local network of communities in and outside Del Carmen, as well as her connections with national and international partners/funders.

When asked about her core leadership values, Deny emphasized how honesty, commitment, and genuine happiness in serving have allowed her to reach people and sustain mutually beneficial relationships through times of crisis and insecurity.

Deny has observed that there are more men in government leadership positions in Siargao. Out of the 9 municipalities, only two are headed by a cis-woman and a tomboy respectively. She has observed the same inequality in volunteerism and she has addressed this in her own foundation where the core staff has a balance of 4 men and women.

The people's organizations affiliated with her foundation are also predominantly composed of women. When asked about gender-based discrimination, Deny does not have any first-hand experience as a woman leader but she mentioned that it is prevalent among the women and queer people she engages with in her work. Abuse and discrimination occur in two interrelated settings: in the intimate space of the home and in public/communal settings.

In the former, Deny has noticed signs of abuse in her friends and co-workers, pushing her to ask them about what happened and taking the time to get them the help that they need in her individual capacity. In the latter, women and queer people's needs are hardly considered in the disaster-relief efforts by the LGU.



Deny had witnessed how gay/bayot men got bullied and how women's safety was compromised due to lack of privacy in the evacuation centers after Typhoon Odette in 2021. Individuals and NGOs also had to respond to other needs of women during crises such as underwear, menstrual products, baby formula, etc.-- the LGU's relief packs only focused on food at the time. Deny and her team had to mobilize their own networks despite being affected by the disaster themselves.

When asked about how these issues were addressed, Deny mentioned that apart from her and select NGOs' efforts, they tried their best to get people back into their own homes for there was no systemic help that they could provide. Institutional support for these experiences within and outside of crises are sorely lacking and so Deny, and other women leaders like her, tend to be on-call during most of their waking hours.

Deny prides herself in being a simple text or chat away from anyone who might need her, whether it be the people in her community or partners reaching out with support.



The LGU also relies on her in receiving and accommodating both local and international partners and researchers– all of which she obliges with no monetary compensation. She is driven by a genuine desire to serve her community and only wishes for the LGU to help more in SOGIE education so that women and LGBTQ+ people are better positioned to assert their rights and that the wider community can have a better understanding of how gender affects the position of individuals in society.



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