

FINDING THE “ME” FOR BUILDING THE “WE”
Building community based support groups
for survivors of violence against women.

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses what feminist action research is all about and how this was used to enable VAW survivors to see themselves not as mere victims but as persons with the power to transform themselves into agents of self redemption and active members of a VAW support group and/or anti-VAW advocacy formation.

What will happen when advocates of anti-VAW can no longer function as they should due to lack of institutional support and the drying up of funds of donor agencies in and out of the country? Is there any assurance that the woman-friendly support programs for VAW survivors will continue?

These questions directed us in Arugaan ng Kalakasan (Cradle of Strength) or A-KLK, a feminist organization, to focus our attention on grassroots community organizations. I, for one, am of the opinion (which is educated by my experience as a teacher of community organizing at the Women and Development Graduate Program of the College of Social Work and Community Development, University of the Philippines) that it is these organizations which are suitable to carry on the work of VAW

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advocacy when others can no longer do so. The reasons for this are: Firstly, they are already organized. Secondly, they, especially the cause-oriented ones amongst them labeled by media as “Leftist”, are usually seasoned in the art of mobilizing forces to urge government to come up with and improve social and welfare services such as housing for the homeless, work for the jobless, and land for the landless. Thirdly, most have the track record of carrying out their objectives with or without assured funding. Considering all these, the only element lacking to make them functional VAW advocates is appropriate training in this line of activism or, another way of putting it, they have to embrace the feminist theory and practice of empowerment.

Women, Power and Empowerment

Empowerment is used in many ways and in a wide range of contexts so much so that it has become a misused and abused concept. For example, some politicians use it in their pre-election speeches for no other purpose but to attract electoral votes.

Progressive writers such as Kabeer (1994) see power as more fluid, more pervasive and more socially embedded than the conventional focus on individual decision-making would suggest. Power is not only being able to mobilize resources to promote the individual's interest but also in manipulating and controlling social standards that society adapts and enforces under the illusion that these are based on consensus and complementation. But this illusion creates a reality all its own. It legitimizes the privileged few to further their interest at the expense of the marginalized many. Transposed to the women's struggle, it is one aspect of having power that they are given equal opportunities through education and economic access, but to what extent? Consequently, while women may successfully pursue their ends, it is still the case that their goals are likely to be shaped by social

systems which deny them ready access to social privilege, authority, and esteem enjoyed by men of an equivalent class.

Power, therefore, is multidimensional. Many writers (Kabeer 1994; Rowlands 1997; Pagaduan 1997) have sought to define the different types of power to better understand the potentials of social transformation for women.

Power over is a type of power which is limited in supply as some people have more while others have less. It is predominant in many societies and is the type of power wielded by men over other men, men over women, and some women over other women. It is also the type exercised by the dominant social, political, economic or cultural group over those who are marginalized. This definition of power has negative implications for women because men are threatened by the empowerment of women. Men's fear of losing control of this form of power serves as an obstacle to women's empowerment.

Power to is generative in nature and does not involve domination. It refers to the skills and abilities that an individual or some people have of stimulating activity in others and raising morale in order to develop the confidence and drive to do something about an existing situation. It creates new possibilities and a kind of leadership that comes from the wish to see a group achieve what it is capable of doing, where there is no conflict of interest, and the group sets its own collective agenda. In this form of power, the increase in one's power does not diminish the power of another.

Power with emphasizes the strength of collective action. Power is seen as being greater than the sum of each individual's power, particularly in tackling problems or issues. This type of power is used by some community organizers in order to increase the ability of women to resist and challenge *power over* which is prevalent in society. Only through collective action as seen in *power with* can women negotiate for a rightful space in society. *Power*

with also stresses on solidarity and alliances among kindred organizations.

Power from within deals with the strength and uniqueness that resides in each individual's understanding of that which makes us truly human. Its basis is self-acceptance and understanding of innate differences in class, race, and gender. Respect for this diversity makes genuine and caring interaction possible.

While all these dimensions of power must be tapped and developed for women, some writers emphasize the importance of building on the *power within* as strategy towards improving their ability to control resources, determine agendas, and make decisions.

It is in this light that Arugaan ng Kalakasan (Cradle of Strength) or A-KLK undertook this project. The research methodology that it used is feminist action research.

What Is Feminist Action Research?

Feminist Action Research (FAR) as its name suggests, builds on three important concepts. It is:

1. research aimed at generating new knowledge and insights or validating previous findings;
2. grounded on the feminist framework that considers research outputs as inputs in furthering actions towards the emancipation of women; and
3. not mere extraction of data from participants but the collection and analysis of the same *with* them as it is directed at developing and initiating actions *for* them *by* them.

In FAR, the research is never divorced from its context. Moreover, the subjects are not reduced to mere objects of study but regarded as active participants. Together with researchers they

search for workable and realistic approaches and strategies to address their respective needs.

The Research Objectives

The research attempted to capture women's experience of violence (*power over*), the views of the community and women themselves on these experiences of violence, the avenues within the community setting which may be utilized so that each woman can transcend her experiences of violence (*power from within*) and women's collective analysis of their experience of violence (*power with*) to build collective commitment to action (*power to*).

In light of the above, the study aimed to:

1. describe the nature and forms of VAW in the selected field area;
2. contribute to a better understanding of VAW through an analysis of its context, its complexity and dynamics; and
3. explore, build, and strengthen the avenues for community-based awareness and action to address VAW in the identified field area.

The Research Participants

Women participants involved in the research process may be categorized into three types:

1. women from the general community population;
2. identified VAW survivors; and
3. women leaders and key informants.

The research sample is limited to the women residents of Camarin and Bagong Silang in Caloocan City who had availed of the services of the two women's clinics organized for them. All in all, there were 190 women who came but only 139 have

intake sheets. Some women were in a hurry and did not want to be interviewed. Given the sensitivity of the research topic, the researchers respected their decision not to be interviewed.

The criteria for selecting key informants and members of the support group were possession of leadership qualities and being VAW survivors. The support group is foreseen to eventually take a lead role in community actions against VAW in the area as organizers within their respective circles and organizations, or as a separate group focused solely on the issue.

The Field Area: A Community Profile

Camarin is a newly developed area in Caloocan, a city in Metro Manila, Philippines. In the 1950s there were only about a hundred families living in the area. However, as time went by there was a marked increase in population. Because of the development of nearby Novaliches as a commercial area migrants trooped to Camarin. Most of them came from the Tagalog region, and a few from the Visayas and Bicol provinces. During the Aquino administration in the late 1980s, migration into and out of the community became more fluid since Camarin served as a relocation site for dislocated urban poor families from Metro Manila cities. In 1995, the total population in Camarin was 64,254, (32,356 men and 31, 898 women). It is projected that in the year 2002, the population of Camarin will be twice as much as the population in 1995.

Camarin derived its name from the Spanish word, *camarin*, which means cradle or bed, for the nearby forest is seen as “cradling” many forms of life. Among the Tagalogs on the other hand, *camarin* means a warehouse or place where sacks of palay are stored. As the name implies, prior to urbanization the place was an agrarian area with most of its people earning their living by planting palay (the main crop in the area) and vegetables.

Camarin is composed of four barangays: Bgy. 175 in the west, Bgy. 178 in the east, Bgy. 177 in the south and Bgy. 174 in the middle of three other barangays. A large creek can be found on the northern part of Camarin which separates the area from Bagong Silang. Camarin has a total land area of 18,196.6 hectares. Bgy. 178 is the largest among the four barangays with a land area of 296.55 hectares while Bgy. 174 is the smallest with 153.57 hectares. There are areas delegated as open spaces such as that in Bgy. 174, located at the back of Camarin High School near the Barangay Health Center. The local government had intended to use this open space to set up a government center, which includes the barangay plaza or playground, a reading center and offices for other local government units (LGUs). As of now, this plan is on hold since many families are presently living in these open spaces. In other barangays, particularly in Bgy. 178, only a part of the whole area is legally owned by the LGU while another portion of it is privately owned. With regard to home lots, Camarin falls under the lot distribution project of the National Housing Authority (NHA).

Camarin is largely Catholic. It is divided into three parishes, namely, Our Lady of Lourdes, Epiphany and St. Agnes. Missionaries who came to the area were responsible for the early organizing efforts in the community. Father Manuel G. Gabriel, now a Monsignor of the Catholic Church, pioneered the organizing in Camarin when he was the parish priest in the early seventies. The Basic Christian Community approach was used to organize the people, and it has given birth to many other organizations. Today, there are many other existing organizations in the community. Some are faith-based; others are economic and civic organizations. They have been organized for the youth, single parents, married women, migrants, and neighborhood concerns.

There are three barangay health centers in the area. Of the four barangays, only Bgy. 175 does not have a health center. Bgy. 174 Health Center caters to the health-related needs of Bgy. 177. Other health institutions is the Nodado Medical Center in Bgy. 177 and a number of private and lying-in clinics.

Since Caloocan is a big city, barangay captains of Camarin, (Anselmo Garcia of Bgy. 174; Dario Monreal of Bgy. 178; Emetrio De Gana of Bgy. 177 and Romeo Bantugan of Bgy. 175) report directly to the Caloocan Mini City Hall located in Bgy. 175. This facilitates their access to the City's public officials and other city services.

Camarin is accessible through public land transportation. Homes have electricity, but domestic water supply is scarce and this is one of the problems of Camarin. People have to buy water for Php1.00 to 1.50 per *balde* (a 4-gallon container). A few entrepreneurs own deep wells and pumps and sell water. Recently, the Maynilad Water surveyed the area and started diggings for pipe installation. Considering the realities of the situation, it will take a few years more before households can have piped in metered water.

Besides the lack of regular water supply, garbage disposal is a major health problem. The garbage collection is only once a week, hence many households throw their garbage in the creek. During summer the creek is overrun with garbage and germ-carrying flies.

The People

Most of the people living in Camarin belong to marginalized groups in terms of housing, regularity and level of income, education, and land ownership. Less than ten percent of the total population belong to the upper middle class, and these are the land-owning families who are originally from Camarin. Others

are not only landed but also operate a business. Exemplifying this type of member is the land-owning Dela Cruz family in Bgy. 175 that operated the first transportation line to and from Camarin. Lately, the membership of the middle class is expanding. Making it to the middle-middle sector are families with members working overseas like Saudi Arabia and Japan. They have managed to buy their own homes, send their children to college who eventually become professionals with high incomes, and save money for investment. Predictably, well-off families built their houses near the main roads and basic institutional structures such as the health center, barangay office and the church.

While a number of families are able to pay for their lots through the Home Mortgage Association of NHA, majority of them could not. These are the families who earn meager incomes. They cannot even feed and clothe their children adequately, much less send them to school. Bereft of a good education that paves the way for gainful employment, their children are condemned to repeat the cycle of poverty.

Despite their poverty, debts and obligations, however, people in Camarin never forget to socialize. The basic social interaction system in the community is based on kinship. Families still remain the core institution in the community. There is a strong bond between families according to consanguinity. A land area originally intended for one household gets converted into a site for a compound-type of dwelling to accommodate a kin group of three to five related families.

Organizations and organization membership also play a role in the socialization of the people in Camarin. In fact, it may even be considered a part of everyday living. In Bgy. 174 alone, there are more than 20 organizations existing, and in Bgy. 178, more than 160 people's organizations are accredited by the

barangay. Due to non-ownership of the land where many a family dwelling is constructed, the threat of demolition always looms large in the consciousness of residents of such abodes. It is for this reason, more than anything else, which makes them turn to organizations. Experience has taught them that there is strength in numbers and solidarity. Not surprisingly, people with no homelots to call their own and the poor who find it very difficult to make both ends meet have a very high level of consciousness — politicized, we can say — long before the entry of A-KLK.

Gender sensitivity, however, is a different matter. Gender blindness is noticeable among many a leader and member of the organizations. This is very evident with regards to VAW. Although there is an awareness that it does take place in the community, it is not seen from the perspective of feminism — that VAW is a function of patriarchy.

On Violence Against Women

It is difficult to demystify the VAW myths and culture that people grew up with. When A-KLK first entered the community, people had little knowledge about VAW. Even the barangay officials who encountered cases of VAW in their work, were not aware that the issue must be talked about and properly addressed. VAW was regarded as a family issue that must be settled within its confines and not discussed in public.

Discussion: The Research Process

The following discussion emphasizes the insights gained from the different methods used in gathering data: (1) The Women's Clinic (2) Home Visits and Reflection Sessions (3) Feedback Sessions (4) Community Education Sessions and (5) Herstories.

1. The Women's Clinic

Arugaan ng Kalakasan, in cooperation with a sister feminist organization, Linangan ng Kababaihan, used the women's clinic as an entry point for the action research. Through the clinics it was able to reach out to women by addressing their practical needs, in this case their reproductive health needs. Moreover, it was able to gain the trust of the women. This is very important. VAW is a sensitive research topic and requires a mode of data gathering that would ensure validity of information gathered.

During the preparatory phase, the groundwork was largely done with the assistance of the women in the community: coordination with the barangay for the logistics of the activity, distribution of invitation leaflets to the mothers in the community, the placement of posters on strategic places, clarification regarding the nature, objectives and significance of the women's clinic, and instructing mothers interested to come to the clinic on what they were not supposed to do — have sexual contact for at least 3 days prior to examination in the clinic.

A community meeting with the women was set before the clinic day to talk about the importance of cystosmear for women and sexually transmitted diseases.

Women who availed of the services of the women's clinic were not passive receivers of its services. They were very much a part of it. Some of them took charge of setting up the physical requirements of the clinic. As the clinic was makeshift, improvisations had to be made: office desks were turned into examination tables, flashlights were used for extra light, daycare rooms and barangay offices were utilized as clinic spaces, with curtains separating one section from another. Particularly the women from ANAWIM and KKK, partner people's organizations (POs) based in the community, helped facilitate the flow of people, respond to their inquiries, and ran errands.

Two intake sheets were used in the women's clinic: the Likhaan Special Outreach Clinic (LSOC) Form for general medical examinations, and the A-KLK Women's Clinic Intake Sheet. The former was used to take the medical history of the woman as well as the obstetric history, chief complaint and history, and results of physical examination. The overall diagnosis and impression by the person doing the examination plus the recommendation appeared on this sheet. On the other hand, the A-KLK Women's Clinic Intake Sheet contains the core information which includes the responses to questions on roles assumed by men and women inside the home, and basic information about the woman's social life.

Two women's clinics were held: one in Bgy. 178 and the other in Bgy. 174. Both clinics were open to all. Those who came to LSOC, even those who expressed unwillingness to participate in the project, were given medical examination.

2. Home visits

An integral part of the action research were the home visits. These were carefully planned as a trust-building activity. In my work as a feminist researcher-community organizer I have learned the value of face-to-face contacts between the researcher and the people involved in the project. I have also learned the importance of the home as a venue for the interview. More than any other place, it provides the atmosphere conducive to friendly and intimate conversations. In the course of such conversations rapport is built between those in dialogue. Before long they become very comfortable with one another and disclosure of sensitive information such as an experience of VAW and the anguish it has produced easily takes place.

Potential participants to the research were identified from the clinic records. These were VAW survivors. However, not all

of them could participate. Some could not be reached because the researchers encountered bad weather and there was difficulty in locating their homes. Others were simply not available on the scheduled visits.

Interviews at the mobile clinics and the home visits became the sources of qualitative data on each participant's experience of VAW in their specific contexts. They were gathered and later developed as case studies.

Reflection Sessions

The reflection sessions were not in the original plan of the project. However, as it progressed we all realized that one-on-one counseling that took place during the home visits was not enough to achieve our purpose. If we were to succeed in building a support group for VAW survivors as well as an anti-VAW advocacy group, it was necessary to bring the participants in the previous activities together. It was important for them to meet not only during the education sessions. They had to be in one place where they could get to know more about one another, compare and contrast their respective VAW experiences, exchange ideas on how to deal with their hurt and pain, and more importantly, how to help one another and prevent VAW from taking place in their community.

The reflection sessions were held not too long after the home visits. They lasted from five hours to three days. The focus of the activities was on the self. Based on what the women said, the concept of self was problematic to most. Because Philippine culture promotes self-effacement, women could only identify themselves as beings in the service of others, in particular husband, children and parents. Being of service to oneself one participant articulated in one of the sessions, "is bad because it is selfish." In general, participants decentered themselves in their relationships with others and had a very low self-esteem. They

were also hard on themselves and found it difficult to forgive themselves (most thought that it was their own fault that violence was committed against them) and those who trespassed against them.

During the sessions VAW survivors were encouraged not only by the researcher-facilitator but all others in the group to transcend their negative outlook about their experiences of violence. We noted that women could retell their experience of VAW that took place fifteen or twenty years ago and still felt pain as though it happened only yesterday. Through discussions they were enabled to process their pain and bitterness. From a perspective of victimization and powerlessness hopefully they could re-interpret their experiences in a more empowering light.

Emotions, in particular, happiness, fear, loneliness, and anger were given focus during the session. This was to make women realize that they did not have to accept the cultural dictates that a woman must be self-effacing and must disregard her feelings, especially the pleasure of loving herself and being in touch with her sexuality and sensuality. Reflection sessions allowed the woman to give names to each emotion she felt and more importantly, to feel them without guilt, and deal with them with honesty.

The counselor-researchers served as facilitators and documentors for the sharing. The traditional concept of the expert as one who possesses expertise about a certain subject was demolished. Each participant was considered an expert. Indeed, who can know more about a life than the very one who has lived it.

We do not claim that the survivors were totally healed after the three-day reflection session. What we can safely say though is that at least a part of their hurt was healed. The opening of old wounds made them realize that these would continue to fester unless something was done to heal them. To become advocates for the eradication of VAW, VAW survivors on their own realized during the sessions that wounds that remained unhealed bred bitterness that has a way of obstructing a clearer, more posi-

tive view of life: Bitterness hindered them from helping themselves toward self-empowerment and incapacitated them from helping others to empower themselves. More importantly, they realized that nobody can empower them, only help them along the way. The important thing to do is to find the "me" from the ruins of life.

Reflection Session Level 1

Finding the Self

The reflection sessions focused on the self and the past experience of the participants. The sessions required their openness so the trust and the friendship that were developed between the counselors and the participants before this session were very important. The environment (i.e. restful atmosphere) and the process of the session were equally important.

The objective of the reflection was for the women to share their experiences of violence. The use of art materials helped each participant better express her experiences, which in turn was intended to help hasten a needed healing process. Participants reflected individually on the most memorable moment in their lives, be it the happiest or the saddest. They were asked to make a map of their life reflecting their stories. Presentations were done in a big group.

Their map showed the highest and the lowest points in their lives. The dominant color of their map showed their inner strength to overcome these experiences and to go on with life. Group mirroring, expressing warmth and acceptance among the group was an integral part of the session.

Flow of Activities

- Community singing
- Introduction of participants

- Community singing
- Life Map
- Individual Reflection
- Group Sharing
- Mirroring after every sharing
- Our Journey and Our Struggle: Some points from the sharing
- Gift Sharing: Something old but meaningful — an offering to co-participants
- Closing Ritual

3. Feedback Session

A feedback (FB) session was done two weeks after the women's clinic when the results of the Pap smear examination were ready. During the FB session, women who availed of the women's clinic services were invited to read the results while A-KLK staff explained to them the details of the laboratory examination done. The feedback session was done on a one-on-one basis to ensure confidentiality.

During the women's clinic, a ready invitation for the feedback session had been distributed to each woman who had a Pap smear examination. The invitation included information such as the date, place, and time of the feedback session. They were also informed that the result would not be available immediately after the examination. The flow of activities for the session was also attached to the invitation.

The feedback session usually started at 9:00 in the morning on the given date. Pap smear result was given individually by the assigned staff (usually a nurse) from A-KLK or an invited medical practitioner. That a person with a medical background was invited to interpret the results had been necessary as laboratory examiners use medical terms to state the results of the check-

up. If needed, women were also given information regarding follow-up tests and women-friendly clinics they can go to, as well as other medical advice.

From the table of the medical staff, woman then went to the next station where three counselors from the A-KLK provided counseling, if necessary. Cubicles were set up for each counselor so as to ensure confidentiality of the sessions. No time limit was imposed on the counseling sessions either. Rather the length depended on the woman's readiness to talk about her experience of violence. The shortest session was 30 minutes while the longest was for one hour and a half. On the part of the counselor-researcher, it was anticipated that the information on the women's clinic intake sheet would be validated. Another instrument to document this first counseling session with the woman was also used during the session. Upon her consent, home visits with the woman-survivor of VAW were arranged.

There were cases when women were not able to come on the assigned date of the feedback sessions. For these women, arrangements were made for a special home visit to discuss the results of their health tests and counseling. Another home visit was scheduled with the women survivors of violence.

The feedback session had been an important component in the research as it enabled the counselor-researchers to integrate with the people in the community, particularly the women, as well as served as an added opportunity to get to know them better, and identify key informants. Vice-versa, the women also got to know the counselor-researchers of the A-KLK.

4. Community education sessions

Education sessions on various topics of interest were held for the general women population of the field area.

Community education sessions used a popular education approach thus fostering a non-threatening atmosphere for the exchange of ideas, opinions and feelings on VAW. The people's comments, reactions and attitudes were carefully noted during these sessions.

In this data gathering method, it was important to document not only what people said but also how they said them and how the larger group reacted to what was said. These sessions were useful for uncovering the range of ideas, attitudes, feelings and perceptions of people regarding VAW and AWIR. In the second level of community education sessions, discussions and data gathered focused mostly on the women's ideas regarding possibilities for change in their lives and in their community.

Parallel to the women's clinic and the reflection sessions, the community education sessions affirmed the sincerity of the research and that the researchers were not there to simply "pry" into the women's lives.

Education Sessions, Level 1 and Level 2

Education Level 1 was a series of educational sessions open to all women in the community. Each seminar was an independent session that allowed the participants to complete all the sessions organized, or attend just one or two of them. The series aimed to initiate the discussion of violence against women in a group since we found that women discussed more readily, albeit "secretly", instances of violence within small friendship circles or cliques. Given that VAW is still a taboo subject in our society, and people generally avoid its discussion, the series made use of creative methodologies to introduce the topic.

Education Level 1

Women and Work

The first in a series (3 July 1999) focused on the discussion of “women and work”. The intricacies and politics of women’s oppression within women’s ordinary routines were discussed via the simple topic of cooking and good nutrition. The interest of women on new recipes by using inexpensive, available and nutritious ingredients led to the discussion of who were expected to prepare the food and how the work being done at home was valued by society. Points on the effects of advertising on women’s consumption habits of unhealthy food were also highlighted. Discussions ensued on food preparation and cooking as forms of reproductive work vis-à-vis productive work that earned money and which were traditionally assigned to men.

Flow of Activities

- Opening Ritual
- Me and my favorite food: a creative introduction of participants
- “I want to know about ... “ — Sharing their expectations vis-à-vis the seminar’s objectives
- Knowing more about Arugaan ng Kalakasan
- Game: “Going to the Market” and active discussion of nutritional value of food commonly found in markets and grocery stores and their active ingredients.
- “Cooking demo” — Several ways of cooking nutritious but inexpensive foods using ingredients ordinarily found in our backyard.
- Synthesis: Discussion of work and valuing of reproductive and productive work
- Action Points
- Closing Ritual

Me and my Sexuality

Seminar no. 2 focused on sexuality. A-KLK prepared colorful jigsaw puzzles of human reproductive organs out of recycled cardboard boxes. Participants were to work in groups. They were not allowed to talk during the exercise, only to put together parts of the puzzles. After the group exercise, there was a plenary session on the topic, “women’s bodies and women’s health.” From the ensuing discussion we noted that most of the participants did not fully know their own bodies. They also considered it shameful to engage in body exploration, especially where sex organs are concerned. After the interactive sharing of the participants the main points were synthesized and soon enough they realized that a woman does not have control and power over her own body and sexuality. This has been handed over to the man at the beginning, during and after a relationship. Hence, the vulnerability of a woman to become overpowered by her other in the relationship, which could lead to her experience of VAW.

Flow of Activities

- Opening Ritual
- Creative introduction of participants
- I want to know about ... sharing their expectations vis-à-vis the seminar’s objectives
- Knowing more about Arugaan ng Kalakasan
- Game: “*Bato-bato*” – a self reflection and community building exercise
- Puzzle of human reproductive organs
- Synthesis: active discussion of Sexuality and control of one’s body
- Action Points
- Closing Ritual

Singing with Grace

Participants analyzed the song “*Taghoy*” from the A-KLK album, *Hulagpos*. The song is about a woman expressing her anguish and pain in her experience of abuse in her intimate relationship. The song also relates the woman’s longing to end the violence. The participants presented their interpretation of the song creatively through:

- Dramatization
- Radio plugs
- Poetry
- Inter-active recitation
- Translating the song into another language or dialect
- Dance
- “Mel and Jay “ (television talk show format)
- Mime
- MTV

Discussions on basic concepts on VAW, (i.e. the forms of abuse, gender inequality) and the community and global efforts to eliminate violence against women followed.

Flow of Activities

- Opening Ritual
- Creative introduction of participants
- I want to know about ... sharing their expectations vis-à-vis the seminar’s objectives
- Know more about Arugaan ng Kalakasan
- Group singing of the song *Taghoy* with variations like singing the song through “*sagutan*” and singing with action
- Group preparation for creative presentation
- Group presentation
- Synthesis: Violence against women
- Action Points
- Closing Ritual

Education Level 2: Understanding AWIR

Participants of this series were graduates of ED Level 1 and reflection sessions. They were the identified potential members of the support groups after the series of education sessions. Mostly leaders of partner organizations in the area they were the elders frequently sought for support by survivors of domestic violence.

ED Level 2 focused on a thorough discussion of Abuse of Women in Intimate Relationships (AWIR) — the forms of abuse, psychology of women, and rights of the survivor, among other topics. The fundamentals of feminist counseling were also discussed in the latter part of the seminar. This group experience culminated in a planning session and brainstorming on how to realistically work out the formation of support groups.

Flow of Activities

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3
Morning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting to know each participant • Expectation check and objective setting • Pre-Test • Basic Gender Sensitivity Training • Pre-Test Processing 	Morning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Morning Praise • Recap/Unfreezing • Workshop 3: Small group sharing using a film presentation <i>The Cycle of Violence and What Hinders a Woman from Leaving a Violent Relationship</i> 	Morning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Morning Praise • Workshop 6: Planning per work area • Reporting • Sending Off—<i>Round and round and going circles: A Ritual</i>
Afternoon <p>Women Situationer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workshop 1: Family Situation • Discussion: Basic Social Institution • Need to Change: Attitudes Towards an Abused Woman • Workshop 2: Forms of Violence • Discussion: Forms of Abuse • Film Showing with an assignment for tomorrow's discussion 	Afternoon <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workshop 4: <i>Paalam sa Kahapon</i> • Group Presentation • Discussion: Rights of the Survivors • Equality • Community Responsibilities • Workshop 5: <i>Ate Divi</i> Letters • Creative Presentation • Critiquing/input on basic case handling and counseling • Ritual 	

5. Herstories from Key Informants

From the attendees of the above activities, a group of women were purposively selected as key informants for the research. They told their particular herstory which were developed into case studies. These were collected and formed part of the main source of qualitative data for the research which was supplemented by observations and insights from other activities conducted.

The criteria for choosing the key informants were the following: that they are—

1. potential leaders and leaders of partner organization ANAWIM, KKK and Barangay groups;
2. survivors of domestic violence who were present during the activities of the research (women's clinic, home visits, reflection sessions, community education sessions); and
3. respected in their community and are always consulted by women in their immediate neighborhood about their personal problems.

CONCLUSION

Our objective to build community-based support groups of VAW survivors led us to the realization that more permanent structures and institutions were needed to strengthen and sustain their empowerment whether on the individual or collective level. Because VAW pervades all aspects of women's lives, from childhood to old age, from the personal to the public spheres, so must any empowerment effort address individual and sectoral concerns. Beyond themselves, their families and the support group, is also the larger community. It holds resources and opportunities to sustain the hard-fought changes while at the same time also the very source of structural constraints that oppress women systematically.

Indeed, organizing anti-VAW support groups and advocates is a long and tedious process considering how VAW is shrouded in myths and silence that hinders those who have experienced it from recognizing themselves as victims of a crime. However, our experience in this action research project taught us that as difficult as it may be, organizing against VAW is not impossible. One of our important learnings in working with community women against VAW, whether as an individual or in groups is that VAW as a point for organizing requires careful planning and sensitivity so that the very women we are trying to help are not alienated or violated in the process. Surely one cannot expect any woman to talk readily about her experience of violence, even details of her family life, just because there are well-meaning researchers or organizers.

One way to get positive results is to use non-”controversial” and reciprocal activities to raise awareness against VAW. The women’s clinic was one such activity. While women were being given health services, interaction between researchers and the community women allowed the latter to participate in the process of data collection and see the sincerity of the former. The hard-sell to participate in the project was avoided. During the intake, the researcher-organizers clarified to the women that they could choose not to answer the questions or not to be interviewed altogether.

Sensitivity in the research-organizing process was also exercised in the flexibility of work plans and flow of activities to accommodate the concerns of women and their level of readiness to talk about topics. In addition, information presented to them was contextualized in their own reality. Pains were also taken in the choice of language used. We know for a fact that college educated and/or academe-based researcher-organizers are wont to use academic jargon that tends to alienate

women who are unfamiliar with it and reinforce the latter's view of themselves as passive actors and the latter as the active experts in the learning process.

Women's involvement and participation then become crucial. By involving them in the process of the feminist action research from planning, implementation, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation the women in the project were enabled to own as theirs the knowledge that the activities produced.

Knowledge gained and processed in group discussions and reflections when personally claimed as one's own becomes a potent tool for transforming the disempowered "I" (who accepts society's definition of a woman as man's inferior) into the empowered "Me" (who sees herself as a victim of patriarchal ideological practices and is willing to do something about it). "Me" sees that VAW is not an isolated incident or a family curse. It is a systematic form of violence that is perpetrated on women by virtue of their being women, because they are regarded as "weak", and the "property" of men. The personal becomes political. "Me" desires and resolves to unite with the other "Me"s, who can act together in the community as a collectivity. Thus is born the "We" which will serve the community as a support group for VAW survivors as well as a proactive anti-VAW formation.

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