

# **The Visayas Human Development Agency**

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In the late seventies, in a trade center like Cebu, many groups were sensitive to the problems of businessmen and quick to respond to their needs, in the belief that they were the geese that lay the golden eggs. But the Visayas Human Development Agency (VIHDA) chose to be different; it opted to serve the marginalized sectors and focused on the needs of labor. VIHDA, from the very beginning, operated on the assumption that workers, revitalized by awareness of their rights and a vision of an improved society, would play a major role in the authentic development of Cebu.

VIHDA started as the Cebu Labor Research Center. Four female professionals together with a male apprentice began doing studies that would be used to help organize workers. They did a thorough research of companies to strengthen the negotiating position of workers fleshing out a collective bargaining agreement with management. They also laid the groundwork for the structures through which concerned professionals could channel support to the labor sector. When VIHDA was registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission, its Board of Directors was composed of a priest, three lawyers, and three female professionals.

With its early researches, VIHDA's staff was able to package sound-slide productions on the Atlas Mining and Development Corporation and the problems of the communities dislocated by the establishment of the Mactan Export Processing Zone. By 1983 the staff was able to publish the comprehensive *Cebu Labor Situationer*.

In 1981 VIHDA started its worker education program. In 1982, the VIHDA all-female education team adopted a Genuine Trade

Union Course. Intended to build self-reliance among the workers, the curriculum included: rights of workers, especially those in the Labor Code, tools for socio-economic analysis, and techniques of organizing. Having been awakened to their rights, workers are equipped to analyze their problems themselves. Organizing skills are geared toward union formation. All of these were meant to strengthen Cebu's labor sector. To educate in the language of their students, the staff underwent a period of immersion among the workers. To further facilitate learning, the staff prepared a sound-slide production on the worker. The learning workers found the documentary particularly stimulating because it was a visual aid — a product of VIHDA documentation.

It was natural for VIHDA to do documentation. VIHDA kept records of the various activities of workers. Starting with their problems, they proceeded to keep track of the solutions they chose (sometimes, dialogues, at times rallies, at other times, strikes); and also noted the workers' triumphs. VIHDA, seeing the advantage of popularizing the stages of the workers' struggles quite early, decided to have a publication. The first issue of *VIHDA Files* was printed on October 1983. The various issues contain : industry profiles, news on mass actions and other events involving workers, discussion of pressing national concerns, character sketches of workers, listings of terminations, and listings of strikes. Beyond these, VIHDA has systematically organized its records from its documentation work to produce the *Cebu Labor Movement*, an unpublished research report representing the history of the workers' movement in the context of the changing economic and political conditions in Cebu.

Sensitive to the needs of their clients, VIHDA has set up the Legal Aid for Workers (LAW); this is presently composed of two full-time legal counsels, two part-time lawyers, and two full-time legal secretaries. They are ready at all times for the legal battles of the workers. Workers and groups that support them are also given in-depth instruction on the intricacies of the Labor Code, to make sure that this law will be maximized as a tool for the workers' protection.

## **The Women of VIHDA and Their Working Relations**

Since 1979 most of VIHDA's staff have been females. Most of them joined the agency in their early twenties right after graduating from college. Many staff members were in their early years of marriage. Among the highly productive volunteers were graduates of St. Theresa's College, Cebu and UP College Cebu. The director, a Theresian through and through, worked as a librarian and teacher at STC before working full-time with VIHDA. Among its more reliable researchers are two sisters from UP, the elder from the College of Social Work and Community Development and the younger from UP Cebu.

Conscious that they were working to set up an alternative institution, VIHDA's pioneering members knew that they could not operate on the old patterns. While they worked earnestly to reach their objectives, they also paid attention to the development and concerns of the staff members. In fact when VIHDA was just getting started the problem it faced was the personal problems of staff members who were struggling through the challenges of adjusting to married life. The office helped these employees thresh out their troubles, acted as a support group and hence did not become an added pressure; instead it assisted the young persons to deal constructively with their problems. VIHDA has also been very accommodating with the demands of motherhood, allowing its employees to bring children to work and even making available office transportation to breastfeeding employees on field research. Of course, responding to the many demands to which its female staff are subjected, VIHDA, has from the start, operated on flexi-time.

## **VIHDA and Working Women**

So far, VIHDA has not dealt with the concerns of working women separately. But in the course of their work they have discovered problems which only women suffer. Sexual harrasment manifested in the prevalence of a "lie down or lay-off" policy bothers women in the workplace. In organizing work, perceptive staff workers have been disturbed by the fact that even if females had been very active and diligent in the building of a union and have courageously gone to the frontline in times of struggle, when

the choice of leaders arose males were still selected. The desire to uncover the cause behind the hesitation of many working women to be actively involved in union activities is one of the reasons behind VIHDA's plan to do a profile of the working women of Cebu.

### **Maturing Change Agents**

Working at VIHDA has been both satisfying and maturing for its staff. The young researcher from UP claims she has grown a lot with VIHDA. The challenges of membership in the Research Team have really brought her out of her shell and made her an outgoing person. She now has self confidence in dealing with people, as well as confidence in her data gathering skills. She is even secure enough to frankly admit a need for improvement in data analysis and research report writing. The Theresian, who is VIHDA's administrator, feels a great deal of self-fulfillment about her twelve years in VIHDA. She had found pioneering very exciting. The challenges which the agency met prompted skills she was not even aware of to emerge. Planning projects, writing project proposals and realizing these projects have really made her resourcefulness blossom, and pressured her to make the most of earlier learning and experiences. In working with other concerned professionals, there was the joy of having a sense of shared values. Success in education work manifested in an eagerness among the workers to act daringly, sometimes recklessly, about their problems, have given her a sense of power which is both humbling and frightening. When she reflects on Cebu society and sees that the labor sector has really began to be a force to reckon with, she feels a sense of effectiveness that can only be called empowerment.