

**VERSUS VAW: FEMINIST ACTION RESEARCH AS A STRATEGY  
TO ADDRESS ABUSE OF WOMEN IN INTIMATE RELATIONS  
in the PHILIPPINES\***  
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**" never doubt that  
a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens  
can change the world.  
indeed, it is the only thing that ever has ."  
-M.M.**

Feminist activists in the movement against *gender violence* in the Philippines have noted the dearth of information on *Violence against women (VAW)*. Our experience regarding the need for reliable research affirms this. In the early 90's, for example, when we faced Senate committees to lobby for government action against VAW, the cases of women who experienced violence in their homes which we presented were not enough to convince the lawmakers about the urgency of the situation.

During our trek to the halls of the Senate, I remember Senator Roco, a "presidentiable" during the 1998 elections, countering our presentation of cases, emphasizing *that violence against women in the home are not the norm because Philippine society is a family-oriented society*. While we were not there to argue whether VAW was the norm or not, we tried to

emphasize that the numbers of cases were not the crux of our being there, *but that this social issue did exist and VAW rightfully deserved attention from elected officials.*

*We have learned many lessons in our advocacy. Reflecting on our experiences in our advocacy with policymakers and politicians, as well as with mass media, we noted that putting out numbers on cases of violence against women has some unusual magic power of respectability in the mainstream world. Reporters from the print media who would interview us would keep asking about the extent of the occurrence of domestic violence in our country. Even when we appeared on television or on radio programmes, statistical counts always cropped up.*

*\*Paper presented at a conference on "Assessing Strategies and Services to Address Gender Violence: A Global Initiative," 9-16 November 1997.*

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In 1992, we were just starting then and it was easy to quote from the books that in the U.S., there was so and so numbers and in Canada, there was so and so cases for every so and so period. But many of these quotes were from the First World, western countries where the tradition of research was well "established." Available resources assured that data gathering was done through "high technology" means.

On the other hand, the Philippines is a poor country and like many genuine activist women's organizations in the Third World/South today, we have very limited resources to parallel the efforts of our sisters in the First World.

### **Raising eyebrows against research**

The term "research" connotes some level of distance or distrust among activists/advocates. This is mainly because research has, for some time, been associated with "ivory tower luxury" usually performed by some academics who are more often than not, detached from the "real world of poverty." On the extreme end, some activists dismiss research as a waste of precious money that should have been used for services which could directly affect poor women's lives. *Most often, activist women's organizations are immersed with the daily demands of attending to women's lives that research has taken a back seat in terms of priorities. Activists' raising eyebrows are not without basis in their respective experiences.*

Many women's organizations are wary of some professional academic researchers "extracting" information from women in communities where women organizations have been involved in organizing work precisely because of many "sour experiences" which can be depressing if enumerated here. There have been times when women in urban communities needed concrete help in terms of their immediate needs (e.g., looming demolition of their homes) as well as support for some needs which can affect their lives in the long-run. But where were the researchers who took so much of their time writing case studies about women's lives?

*Our mission is clear: we will exhaust all means that we can utilize to eliminate violence in the lives of our Filipino sisters.*

This paper is about specific feminist action researches, namely (1) the Arugaan ng Kalakasan codes and (2) Policewomen's Work for Women's Rights. In these two specific projects, we have attempted to systematically document the texture of women's lives of abuse as well as assess specific services set up to address *abuse of women in intimate relations* (AWIR) in our country. *In these initiatives, unlike conventional research, feminist action research as a strategy is carefully integrated into provision of direct services as well as into our networking and advocacy efforts.*

This paper briefly describes the above action researches and how these have been utilized in various spheres of our work to address AWIR in the Philippines. Secondly, it tries to outline principles of feminist action research which may be used as a guide in proceeding with this strategy. Lastly, we provide an outline of some issues and dilemmas which we continue to "struggle with" today.

### **THE ARUGAAN NG KALAKASAN CODES: Facts You Wouldn't Want to Know**

Our organization has been able to design a pre-coded intake sheet which is primarily a guide for feminist counselors attending to women who call our *women's action helpline*. These codes also serve as an instrument for a computerized database on AWIR. We also use the *Arugaan ng Kalakasan* (A-KLK) codes to codify the information from the many letters we receive from women who respond to our weekly column on women's rights (*Ate Divi*) in a popular tabloid.

The A-KLK codes cover various aspects of information on AWIR, mainly on (1) demographic profiles of the survivor (2) a short profile of the abusive partner or "batterer" and (3) experiences of women who have sought our help.

Each month, the pre-coded intake sheets are compiled in monthly folders. Each year, they are entered into the database by interns whom we train to do the computer input. Their involvement in this process may seem mechanical from the outside. But this was purposely planned by A-KLK as an *exercise in consciousness raising* for many young female students to the social reality of domestic violence which they would not have been able to learn in the protected environment of religious education. The 1993-95 cases of the women's helpline and the *Ate Divi* letters, summarized in early 1996, were done in partnership with our volunteers.

*The development of the codes for this intake sheet was a long, painstaking process. They were not simply hatched by the brilliant genius of one person who read some reference books in the library. The A-KLK codes are a product of years of collective interaction, argumentation, sensitivity, debunking, discussion, and finally, agreement and documentation among feminist counselors who have been in touch with survivors for many years, advocates in action against VAW in the women's movement, feminist grassroots educators and community organizers. Our collective efforts allowed the refinements of the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the code.*

To illustrate, the section on forms of abuse took the most work. Originally, we were advised to come up with only 5 codes per variable ( form of abuse), a typical expectation for most conventional research. It was simply impossible to capture the terror women experienced with only 5 "variations". So that things would not be lost in interpretation, we directly quoted women to tell their story and we took precaution not to further traumatize them. We used verbatim language, that is, the exact words used by each survivor to describe the abuse she experienced.

The section on forms of abuse of the A-KLK codes are written in Pilipino. As the thought process and discussions were also in our language, we felt that this best captured what our Filipino sisters shared with us. We did not think it was necessary to translate each and every word.

### **The Use of the Codes**

The codes capture the texture of the forms of abuse which women experience. They also allow a better mirror of the faces of abuse, the blatant, side by side with the insidious. The A-KLK codes allow us to systematically see the frequency and patterns of abuse as well as the permutations and combinations of the various types of abuse experienced by each woman survivor. *The A-KLK codes which emanates from our provision of direct services, has in turn, enhanced the quality of care of our direct services program.* It has helped us better understand in a systematic fashion each unique case of a woman who seeks our help. With the use of the codes, we can better facilitate and lead ourselves to a common view/understanding. The codes help better illustrate and redefine to a survivor what he is going through.

It helps in seeing whether the understanding of the counselor and the survivor/caller are parallel. The feminist counselor, be it through the helpline, through mail counseling or in face to face meetings, uses the A-KLK codes.

Summaries of the database throughout the A-KLK codes have also been useful in our networking efforts. It has strengthened effectiveness of our organization in our advocacy, education and case work. We have used them in countless educational fora among various communities, in meetings and consultations with networks of women's organizations (e.g., SIBOL, Task Force May 28, The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women-Asia Pacific); in lobbying for legislative change such as in discussions during the 1996 Consultation Towards a Domestic Violence Legislation Appropriate to the Philippines; and in our own internal staff discussions.

We have been able to popularize these summaries for ordinary people, especially women, in our weekly radio program discussions and in our weekly women's rights column *Ate Divi*. The latter is printed in a popular tabloid read by more than half a million readers nationwide. Dissemination and dialogue on the summaries of the database is an important part of the strategy of feminist action research.

Any discussion of the summaries of the database of the A-KLK codes cannot be divorced from the feminist perspective on the structural roots of violence against women. We have constantly stressed that these can be used primarily to debunk prevailing myths of the Dark Ages. We must utilize the summaries of the database to replace deep seated cultural myths with eye-opening and heart-wrenching facts.

We have recently come out with a publication on the 1993-95 summaries using the A-KLK codes as one chapter of a book. Other women's organizations, schools and non-government organizations who accessed this publication have been able to use them in their respective advocacy and consciousness raising agenda for the communities which they serve.

Way back in 1995, a woman based in South Africa and Norway who was a resource person for a seminar on human rights documentation here in the Philippines looked at the codes we had been starting to develop. She was impressed and told us that the human rights community itself was still grappling with documentation of *violence against women* in the context of human rights' work. In 1997, our action research program officer was able to share our pioneering work and her own personal involvement in the process of the development of the A-KLK codes with women's organizations involved in work against VAW in

the Philippines during a documentation training for women NGOs concerned with issues on violence against women.

The A-KLK codes has likewise impressed many visitors from parallel women's programs in China, India, and Malaysia who have visited our program. They are surprised that a young organization like ours with limited resources and a lean staff and with so many cases to attend to, yet are very organized and systematic in our files.

*We do not claim the A-KLK codes to be definitive. They are not linear nor static. They are just a beginning and they continue to evolve. The power of the A-KLK codes lies in the fact that they were not developed in a vacuum by detached researchers who have no responsibility to the women whose lives are reflected in these codes.*

#### **POLICEWOMEN'S WORK FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS: An assessment of quality of services for survivors of AWIR**

Our second feminist action research revolves around our work with policewomen in the policewomen's desk which we piloted in 1993 (see Arugaan ng Kalakasan, 1997, *Action Against VAW*, pp. 110-117). The government boasts that there are more than a thousand such desks nationwide. But as most of us know, numbers mean nothing if quality of service is low.

*As activists, we ask: in the Philippine National Police Women's desk, what is the quality of service for survivors of VAW? In an effort to provide systematic information on the state of the PNP Women's Desk (PWD) as a specific intervention strategy for survivors of VAW, A-KLK conducted this study.*

The document describes the status of the PNP Women's Desks in Metro-Manila (the pioneer geographical area of the PNP to address VAW in the Philippines), identifies features of the conditions, the gaps and problems faced by each of the 27 PWD covered by the study.

The most critical implication of the report is how it ascertains whether the PWD is in fact addressing the needs of survivors of VAW. The findings of the action research indicate that much still needs to be done to equip the PWD to deal with VAW. Our study found that the PWD lacks in trained policewomen and in logistical and organizational support. Most of the women's desks were staffed by only one policewoman who had additional duties, mainly administrative or clerical in nature. The study also noted that almost half of the total desks were staffed by those without investigative skills which required them to refer cases to other departments of the police bureaucracy. Hence, a truly bureaucratic process for a survivor of AWIR seeking intervention.

*In the rigid hierarchy of the male as majority military establishment, this research stands out as a pioneer attempt to reflect the views of frontline policewomen of the PWD in possible improvements in police policies and practice. What also makes this research unique is that like the development of the A-KLK codes research, the objectives of this research were parallel with the priorities of the programs of A-KLK: to enhance the direct services program through strengthening its referral network in the law enforcement sector for women survivors in various parts of the Metropolis (for our direct service program) and to provide educational inputs to policewomen with the intention of hopefully upgrading prevailing sexist attitudes which affect gender-sensitive attention given to cases of domestic violence (for our networking and advocacy program).*

### **Participatory methodology**

We believe that our involvement in this research goes beyond releasing an expected "output." The process of research itself, we believe, is as critical as the output. The research methodology, not simply the method, is conscious and purposive.

The involvement of our direct service staff in this action research is a significant contribution to the operational research plan. In turn, their participation in the action research also positively affected their direct service work. They were able to meet the policewomen in various parts of the Metropolis personally. These meetings helped in strengthening our referral network for the *women's action helpline*. With women from various parts of the country and the metropolis reaching us through the women's action helpline, we could now better refer them to specific women in usually unwelcome places such as police stations.

Feminist counselors and volunteers comprised the team of trained field researchers who "toured" the metropolis, set foot on the stations and personally engaged in interaction at the police stations. We called this "police hopping." Unstructured interviews were done during announced and unannounced visits to selected police stations.

Aside from unstructured face to face interviews, a survey of policewomen was undertaken to determine the profile of the policewomen at the desk, their experiences while assigned to the PWD and their perceptions of problems encountered. This survey was later enriched with more in-depth key informant interviews conducted with policewomen assigned to the desks.

The highpoint of this research is how specific research objectives were integrated again with an activity which we hold yearly, a Policewomen's Caucus, which was utilized as a data gathering method for the research. By spending time with policewomen and establishing rapport with the respondents/key informants of the research, the Police Caucus also deepened discussions and reflections on their work at the PWD with survivors of VAW. Lastly, but we feel the most significant accomplishment of this research, is that the Police Caucus as a data gathering method of the research provided immediate educational inputs for some of the needs expressed by the policewomen during personal visits of A-KLK to the desks.

We held two (2) Police Caucuses in which the policewomen we met in the stations were invited to come together for an educational experience. There had never been an opportunity for policewomen from different districts all over the Metropolis to come together to exchange their experiences and lessons on their work at the PWD. Among the program methods used in each Caucus were participative: role playing of situations in the policewomen's desks, lecture-discussions on perspectives on AWIR and the Law, and small group work on gender-sensitivity exercises.

Assessment of these activities reveal that the policewomen had never been exposed to this style of learning and were used to the "banking type" of education of pure lectures by so-called "experts." In the Police Caucuses we held, sisterhood was fostered through more participative popular education style of learning alien to the military establishment.

The culmination of our action research on Policewomen's Work for Women's Rights was its presentation to the public. We formally presented the findings of this study at a forum well attended by police officers, policewomen, representatives from offices in the Senate and Congress, the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI), Malacanang, the Commission on Human Rights and other government, non-government, civic and international agencies as well as the media. The multi-sectoral participation assured us of a dynamic exchange among important partners in the movement against VAW.

We utilized this forum also as an opportunity for advocacy on VAW. During the program, we had a symbolic ritual prepared by one of our feminist counselors wherein selected members of the audience were invited to participate, read their parts of the ritual and sound the indigenous musical instruments as part of the solemn ceremony.

### **Advocacy for Reforms in the System of Law Enforcement**

A few months after the release of the report, many have sought copies of the report.

The Philippine National Police has also invited us to attend many of their fora related to the work in addressing VAW. Among others, entities which have sought copies of the report are the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG), the National Police Commission (NAPOLCOM), the Philippine representative on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the British Embassy who consulted us in the training needs assessment for a 4 week course on Women and Child Protection for Trainors of Police from various regions of the country.

**"I believe that the women who are survivors of domestic violence, who care about the women and children being victimized, who have been active in building this movement for the past twenty years, are the experts."**

- A.I.



### **CHARACTERISTICS OF ALTERNATIVE RESEARCH: Working with Women Against Violence**

The above quote captures the core of the principles of feminist action research (FAR), implying that FAR is definitely not research for research's sake. In feminist counseling for survivors of AWIR, listening, empathy, non-blaming attitude and confidentiality are the cornerstone principles. These principles must echo in our work in research on VAW.

Research must not remain in the hands of "experts" (from ivory tower academe or research bureaucracies) alone. Today, we see many institutional enterprises enriching themselves through the conduct of researches. Sadly, the bandwagon for research on *violence against women* is in vogue. Multi-lateral agencies dangle invitations for financial support as calls for research proposals on VAW abound.

In the free market of ideas, why should we even bother to speak against such practices? Would our little voice of conscience against opportunism be heard? Where are the women's views and voices in research?

### **Collaboration**

"Pure" researchers and advocates may choose varying degrees of meaningful collaboration. We believe that it is important that there be consultation with activists in the movement against VAW. Today, very few academic researchers actually invite collaboration of the activists or the survivors in the entire research process/endeavor. Research would surely be more meaningful if the research issues to be investigated, the research design (including therapy or "treatments" to be evaluated), the data analysis and reporting would be integrated in a plan for collaborative research. Not to be forgotten is the dissemination of the research data and conclusions.

### **Research to push for social change**

*FAR is not neutral nor value-free. It consciously takes the side of women survivors of VAW. FAR proceeds from the assumption that participants believe in the vision that change and development in the situation of women must be rooted in a deep understanding of the historical and structural roots of women's oppression and a belief in the individual and collective capacity to consciously change this oppressive situation.*

FAR does not stop at being descriptive. It moves on to an analytical level through a liberative perspective on VAW as its conceptual framework. This framework proceeds from an understanding of the forces which shape women's oppression. The objective of FAR is not simply to provide information but to consciously push for a liberative perspective on *violence against women* as the basis for actions to genuinely improve the situation of women in society. *Violence against women*, specifically the abuse of women in intimate relationships, is not a personal problem of isolated individual women. AWIR is a social issue shaped in history.

If scientific inquiry must evaluate, it must also take action so that it can assist survivors of violence and advocates for survivors. Evaluation research certainly evaluates the quality of service delivery and practices of institutions in the delivery of services to survivors.

### **Ethical issues and implications**

The most critical concern of those who conduct research on VAW is that investigation must be accountable to survivors of VAW. These include sensitivity and accountability concerns such as the safety of the women involved in the research, the education of the participants in the research, confidentiality of the identities of the survivors if involved in the research, informed or voluntary participation such that survivors are not forced/coerced to participate in the research.

FAR starts with small cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting among a collective group of women involved in work in the movement against VAW - feminist counselors, advocate volunteers, women activists, students of social change. Collective discussions can help define issues, ideas and bring out assumptions more clearly as well as help define more powerful questions as research work progresses. FAR hopes to establish self-critical communities of people participating and collaborating in various phases of the research process.

*As such, it is research through which people work towards the improvement of their own practice in the movement for social transformation in the Philippines.*

Respondents are not seen as simply objects of research or sources of knowledge. They should be affected by the process of research. The word Action in FAR denotes that some action must happen to affect lives of women involved in the research. FAR must not be an extraction process unlike conventional research.

## Feminist Action Research

### **Participatory processes and Use of multiple methods**

Parallel to conventional research wherein each member of the research team's contribution is dependent on the level of skills for specific phases of research, FAR must likewise be rigorous. Rigor is necessary for it to be respected among policymakers and officials whose decisions on social policy and law affect lives of many of the women we serve. The use of multiple methods not only encourages creativity among groups conducting FAR but it also ignites interest and rapport among participant-respondents.

A combination of individual "patanong-tanong" (unstructured interviews), more structured interviews with instrument-survey guides, role playing, caucus, surveys, observation, workshops and a host of many more methods of data gathering are venues for lively discussions.

VAW and AWIR are such heavy topics and the use of multiple methods would help, as most feminists would say, "break the silence."

### **Questions we raise among ourselves: Thoughts on the Lessons we must learn**

A colleague of ours in the movement against VAW, Dr. Junice Melgar, said that long years of grassroots experience and policy advocacy in the women's movement have shown how direct services are effective venues for concretizing issues, educating women, training people, and enacting and evolving alternative methods. When misguided, direct services has easily resulted in what many practitioners in the women's movement in the Philippines call "tokenism," or lip service, and worse, opportunism. Such values also perpetuate dependence and individualism.

As feminists, we know that in the real world, there are questions of power and control we have to confront. There are practical concerns of survival of activist organizations rendering shelter and succor to women survivors of violence, and, at the same time, pushing for attitudinal changes in the larger society. In reality, there are institutions and organizations which have the resources. The follow-through process of researches requires a large amount of financial resources which we do not have. How can we "protect" ourselves from mainstream research institutions and more well-funded organizations?

*The responsibility of FAR is clearly a sharing of information and perspective as a process of empowerment of communities. In here lies questions of accessing resources to be able to see through the various circles of solidarity in addressing violence against women.*

*How do we further alert and share the rigorous research methodology and substantive results with NGOs and community-based organizations in other parts of the country for possible replication or adaptation into their existing programs?*

*How can we further utilize the research results through a more systematic program of policy and legislative advocacy?*

*How can we further maximize the research results through a vigorous popular education program (i.e. non-traditional, creative forms and methods)?*

Last but not least, is what many activists in the women's movement have been working for: *the development of analytical tools in Pilipino and in English, for a level of theoretical discussion which could influence current ideological debates on the abuse of women in intimate relationships in the Philippines, rooted in Philippine culture, reality and history.* This we see, is the crux of oppression of women: deeply embedded in the cultural arena of ideas, beliefs and values about women which are objectified, legitimized and normalized in social institutions.

*Do we have the energy left, after attending to the wounds of a woman physically abused for more than 30 years, kicked, dragged, insulted in full view of her neighbors, forced to have sex just after giving birth, emotionally scarred from sleeping with knives and guns beside her pillow, forced to beg for money for her neglected children from her partner's other woman, and endless trauma unimaginable in today's supposedly "civilized" world?*

Research is ideally a liberating process. We can seek power by raising our consciousness on the politics of research. Research that is accountable to the survivors of violence advances our goal: for the safety and integrity of women.

## FEMINIST ACTION RESEARCH

**A-KLK CODES:  
FACTS YOU  
WOULDN'T  
WANT TO KNOW**

**POLICEWOMEN'S  
WORK FOR  
WOMEN'S RIGHTS**

### *group addressed*

primary	: survivors	survivors
secondary	: advocates	policewomen
	polymakers	policy makers
	researchers/	
	media	

### **activities**

- > action-reflection-action  
(continuous internal collective discussions)
- > conceptualization
- > "levelling-off" on principles/ethics of the action research
- > review of case files
- > review of PWD contacts
- > development of codes
- > development of parameters of evaluation
- > development of computer program
- > staggered fieldwork/PWD hopping
- > data cleaning
- > yearly PW caucus
- > computer input
- > feedback fora
- > training of interns
- > generation of tables and graphs
- > qualitative summaries
- > publication and dissemination

### **indicators**

- > research is not detached from wider of context of A-KLK MVG, success affects quality/competencies of direct (output service program; and impinges on A-KLK's advocacy work process
- > able to harness participation of various women
- > direct service workers are part of the research team
- > attention to needs expressed in research are integrated in the research process
- > positive feedback from external environment

### **challenges/areas of improvement**

1. follow-through process of researches requires financial resources
2. "protection" of our work from mainstream and more well-funded
3. to further utilize the research results through a more systematic program of policy and legislative advocacy
4. to further maximize the research results through a vigorous popular education program (i.e. non-traditional, creative forms and methods )
5. to further alert and share research process and results with NGOs and community-based organizations in other parts of the country for possible replication or adaptation into their existing programs
6. the development of analytical tools for a level of theoretical discussions which could influence current ideological debates on the abuse of women in intimate relationships