

THE SINGLE MOTHER WHO ENCOURAGES OTHER WOMEN TO RISE UP

By Denise Rafaeli Cadorniga



Salwa tours Denise in Basilan wet market and opens about her life as a single mother and gender advocate.

Who's the best to empower single mothers? Women who know their rights as a human, according to our Gender Peace Champion of Hadji Muhammad Ajul town in Basilan, Salwa Wali.

Salwa could still recall how it felt to become a single mother at the age of 27. The general consensus seemed to be that her life would no longer amount to much. It's this memory that motivates her to help other women, whether they are single, married, or raising a child on their own, to stand up for their rights as individuals.

RAISING ALLIANCE

Salwa is one of the participants who have been trained under Women-IMPACT Project or *Women ex-combatants Increasing Their Meaningful Participants in Advocacy and Conflict Transformation Initiatives*, an initiative of Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) funded by UN Women and Women Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) being implemented in the provinces of Lanao del Norte in Northern Mindanao and Basilan in Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). The project's interactive trainings, which are delivered to the community and Civilian Society Organizations (CSO) aim to show the increased participation and decision-making of women in conflict prevention processes and policy advocacy on local peace and security initiatives. Tackling several topics such as gender norms, human rights, violence against women and children (VAWC), gender-based violence, unarmed civilian protection (UCP), early warning and early response (EWER), culture-sensitive conflict resolution, and mediation.



What makes the trainings unique is that the participants are women in the seat of the influential position in the CSOs, local government unit (LGU), and other disadvantaged women, like Salwa, who has been a single mother herself. Plenty have been given opportunities to improve their capacity to facilitate dialogues of peace between communities and other groups, ensuring that women of different backgrounds always have a voice in the process.

Salwa, who is now 30 years old, is the president of EWER monitors and a Gender Peace Champion in Hadji Muhammad Ajul, Basilan, and has been working in LGU for over 2 years. She also had been given a chance to be a Gender and Development (GAD) focal and now uses her background and skills in gender mainstreaming. She turned her focus to preventing inequality, which involves integrating a gender-based perspective across policies, regulations, and the Islamic perspective.

Salwa told Nonviolent Peaceforce, **“Kung hindi mo alam ang human rights mo, madali kang ma-manipula ng mga taong may power. Nila-lang lang kalang kapag hindi mo alam kung saan ka nakatayo. Kapag alam mo na ngayon, alam mo na rin kung sino ang kumokontrol, juma-judge, nagdi-discriminate sayo. Kasi alam mo na ngayon kung saan ka ba talaga nakatayo.”** *[If you don't know your human rights, you will easily get manipulated by people who have power. They will only belittle you if you don't know where to stand. If you now know where you should stand, you now know who is controlling you, who is judging you, and who is discriminating against you because you now know where you are supposed to stand.]*

IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO RISE IN CHANGE



In the past months, 285 women within the community who were taught about gender mainstreaming were challenged to look into gender norms, misogyny, and stereotypes that subjugated what Muslima endures every day. Seeing the complex realities of what is actually “acceptable”. Of course, this isn't about judging anyone who finds themselves inside these situations, but about urging people to think more deeply about the reality of each and everyone's responsibilities- whatever the circumstances are. It engages participants by framing them as solutions in preventing violence, rather than following the negative norms.

“Sobrang thankful ko sa NP kasi mahirap magsimula sa isang purpose na hindi mo alam kung saan ka pwedeng magask ng help. Dahil sa NP, alam kong may magagawa na kaming step forward.” *[I am so thankful for NP because it's very hard to start on a purpose without even knowing where to ask for help. Because of NP, I know that we now have steps to move forward.]*

After becoming a single parent, Salwa experienced some of the prejudices leading to a life that scrutinised and punished single mothers who left their abusers. Salwa believes that reaching vulnerable women is crucial. More common than not, women in the areas of the conflict are commonly synonymous with abuse. That abuse might be verbal, emotional, financial, and/ or worst physical and sexual. With the tradition of silence that tells people that what they have gone through is something that is devaluing, speaking up has a price. By encouraging people to speak out and rise up, to be brave, and to confront the uncomfortable, gender norms can be uncovered and corrected.

She also added, “Napaka dami narin kasing iba’t- ibang discrimination na nangyayari. Kagaya ko, kapag sinabing single mom ka, nandun pa rin yung discrimination. Gusto kong maging boses ng mga kababaihan na kung may nakasanayan kang mga ganon ay ganun na lang yun. Gusto kong i-change yung mindset ng mga kababaihan, lalong lalo na yung mga kagaya ko na may karapatan rin kami. Kung sino kayo, yun rin kami. Same lang tayong lahat sa mundo.” [There is so many discriminations happening (in the community). Like me, when you say you’re a single mom, there would still be discrimination. I want to be the voice of the women. That if there are things that are normal, that doesn’t mean it is right. I want to change women’s mindset, especially those that are like me. That we also have our rights. Who you are, is also me. We are all the same in this world.]



Internalised misogynistic behaviours may be traced back to the stigmatisation and prejudice that women and single mothers face in society. These come with consequences like violence and legislative exclusion. Salwa, like many others, hopes that gender education and empowerment would encourage more people, especially with power, to give women the support they need. Equality has no gender. Gender peace work is for all.

Salwa is one of many beneficiaries and training participants of the Women- IMPACT Project or Women ex-combatants Increasing their Meaningful Participants in Advocacy and Conflict Transformation Initiatives funded by UN Women and UN Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF). Women- IMPACT is being implemented in the province of Basilan and Lanao del Norte to increase the participation and decision making of women in conflict prevention processes and response, to increase women’s participation in their networks in policy advocacy, and improving their organisational capacity to advance women’s role in local and peace security initiatives.