
the

Humanitarian Leader

**Women's education and empowerment in the
Philippines: A community solution**

AMELYN LANADA LARO



THE HUMANITARIAN LEADER: WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT IN THE PHILIPPINES: A COMMUNITY SOLUTION

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Cover image: Women in the Philippines face many challenges, including discrimination at work and in school while pregnant © Carlo Gabuco / Save the Children

Abstract

The Advocacy on Women's Education and Empowerment (AWE) Project is a community action program based in the Philippines that was implemented after participation in the 2016 Community Solutions Fellowship for Global Leaders—a professional leadership development program for community leaders across the world that involves a four-month fellowship with a nonprofit organisation or local government agency in the United States. The inspiration for the AWE project was the Girls Getting Ahead in Leadership (GGAL) program of the Women's Initiative for Self-Empowerment (WISE) in Minnesota. The AWE project empowers young women through a series of capacity building exercises, beginning with personal self-awareness, leadership development, conflict management, peace circles and gender and human rights. This provides opportunities for female social work students and young social workers to reach their full potential as gender and human rights advocates and leaders in the Philippines. This paper aims to highlight the role of social workers in gender and human rights advocacy at the local and international level, details the experiences, lessons and challenges of running a project which builds the capacity of young women, and promotes the role of higher educational institutions in building the skills and competence of future leaders.

Leadership relevance

Social workers are natural leaders in the field of humanitarian work. There are many social workers who are highly visible in times of disaster as camp counselors, extending relief services and psychosocial interventions to individuals, groups or communities. The values of service, human rights and advocacy are all essential elements of effective social work practice. Moreover, the profession adheres to notions of human dignity, social justice and humanitarian leadership. It is expected that social workers will take leadership responsibility because as professionals their primary aim is to create change at a micro or macro level, and they can be strong advocates for making positive changes in society.

Introduction

An inclusive and gender-equitable education contributes significantly to sustainable development and should be a part of every higher educational institution. By promoting an inclusive, just and equitable world, all women, men and especially girls will lead empowered and dignified lives (UNESCO, 2018). A study on higher education for women in Asia revealed that “co-ed institutions should also work toward gender equity, including promoting leadership opportunities for female students”, and that by doing so, there will be possibilities for change in the social, political and economic potentials of the next generation of women (Ostrom & Rao, 2020).

Yet despite several international and national policies adopted by the Philippine government to address gender and human rights, there are still continuous violations of human rights and abuses against women in the country.

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Academic institutions play a vital role in addressing gender disparity and in 2015 the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) of the Philippines mandated the establishment of policies and guidelines on Gender and Development (GAD), a development perspective that recognises the equal status and situation of women and men in society (Albaldein, 2016). This emphasised the country’s compliance with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BfPA), putting much significance on gender awareness, gender sensitivity and the institutionalisation of gender policies and standards in higher education institutions (HEIs). The mandate recommended that higher educational institutions offer support to academics who promote gender equality and women’s human rights (Pulmano, 2016) and that lack of understanding about basic individual human rights and the lack of necessary skills to promote these rights must be addressed by higher educational institutions.

The Holy Cross of Davao College is a Catholic higher education institution founded by the Religious Order of the Virgin Mary Sister in 1951. The college offers a Bachelor of Science in Social Work (BSSW), which is envisioned to play a key role in the formation of competent, service-oriented, highly committed, principled and productive citizens through instruction,

research and community extension. The BSSW program undertakes community extension services that foster self-reliant, empowered, sustainable and gender responsive communities. Through the years, the BSSW program has initiated several activities which promoted gender sensitivity in the campus, including foras on Gender and Peace-building and Human Rights and Disasters, as well as a ‘Colors for Peace’ art exhibition by women artists from Mindanao.

The BSSW program adheres to the new global definition of social work agreed upon by the International Association of Social Workers General Assembly in July 2014, which defines social work as “a practice-based profession and as an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. The principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work” (IFSW, 2014).

It is within this framework that the AWE (Advocacy on Women’s Education and Empowerment) project was launched as part of the SWIP (Social Work Innovative Projects) of the BSSW Program in 2017. The project was proposed by myself, Professor Amelyn L. Laro, a social work faculty member at the Holy Cross of Davao College, after my placement as a Community Solutions Program Fellow under the US State Department Bureau of Cultural and Educational Affairs for Gender and Human Rights. The fellowship required participating fellows to extend their knowledge and expertise to their own organisations upon returning to their home countries.

The AWE project was conceptualised based on education, gender and human rights concerns in the Philippines. The vision of the project was to provide opportunities for personal and professional development for young Filipino women who were studying to become social workers. The project also created a ‘Continuing Professional Education’ program for new social workers in Mindanao in partnership with the Social Welfare Learning Network of the Department of Social Welfare and Development in Region XI. The end goal of this program was to build a core group of young women leaders and advocates in Mindanao.

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This paper aims to describe the impact of the AWE Project after its one-year implementation by reviewing reports submitted by the field instruction students who implemented and documented the sessions conducted

from January to December 2017. Specifically, this study focused on the following:

1. Highlighting the role of social workers in gender and human rights advocacy at the local and international level.
2. Sharing experiences of running a project which builds the capacity of young women leaders, and understanding the lessons and challenges that were encountered.
3. Promoting the role of higher educational institutions in building the skills and competencies of future leaders.

This paper also focuses on the interlinkages between social work and humanitarianism and how the AWE project has worked to build the potential of female social work students and young social workers to become more responsive to the needs of their clients in times of displacement and disaster. During disasters, women and girls in particular are badly impacted, leaving them more vulnerable. Synoba (2020, p. 190) mentions that there is an urgent need to use the knowledge and skills of social workers in the provision of psychological and social support to victims of disaster while delivering humanitarian assistance. Future social workers must be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to also function as humanitarian workers and AWE project participants understood that in preparing themselves for this profession that they will also take leadership during times of disaster.

Implementation of the AWE project

The AWE project was funded by the Holy Cross of Davao College Bachelor of Science in Social Work Community Extension Program and implemented from January to December 2017. The project was split into two tracks—AWE for female student leaders and AWE for female social workers. The project was also partly supported by the Department of Social Welfare and Development Social Welfare Learning Network Region XI and operated in collaboration with the National Association of Social Workers Inc.

As the Community Extension focal person of the college, I was in charge of the operation of the project, from the conceptualisation and implementation, to monitoring and evaluation. The BSSW Program Head supervised the implementation and smooth operation of the project. Prior to the implementation, a workshop was conducted to forge partnerships with other social work faculties,

and internal and external stakeholders. Internal partners included students, teachers, and other members of the extended college community. External partners were barangay officials, Agency Field Supervisors and other agencies that extended their technical and financial assistance. The Fourth Year Field Instruction Interns were chosen through the community extension services (CES) program of the college and were directly assigned as session facilitators and put in charge of documentation and reporting.

The AWE learning sessions aimed to help the participants in several ways. Firstly, to develop and enhance basic skills in advocacy, communication, leadership and conflict management. Secondly, to promote a deeper understanding about human rights and gender-related concepts and issues. Thirdly, to learn how to prepare and implement Community/Agency Advocacy Plans (CAPs), in which they would address topics on gender and human rights. Lastly, to organise a pool of advocates for gender and human rights. There were several speakers invited to share their knowledge and expertise on each topic, usually coming from the Social Welfare Learning Network of the Department of Social Welfare and Development Region XI.

The project was divided into two different tracks— young women professionals and female student leaders. The first cohort included 15 young registered social workers with a track record in leadership who were highly recommended by their Head Agency or Agency Field Instructors. They were chosen based on their involvement with women and children and their strong interest in improving their knowledge on advocacy, leadership, communication, and conflict resolution. They were required to submit a CAP as part of their return service to their own organisation.

The second track involved training and workshops for female student leaders enrolled in Community Education and Training (Service Learning) courses. These social work students were from Muslim, Christian and Indigenous groups. They attended a series of learning sessions on advocacy, leadership, communication, conflict resolution, gender and human rights. After the sessions they were required to adopt a partner community where they conducted their advocacy as part of the Service Learning Component. Once in their chosen community, they disseminated the concepts they learned from the training and workshops. After this activity, the students were required to submit a reflection paper and activity completion report and were also invited to be part of a pool of resource trainers for gender and human rights and other topics in the college.

Lessons and challenges

The role of social workers in gender and human rights advocacy

Mohamed (2020) remarks that “the social work profession shares a close relationship with human rights because it adheres to values such as respect, dignity, and self-determination—values that are strongly embedded in the code of ethics for all practitioners”, while Doninelli (2011) states that, “social workers have advocated for gender equality and participated in struggles for social change as individuals active in the women’s movement, [and as] development workers tackling structural inequalities”. However, in the Philippines only a few social workers fully understand that social workers are also gender and human rights workers.

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Even though one study on abuse of women and children in the Philippines reported that 75% of abuse was perpetrated by husbands and live-in partners (Chez, et al, 2002), and another reports that “one in four Filipino women aged 15-49 has experienced physical, emotional or sexual violence by their husband or partner” (PCW, 2017), the social work curriculum has limited in-depth discussions or studies about human rights education. There are few social work educators with the knowledge of or expertise on the integration of gender and human rights.

The 2017 study also discussed the ‘culture of silence’ surrounding violence against women, stating that “many of the victims are ashamed to relate their experiences while others tend to dismiss their ordeal as a result of their lack of faith in the country’s justice system caused by frustrations over the lack of results in filing complaints” (PCW, 2017). Girls are systematically disadvantaged across the South Asian region because of structural inequalities and low social status (UNICEF Report). This shows how essential it is for new social workers to fully grasp the concept of human and gender rights before they can teach empowerment to their clients. Social workers must learn that the essence of social work is a fundamental belief in human worth and dignity.

There are also close connections between social work, gender and humanitarianism and the potential for social workers in the Philippines to work more effectively during times of displacement and disaster, especially in relation to vulnerable women and girls. One study

conducted in 2007 by the London School of Economics states that out of 141 countries from “1981 to 2002, natural disasters and their subsequent impact, on average, killed more women than men or killed women at an earlier age than men related to women’s lower socio-economic status” (Neumayer & Plümper, 2007, cited in Patel, 2019). In 2015, Pittman et al. noted that advanced social workers are uniquely prepared for international relief and development leadership careers, but in reality the social work curriculum is lacking career development plans that connect the skills of social work to the international relief and development job market.

It was at this intersection between relief and development, social work, and gender and human rights that the AWE project operated—building capacity to augment the needs of humanitarian relief agencies and better prepare social workers for the demands of disaster contexts.

It was at this intersection between relief and development, social work, and gender and human rights that the AWE project operated.

In one of the AWE workshops, the participants were instructed to cite examples from their region, city, or area where women’s issues have been marginalised by segregating them through special legislations, administrative departments or agencies. Then they were asked to think of some of the ways in which they observed that women in the country experienced conflict between the universality of human rights and cultural and religious traditions. These young social workers identified various concerns, including issues of access to education among Indigenous women, and early, forced and arranged marriages among young girls.

In several group activities, the participants expressed that termination of employment due to pregnancy in school and work settings was still a prevalent concern. They encountered cases of domestic violence and elaborated on issues around religious and cultural practices that are not responsive to the needs of women, including lack of access to basic health services in poor and rural communities.

Another group of participants, mostly from Non-Government Organisations, identified prevalent issues encountered by women in their agencies. One stated that women’s qualifications were sometimes questioned. Another participant said that she experienced a lack of due process in her case against her employer, after her employment was terminated without notice after she fell pregnant out of wedlock. Many participants also

mentioned the stereotypical depiction of women in advertisements and the media.

A lack of education for young women from Indigenous groups remains a problem. Participants from Indigenous backgrounds expressed how cultural practices around early and arranged marriages affect the dreams and aspirations of young girls. Some of the women from Indigenous sectors were not able to access basic health services. There are continuous problems of “domestic and gender violence [that] manifest differently across communities: prevalence and incidence rates, attitudes to domestic violence and help-seeking, culturally rooted types of abuses, and traditional norms for women and men, vary from one culture to another” (Asia Pacific Institute, 2018).

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A group of participants representing local government units identified the following issues. First was the termination of female employees due to pregnancy in school settings and private companies. Second was the lack of recognition of the Solo Parent ID which provides benefits to single mothers. Third was that despite being the family breadwinner, some women are still dependent on their husbands in terms of decision-making in their own homes. These issues emphasise that there are “other dimensions of inequality which cover freedom, personhood, dignity, mobility, autonomy, choice and options, space to express ideas and orientations, rights and access, decision-making capacities in relation to the allocation of resources, and the ability to control one’s own body and life choices. Many of these human rights and choices are denied to women even in developed countries” (UNDP, 2016).

The participants also looked into the impact of disaster on women and highlighted several challenges. Many observed that there were no gender sensitive comfort rooms for women in most areas during disasters. There are also few or limited rooms in the evacuation areas intended for breastfeeding mothers. These concerns are supported by studies that have found that “disasters have had an impact on the lives of women all around the world. Generally, women are looked at in disasters only as victims despite the fact that the majority of victims in disasters are women and children” (Gokhale, 2008).

Several young social workers who had handled cases during disasters said they have also found gender issues in camp management for Internally Displaced Persons. This reiterates that “the inclusion of gender-mainstreaming in Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) is an important development. It signals a broad realisation that both gender-informed analysis of disaster impacts and the preparation of gender-responsive actions are critical to reducing disaster risk for all members of society” (Howe, 2019). It is also interesting to note that during the AWE workshops there were discussions on providing protection to women during disaster. Most agreed that limited opportunities for stress debriefing are extended to women victims of disaster. “Pre-existing, structural gender inequalities mean that disasters affect women and girls in different ways than they affect boys and men. The vulnerability of females increases when they are in a lower socioeconomic group, particularly in the Global South” (Disaster Philanthropy, 2020).

During the AWE sessions participants mentioned that there is no clear action on these existing issues in their respective agencies. One participant said that “as a social worker we cannot do anything and we feel helpless also because this is already part of the norms in our existing agencies”. Another participant expressed that she realised that there are still many existing issues around gender and human rights, even when policies and programs for gender are in place. Furthermore, one participant stated that there are authorities who overuse their power and abuse the rights of women in her agency.

By providing a venue where these young professionals could express their experiences and views about issues on gender and human rights they were able to surface their roles and functions.

The AWE sessions on gender and human rights clearly showed that there are still existing issues for women in different fields in both private and public agencies. Some organisations explicitly showed their biases against women through a lack of sensitivity to women’s needs. The participants recommended that there should be more sessions on gender sensitivity. In addition, they advocated for strict implementation of rules and regulations for gender and development. Social workers also play an important role in highlighting these issues as they are the direct contact of clients in the field. They are the ones who extend services and are on the frontline of addressing the needs of women and children

in the community. By providing a venue where these young professionals could express their experiences and views about issues on gender and human rights they were able to surface their roles and functions. They also enumerated some of the steps that they will take to be able to address these concerns. By revisiting the global definition of social work and also some policies and mandates on gender, these young social workers have learned more about their crucial role in society and appreciated the importance of their profession.

Lessons and challenges from building the capacity of young women leaders

As a small program in a small college there are many lessons we can draw on when considering implementing community extension services projects. Our program had meagre resources for big activities such as the AWE project, however we mobilised various resources in our college in order to manage—especially by tapping the potential of our Field Instruction students to serve as co-facilitators and direct implementers of the project. We have learned how to work with different stakeholders in the campus and we also used the knowledge and financial assistance of the Department of Social Welfare and Development Region XI Learning Network. Furthermore, we were assisted by the National Association of Social Work in Education Inc.

Our learnings have proven invaluable and have increased both our understanding of extension work and acquitted the social responsibility and knowledge transfer required to ensure that this extension work improved lives in the community, as per Mojares' definition (2015). As Stoeker (2014) says, "without good research to understand how on-the-ground Extension educators are interacting with service-learners, and want to interact with them, it will be very difficult to advance the practice of higher education service-learning with Extension".

We have also learned how to involve our Field Instruction Students in the whole process of project planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. We have learned the value of co-facilitating with our students and empowering them through ownership of the results of the project. According to our participants, their participation in the AWE sessions have helped them become more effective advocates. As facilitators, we were impressed by their interest in deep learning about issues around gender, peace, conflict resolution and human rights in the context of Mindanao. Since our participants came from multicultural backgrounds (Indigenous, Christian and Muslim), they also brought with them multiple perspectives.

The AWE project was an opportunity to bring everyone together to discuss and debate about issues and problems in society through a method called the 'Circle

of Peace'. AWE participants taught us to open a space for diversity, difference, and tolerance, and recognise that our experiences shape our thinking and our leadership styles. At the end of the project they shared their evaluations and it was heartening and inspiring to see them turn into young leaders who can speak and clearly express what they want and what they hope for the future for themselves and for humanity. What follows are two of the more notable pieces of feedback from the AWE participants:

"I don't really have the courage to speak in a crowd until I joined this project. AWE project has provided various activities which really helps me to boost my confidence and since I am currently the Designated Section Head in my work. AWE Workshop has imparted in me... techniques and teaching [that] has never gone in my mind".

"The project acknowledges the strength and capabilities of being woman. [Being involved] in this kind of advocacy is such an opportunity and privilege to learn new knowledge. [It provides the opportunity to] breakthrough that we can use not just inside this institution but ... [in] the communities".

The role of higher educational institutions in building the skills and competencies of future leaders

The *Philippine Higher Education Act* of 1994 emphasised that the state shall ensure the development of responsible and effective leadership. A higher educational institution "is one of the most important means of empowering women with knowledge, skills and self-confidence" (Sharma & Sharma, 2021), which is essential for leadership development and moulding future humanitarians. Since 2010, the Commission on Higher Education in the Philippines has been pushing to mainstream the gender and development agenda. The Holy Cross of Davao College does not have a designated GAD office because unlike state colleges and universities the College does not have regular budget for GAD-related activities. However, the Bachelor of Science and Social Work Program Community Extension Services implemented GAD-related activities since gender and human rights concepts are highly integrated in the social work profession.

AWE created a milestone for a new generation of female leadership and women who know and understand their roles in society.

AWE created a pool of young women alumni and enabled them to become advocates for gender and human rights. AWE also organised a circle of young female leaders

sharing power and energy to build a more just, peaceful and humane society. AWE created a milestone for a new generation of female leadership and women who know and understand their roles in society. AWE supported women who are advocates of gender equality and human rights. As young social workers they are powerful agents of social change and transformation and have helped proved the adage: 'educate a woman, educate humanity'.

Conclusion

There should be more community extension projects focusing on building leadership and the capacity of young women. This study calls for the higher educational institutions' community extension programs

to implement such projects and intensify their advocacy on gender and human rights as a backbone of their teaching. There is a need to encourage the active involvement of students, faculty and even non-teaching personnel to include GAD in their agendas and provide materials and human resources for projects allocated by colleges for GAD initiatives. Higher educational institutions should promote gender sensitivity and gender responsiveness in their curriculum, instruction, research and extension programs. There is also a need to conduct more innovative GAD projects and activities that promote the humanitarian aspect of social work to better serve local communities in times of need.

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