

# The Golden Girls of Daraga: **No limits for women claiming their own voice and space**

By Malu Perpetua, Akbayan



Daraga, a first-class municipality in the heart of Albay province, is aptly named. In Visayan languages, daraga means “maiden” or “lady”. Women slightly outnumber men in Daraga and, over the years, their potential as a social force has been recognized. Daraga being strategically located along a growth corridor in the Bicol region, women’s interests and economic welfare became a focal point for organizing and community mobilization in the area.

Women’s organizations bloomed in Daraga in the late ‘90s. The Bicol Grassroots Leaders for the Empowerment and Development (BIGLEAD), Inc., a people’s organization composed of grassroots leaders and local officials, and its partner the Center for the Advocacy of Participatory Governance (CAPG), started organizing the Samahan ng Kababaihan sa Daraga (SAMAKA)1, a municipal federation composed of women’s organizations and their community leaders. The CAPG was led at the time by Hon. Len Magayanes, a grassroots leader who was then a municipal Councillor. She was instrumental in organizing SAMAKA and its key leaders, fondly called the Golden Girls for their senior status in the community.

## Women as community leaders



(l-r) Zenaida “Mommy Zen” Morcozo, Teresita “Tess” Galicia, Elena Arimado, Emma “Ate” EmsOtivar, and Josefa “Mommy Eps” Marvella

Soft-spoken, mild-mannered Elena Arimado is the President of SAMAKA-Gabawan Chapter and Secretary of the federation. She says that in the beginning, “SAMAKA chapter building was a

Elena Armido owns a handicrafts business and is president of the Samaka-Gabawan chapter. →



Emma "Ate Ems" Otivar was a former migrant worker turned entrepreneur and now a community worker. ↓



↓ Zenaida Mommy "Zen" Morozco is a community worker and founding secretary of SAMAKA.



↓ Josefa Mommy "Eps" Marvella is Daraga BHW President



Tess Galicia is a community volunteer and a three-term barangay councilor. →



very big challenge because the women in our area are disorganized, unaware of women's issues and apathetic to what is happening in the community."<sup>2</sup> Josefa "Mommy Eps" Marvella, a SAMAKA original member and BHW President of Daraga, adds, "Back then decision-making was still mostly made by men, and women were relegated to just doing household chores." But things changed, narrates Mommy Eps: "In the late 80's and early 90's women became more involved, as a result of organizing and, at the same time, their participation in programs, for example, on BHW trainings in primary health care. That was how I was mobilized and organized myself, and it paved the way for my appointment as Barangay Treasurer for 12 years."

Mommy Eps is an inspiration for the majority of SAMAKA members; despite her age and health condition, she continues organizing and serving the women and men of her community. Teresita "Tess" Galicia, a Barangay Health Worker (BHW) since 1983, added that when she joined SAMAKA her skills and knowledge on governance work and on women's involvement in communities was further developed; she realized that working for women's empowerment and gender equality was a big challenge for her and for the Daragueñas. Since then Tess has become an active community volunteer. She was also a three-term topnotch Barangay Councilor from 1994 -2007 in Kimantong, Daraga.

Mommy Eps, Tess and Elena are outstanding examples of how SAMAKA as an organization concretely paved the way for empowering women. Once organized, the women of SAMAKA dared not just to speak out, but stood up as leaders for their communities. As Mommy Eps recalls, "Of my own volition and out of the prodding of my fellow BHWs, I ran as a barangay Councilor in 1997 and won two consecutive terms. That was a proud achievement for me. "During my time as Councilor, I handled the Barangay Committee on Health and I helped link our barangay with line agencies, such as the Department of Agriculture and Department of Agrarian Reform, to access livelihood programs."

Elena echoes the sentiments of Mommy Eps. The trainings and seminars she attended in SAMAKA developed her as a leader and made her outspoken; and so, people encouraged Elena to run in the 2002 barangay election where she also won.



Emma “Ate Ems” Otivar, a strong woman with a good heart who enjoys community work, was a migrant worker turned entrepreneur before becoming a community leader. She was also among the first members of SAMAKA. She joined the organization in 1998 when she was recruited by Hon. Len Magayanes and joined the women-empowerment advocacy of CAPG. According to Ate Ems, “My dream then was to have a daycare center in our barangay, and for that dream to come true, in 1998 I offered my house to be a temporary daycare center for our community.”

Ate Ems with her dedication and initiative was encouraged to run in the 2002 barangay election where she won the third slot out of six openings for Barangay Councilor. Ate Ems declares, “SAMAKA helped me become a more effective community leader through training and seminars on gender sensitivity, women’s and children’s rights, and participatory governance. “SAMAKA developed my skills and knowledge that helped me to know women’s role in the family, barangay, and society,” she adds.

Zenaida “Mommy Zen” Morcozo, a woman of happy disposition, a loving wife and a devoted community worker, and founding secretary of SAMAKA, learned over the years that her place in life was not to be limited to the private sphere, her intimate family. Her place included her larger family in the community. Mommy Zen ran for barangay councilor and won three consecutive terms from 1994-2007.

## SAMAKA’s vital role

As SAMAKA’s leaders and members claimed these public spaces to influence decision-making and bring to light women’s interests, Daraga’s government and brand of governance became more open and flexible to people’s participation. It helped that eventually one of SAMAKA’s originals, Hon. Len Magayanes herself rose from Municipal Councilor to eventually winning as Vice-Mayor in 2004. Together with the other elected leaders of SAMAKA, women in general gained advocates within government to fight for their rights.

As Mommy Eps believes, “Because of SAMAKA, women’s groups and advocacies gained more prominence in Daraga precisely because of the interventions from partners such as the Barangay-Bayan Governance Consortium (BBGC), various non-government organizations, and through the help of Vice Mayor Len Magayanes.”

These empowered women in turn helped make SAMAKA become more stable and expand its services to its members. As Mommy Eps recalls, SAMAKA was even able to forge linkages and access services from partnerships with the Municipal Social Welfare Desk Office (MSWDO) and the Rural Health Unit (RHU).

Furthermore, during Elena’s leadership, for example, SAMAKA was chosen as the partner of Community Crops Association of the Philippines (CCAP) for the latter’s livelihood programs, and her barangay chapter was able to venture into handicrafts. Until now, the CCAP-SAMAKA partnership helps the community women pursue their livelihood.

## Developing leadership skills and influence

When the Bayanihan sa Kalunsuran (BAKAL) project entered the picture, SAMAKA had had gone into an organizational slump, as its chapters turned inactive after resources became scarce. But through the BAKAL project, SAMAKA was revived and its engagement in governance work

continued. Organizing was revived, capacity building interventions were undertaken, and the development planning in Daraga's barangays was updated, resumed or expanded.

SAMAKA played a pivotal role in the development planning among Daraga's barangays, its leaders, the Golden Girls, became part of the pool of facilitators and the municipal technical working group that oversaw the barangay development planning through participatory planning and action (BDP-PLA) in 18 barangays. The BDP-PLA continues for the rest of Daraga's 54 barangays. Mommy Zen, for example, being a BDP-PLA facilitator, encouraged and convinced her Punong Barangay and the Council to use this participatory approach in planning workshops in their barangay. Mommy Zen easily influenced the officials, being the Barangay Secretary since 2007 after serving her three terms as Barangay Councilor.

Hirfa "Ka Pepay" Espadilla, Barangay Chairperson of Barangay Dinoronan entered politics herself in 1997, and attests to the efficacy of the BAKAL interventions. Slim but not frail, articulate and a strong woman, Ka Pepay exudes a pleasant aura with a ready smile and crisp voice as she related how the BDP-PLA helped her in the implementation of projects in her barangay.



"It's participatory and the community decides what projects are really needed; and everybody participates, like women's groups, seniors, youth, farmers and other sectors," describes Ka Pepay. For Tess, the BDP-PLA as tool for their planning process was empowering in that "everybody participates and women in the community began to understand why we should organize, participate in all decision-making bodies, mechanisms and processes."

She admits that "We still have a long way to go, but with our plan we are now starting to systematize implementation and monitoring especially in gender related projects."

Elena also helped as a BDP-PLA facilitator, "The renewed activity it gave us boosted my self-confidence and skills especially when this participatory training was conducted in our barangay," Elena says. "Also the seminars we took about gender equality and women empowerment gave me a better perspective and these are affirmations of what we believe in as women." Women, she said, should be able to know their rights, for their own good and to be ready for challenges.

Her sentiments are echoed by Tess: "Despite being organized already I was not as confident and strong then as I am now. I don't have any inferiority complex anymore."

Mommy Eps adds: "Through the help extended to us, my skills as Barangay official, SAMAKA member and as a woman were all developed further. The development planning we undertook gave importance to women's participation and stressed gender responsiveness in the projects we outlined in our plans."

The growth of their leadership skills was a common experience among the SAMAKA members. As Tess recalls, more women began to express a willingness to engage local politics in their areas. While the BAKAL project progressed in Daraga, more and more women leaders surfaced and stood up for election in the barangay elections of 2007. However, years of inactivity showed SAMAKA's inherent weaknesses when some of its members failed to get elected or re-elected. In the October 2007 Barangay election Ka Pepay thankfully won as Barangay Chairperson and according to her, her experience in governing her barangay through participatory means learned from BAKAL encouraged her to conduct its second BDP-PRA last year after winning her second term as Punong Barangay.

The other Golden Girls have also branched out to more positions of authority in their communities. Mommy Zen, for example, is also a Board Member of Soroptimist International, treasurer of the Barangay Health Workers Daraga Federation, and an auditor of the Local Council for Women. Ate Ems, on the other hand, is Chairperson of the Local Council of Women composed of women's organizations operating in the area. This opening hopefully would allow SAMAKA to strengthen existing relationships, and forge new ones with more women's organizations in Daraga. Furthermore, in a lot of the barangays where the Golden Girls work or live, their development plans have also begun to bear fruit. Their linkages with agencies, other officials, formal or otherwise, and their capacity-building under BAKAL have allowed them to nourish, maintain or initiate livelihood projects such as handicrafts.

## **Towards a strong, independent organization**

Organizationally, SAMAKA's revival attests to the apparent willingness of women in Daraga to mobilize and participate to make themselves heard. In February 2008, in an attempt to address their weaknesses—demonstrated by the unmet expectations of the 2007 barangay elections—SAMAKA held a general Assembly with 143 representatives in attendance.

“The General assembly sought to finally re-establish SAMAKA as a force for inspiring, motivating and mobilizing women towards the improvement of our own lot,” says Ka Pepay. “By getting its act together and rising from years of inactivity, SAMAKA seeks to enjoin more and more women to come out of their shells.”

SAMAKA also conducted its 1st assessment and planning last year with the help of the Institute of Politics and Governance (IPG) under the BAKAL project. The assessment-planning gave the Golden Girls and SAMAKA an opportunity to draw out their organizational plans.

During their assessment the Golden Girls agreed that over the years, SAMAKA is not lacking in the skills among its leaders and members to grow. According to them, “SAMAKA has a fund and a program to generate funds, has a widespread coverage among Daraga’s barangays, and its programs and services can be utilized for its members and constituents.”

Out of their assessment they drew up an orientation paper, revived and assigned key persons to their standing committees on membership, finance and the like, and drafted organizational policies and procedures—with the end view of revitalizing SAMAKA as a robust, independent organization beyond even the shadow of what has been achieved by its pioneers, the Golden Girls and Vice Mayor Magayanes.

Given their commitment, indeed there seems to be no sunset on the horizon for the Golden Girls of SAMAKA. They demonstrate how fine women can lead the way in the place aptly called Daraga.

