



In Bloom: The Mujeres

Angie Ludovice-Katoh (center), executive director of ACORD and chairperson of MUJERES at the women's day parade in downtown Zamboanga City.

de Zamboanga in Public and Economic Life

By John Vincent Cruz, IPG

Affectionately called The City of Flowers, Zamboanga City sits way down on the southwestern tip of the Zamboanga peninsula in Mindanao. The city looks out on the Sulu Sea that teems with abundant life and resources, a major source of income and livelihood for many of its residents. Zamboanga City is known for its sardines export and nascent seaweeds-processing industries. The natural beauty and strategic location of Zamboanga City has made it not only an economic hub in Mindanao and a popular tourist destination; it promises hope for a better life for people in other areas. And where growth is imminent, so is the failure of rapid urbanization to keep up with the demands for social services.

The women of **MUJERES**

In one of the poorer barangays of Zamboanga City, Rose Rabutin sits at home, hushing her 5-year old son and his sister who had just come home from school, as she relates how she ventured into the world of women organizing. "I was content with just staying at home and looking after my kids," she related. "But with the persistence of ACORD and the Tierra Madre nuns I was convinced to attend meetings and trainings." Demure and unassuming, Rose mused, quite timidly, "I was hesitant to join

at first because I don't have sufficient education. But I saw that the intentions of our group were good, and that taking action would help improve our lives here."

Rose is but one of thousands of urban poor women who were mobilized and organized under the MUJERES de Zamboanga, a federation of various women's organizations around the city that have banded together for a common cause: the upliftment of their conditions and the advancement of women's rights.



Rose at home relaxing after marching at the Women's month parade in downtown Zamboanga City.

Reactivated women's organizations

When Bayanihan sa Kalunsuran (BAKAL) came into the picture, MUJERES was smaller than it is now. In 2005, according to Angie Ludovice-Katoh, MUJERES Chairperson and Executive Director of Alternative Center for Organizational Reforms and development (ACORD), MUJERES only had 894 members. ACORD, which is the local partner for the BAKAL project in Zamboanga City, revived MUJERES by organizing the women organizations in barangays across the city. MUJERES now counts around 4,780 members. "It is considered our greatest achievement," said Angie, "given that we were able to mobilize this number of women in only three years' time."

As an example, in Barangay Cabatangan, Sanny Sanicad, President of HUKUSAKA recounts how their organization was revived with the entry of BAKAL. "We were organized in 1998 and were immediately registered with the Department of Labor and Employment. The DOLE gave us two small sewing machines to jumpstart our garment project where we made dresses and bags, but in time, the organiza-

tion was almost dissolved because of mismanagement.” In 2006, Sanny recalled as their members gather around during a meeting, “ACORD came in to reactivate HUKUSAKA and new members were recruited.” She looks around and sees their members composed of some elderly women, mothers who dressed up in anticipation of guests, and younger women who form the core of HUKUSAKA’s new recruits. “Our challenge now is how to make sure that what has been started is allowed to flourish and grow into something that will benefit all our members,” Sanny added.

Women go out to organize

The impact of this organizing is already apparent in a lot of MUJERES’s members. “I did not imagine I could be President of our women’s association here in Tierra Madre,” said Rose. “Before, I simply wanted to cook, take care of the children, but now we are visible in our community and we are recognized as leaders.”

Tausug women vendors at the Zamboanga Public market are members of the Mampang Mujeres group.



The strength that MUJERES and its affiliates began to show proved effective in convincing local officials to engage them in their pursuit of participation in governance. In Barangay La Paz, barangay officials became supportive of ACORD and MUJERES when their community undertook its Barangay Development Planning through Participatory Learning and Action (BDP-PLA).

As Erlinda de la Serna recounted, “In our barangay, it was the women who got interested to participate in the plans under BAKAL because many of us did not have work outside our homes.

“We did not have any knowledge about governance and I later found out it was important to participate in the development of our barangay because that would help us overcome being poor.”

According to Erlinda, out of their BDP, which the barangay officials adopted, their barangay was able to have electricity. As Angie explains, “these women are now the ones who go out of their homes to organize other farmers. And out of their development plan they were also able to obtain a cargo truck for use by the farmers in the community from a donation by Katilingban. Their produce is now sold by their organization directly to consumers in downtown Zamboanga, eliminating the need for middlemen, which kept prices low from them.”

Barangay Mampang was not originally covered by BAKAL, but the women’s community there, led by Darwisa Omar, was also organized, seeing that Mampang was one of the most depressed areas in the city. “We want to seek out a better life for ourselves, also to show everyone that Muslims are a people of peace, who only want what everyone else wants – a better life,” said Darwisa.



Darwisa Omar is a member of the MUJERES in Barangay Mampang, Zamboanga City.

Partnerships are Important

Indispensable to such pursuit is the support of government officials. At the barangay level, the affiliates of MUJERES worked towards accreditation in barangay development councils, in order to allow their organizations to have a say in the governance of their communities. MUJERES also closely related to key offices and officials in the city. As Angie recalled, “Representative Isabel ‘Beng’ Climaco of the 1st district is one of the elected officials most supportive of MUJERES.”

Barangay Mampang, Zamboanga City



According to Angie, “A big slice of Rep. Climaco’s Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF) or pork barrel, is allotted to barangays where MUJERES has a presence, in recognition of our support.” “Her support is also seen in the way that she connected us with different agencies such as Department of Agriculture (DA), Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), and the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE),” added Angie.

In Barangay Zambowood, another expansion area under BAKAL in Zamboanga, Jocelyn Angeles is the head of the local MUJERES chapter. She related that “We had been looking forward to having a daycare center of our own in our barangay.”

Jocelyn recalled how in the past, women in their community of Putik Riverside used to hang out and play poker and other forms of gambling. “Women did not want to join at first but because we kept convincing them, they were eventually mobilized.” Organized because they were included in BAKAL interventions, the women in Zambowood wrote to ACORD for help, after which ACORD and MUJERES negotiated with the office of the city Mayor, Hon. Celso Lobregat and Congressman Erbie Fabian who represents the 2nd district of Zamboanga City. The politicians helped them look for a vacant lot where the association could build a daycare center made of light materials. They are also awaiting results of requests made with the mayor’s office and the DSWD regarding the honorarium for the daycare worker maintaining the place now.

According to Angie, "It is important to have an open line of communication between government officials and our women's organizations, because the relationship developed is mutually beneficial. "They facilitate the freeing up of resources for the benefit of their constituents, and our communities help convince them of the need to engage the grassroots to make governance more democratic. "With such openings available, we have to maximize them to enable the ordinary citizens, especially women, to get involved in decision-making, and this framework is integrated into ACORD and MUJERES's work."

Women take political power

The natural offshoot, of course, was engagement in the electoral process. And as the women of MUJERES became more and more conscious of their role in society, more of them began to expand the scope of their participation. As Rose added, "Before we didn't really care about elections, especially if we saw there were too many people in line at the polls." "But with the help of ACORD not only did we actively campaign for candidates we believe would help us, but some of our members in MUJERES also ran and won in the barangay elections last year," added Rose. Indeed, through the BAKAL project, MUJERES succeeded in winning 16 barangay councilors throughout Western Mindanao – 3 in the city, 7 in Sibugay, 4 in Basilan, 2 in Zamboanga del



Mujeres de Tierra Madre business manager Carmelita Rico in front of her store, Zamboanga City.

Sur, all women leaders who benefited from ACORD's efforts to maximize its trainings on electoral campaign management. Some of their supported candidates, men and women, also won. There was one which won in Barangay Tumaga, two in Barangay Mampang, two in Barangay La Paz and one in Barangay Pasonanca. "We went to the polling center very early because we wanted our candidate to win," said Rose. "Even though some of our local candidates didn't win, we are resolved to continue our participation in the 2010 election." "We want to be recognized as leaders," said Erlinda. "BAKAL changed our outlook and we are confident that there will be a change in our lives' direction, because in the next elections we will make sure that our supported candidates win."

Estelita Manalo, President of Puerzas de las Mujeres in Barangay Tugbungan, recounted her electoral experience. "Before, we did not care about our environment. Our area was flood-prone and our canals were overflowing. But when we had a training on barangay governance I realized we were being neglected, so I ran as barangay councilor." Estelita however, did not make it. As she recounted, "I realized that short preparations were not enough, but now we are working to have our organization accredited with the Barangay Development Council so we can continue to lobby our barangay for the services we should receive."

As Angie explained, "Women's education through training and seminars would help a lot in the women's campaigns. More of them can win if they become more articulate on issues and concerns that affect their lives." She added that "Education has helped boost their confidence but this has to be sustained so they can have the courage to push and assert the solutions they see to their community's problems." Erlinda herself testifies, "The help we received gave us not just ideas, but the courage and self-confidence to address our community problems and improve our conditions."

Livelihood and **MUJERES'** sustainability

In order to improve their communities' conditions, the various women's organizations under MUJERES were able to clinch livelihood project support from DOLE. "We passed the ocular inspection and background check done by DOLE, thereby affirming our credibility," recalled Angie. "We were then accepted and accredited as co-partners of DOLE, showing that ACORD has been able to build on its track record in project implementation." Angie believes that accessing these projects was a direct result of their organizational capacity and effective lobbying. As a result, projects on production of delicacies, muscovado sugar, mud crab fattening, seaweed farming, garments and dressmaking are now supported in several barangays where BAKAL organizing was done.

To help ensure the sustainability of these projects, Angie said, "ACORD provides training on project management, including business coaching and mentoring, organizational maintenance and monitoring." "The women's organizations or affiliates of MUJERES form their management committee which sets up the mechanisms for the reporting and managing their businesses, which we hope will allow them to earn a living and help their families as well." As for MUJERES itself, ensuring the health of the federation is constantly on the women's minds. As Angie explained, "Whatever savings MUJERES generates from dues or fees are converted into a social fund, which returns to the members in terms of services and assistance for their activities."

In maintaining this social fund, Angie said that plans included "institutionalizing a P15 per month due for MUJERES members, collection of a 'royalty' fee for referrals made and the eventual establishment of a MUJERES cooperative."

Presently, MUJERES provides several services to its members: referral and endorsement specifically on legal advice and livelihood trainings, project mentoring, project development and awareness-raising. These services are offered in a way that, as Angie cautioned, "We do not want members to affiliate with MUJERES just because of projects. Consciousness-raising has to become a continuing endeavor."



Lukot-lukot , a sweet delicacy of the Tausug, is sold in the market by members of the Mampang Mujeres group.

Confidence and optimism

The seeds of qualitative change, however, are apparent in the words of the MUJERES leaders themselves. As Rose said, "Nowadays, we have learned not to be shy when opportunities come up. To make sure people can see us, and that we can ask for our rights as women, we make sure we are active not just in parades but also other city-sponsored activities." Estelita added, "I used to be discouraged because my members had so many problems and I did not know how to handle them. Now I am proud that because of ACORD's help, we are recognized, accredited and we even mobilized the biggest number during the 2007 Women's Day parade for the MUJERES contingent." Estelita further says that with renewed confidence, she need not be an elected official to participate. "Complying with requirements for accreditation to the BDC is just formality because I am able to participate in Barangay Council sessions and they listen to me."

Sanny for her part added, "Having support from the likes of ACORD helped a lot in building our belief in ourselves that together we can take on the challenges our communities face." "We now understand what our rights are and what we can do as women, and there is a lot," with a glimmer of hope in her eyes making it clear that just like the other women of MUJERES, Sanny is hopeful for their future. Angie echoes their optimism: "In our work in Maluso, Tawi-Tawi the Mayor Sakib Salajin even expressed interest to emulate the BAKAL project to help the women sector in his municipality." According to Angie, "The BAKAL experience in Zamboanga is replicable, and a challenge to undertake in predominantly Muslim areas where men have control. But with the lessons we have learned we may even find a way to do it." The women of MUJERES, like their City of Flowers, are indeed in full bloom—and they have even begun to inspire other communities.