

RONDA GIRLS OF PATEROS



A photo of Sitio Pagkakaisa, Barangay Sta. Ana, Pateros. Photograph by author.

Under Duterte's drug war, it takes a village led by mothers to protect each husband and child.

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THE HUMAN COSTS OF THE DRUG WAR

Pietà. Photograph by Raffy Lerma, 2016. ([@raffylerma] 2020).

The “war on drugs” in the Philippines, initiated under President Rodrigo Duterte's administration in June 2016 and continuing under the current administration of Ferdinand Marcos Jr., has led to thousands of deaths and widespread human rights violations. While official government data reported over 6,000 fatalities, other sources, such as the International Criminal Court, estimated as high as 12,000 to 30,000 deaths within Duterte's term (The Economist 2021). While men are the primary targets of the drug war, women have been immensely affected by drug violence as they deal with loss, trauma, physical threats, and economic hardships.

The gendered impact of the “war on drugs” has relegated women as the “new underclass among the urban poor” ([Dionisio 2020, v.](#)).

Despite the absence of justice and the continuing culture of violence and impunity, the women from targeted communities have mobilized to demand justice for the victims of Duterte's drug war. This booklet sheds light on the acts of resistance of a group of mothers to protect their loved ones from the violence brought on by the drug war. [This is a story centered on a tight-knit neighborhood in the city of Pateros, Philippines about a mother's radical love for her family and community.](#)

THE KILLING THAT SPARKED THE PATROLS

On the eve of December 14, 2016, Mary Jane had to stop doing her laundry. Hearing motorcycle engines roaring in the streets at night would usually not bother her. She thought there was no way that her family would be arrested by the police or targeted by the "Bonnet Gang," the motorcycle-riding vigilantes. Her family was not involved in the use or trade of illegal drugs; in fact, they were even supporters of President Duterte and the causes of his drug war. However, on that haunting night, two of their neighbors who lived just across the street from them were executed by the vigilantes. Her childhood friend was one of them whom she spoke with just hours before he was killed.

The gunshots broke the silence in Sitio Pagkakaisa, signifying that the drug war had already crept into their village. The first case of extra-judicial killing haunted the entire community. No one dared to go outside once nighttime unfolded. For Mary Jane, her nights dedicated to laundry shifted to routines of moving the cabinet behind their door, placing her husband's ID within arms reach, and making sure that her family would be safe from mistaken identities and stray bullets.

What happened in Mary Jane's neighborhood was only a glimpse of the larger picture of violence inflicted by the Duterte administration's "war on drugs." Amnesty International (2017) condemned the controversial policy for being a "war against the poor," targeting only the most vulnerable and waged only in impoverished communities.

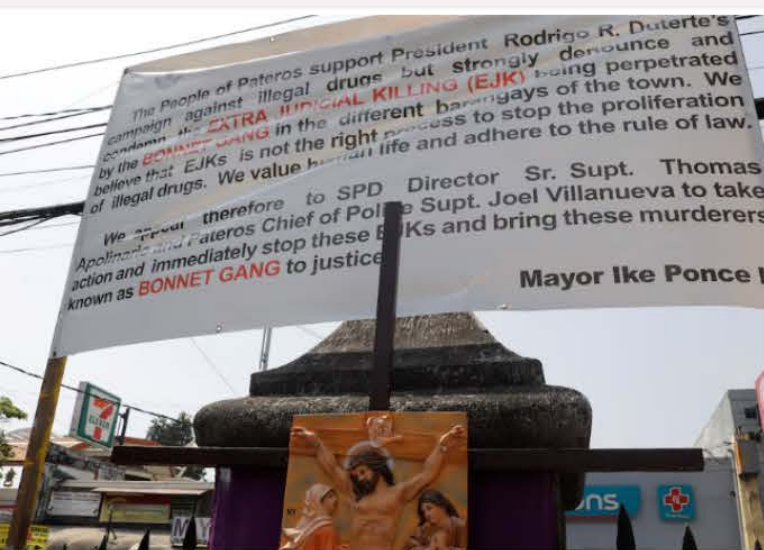


A photo of the Chapel of Birhen Milagrosa, where the mothers gather every evening to conduct their patrols. Photograph by the author.

The drug-related violence under the Duterte administration goes beyond the killings. According to the Philippine Human Rights Information Center (2018), "an EJK death does not end the human rights violation... it is an inciting incident to a host of interrelated negative conditions that have gravely undermined the economic and social rights of the families left behind."

While men are the primary targets of the killings, the women of left-behind families and affected communities carry the multiple burdens of taking care of their families and providing for their survival.

PATEROS UNDER THE “WAR ON DRUGS”



A banner in Pateros denouncing EJKs. Photograph by Erik De Castro (Baldwin and Marshall 2017).

Oplan Tokhang in Pateros

Mary Jane's neighborhood is located in the heart of Sitio Pagkakaisa, Barangay Santa in Pateros City, the lone municipality and smallest government unit in Metro Manila, with over 60,000 people as of 2020 (Philippine Statistics Authority 2017). Barangay Santa is the city's most populous barangay, making up 45.50 percent of the city's population (PhilAtlas 2020).

During the first eight months of Oplan Tokhang, the "Bonnet Gang" gunned down more than 60 "drug suspects" in Pateros (Baldwin and Marshall 2017). The city Mayor Ike Ponce III was the sole local executive who openly opposed the policy at the outset of the drug war.

Impact of the killings on Sitio Pagkakaisa community

Sitio Pagkakaisa was engulfed with fear and trauma after witnessing its first incident of extra-judicial killing (EJK). The festive December scene was absent as the neighborhood was reduced to a ghost town. No one dared to walk the streets at night for fear of being the next target of "tokhang." Husbands and sons slept in their workplace instead of going home late at night. The children were traumatized, panicking and screaming "There's a bonnet! There's a bonnet!" upon hearing sounds of motorcycles in the streets.

Nene, a mother of 8, shared how the EJK affected her family: "Ever since the tokhang, my 7-year-old child became traumatized. She had to go back to first grade because she had stopped her schooling ... Seeing the lifeless bodies of the man and his nephew terrified her. We had to leave for Baras last December 25. We were so afraid that we did not want to go back home."

With the literal absence of men in the streets of Sitio Pagkakaisa, the only brave presence outside were those of women—the grandmothers, mothers, and wives patiently waiting together for their family members to reach home safely each night.

Mothers leading the patrols

As the women spent their nights talking to each other and waiting for their husbands and sons to come home from work, one of the mothers suggested the idea of watching over the streets by enforcing curfews, keeping them clear of minors or street drinkers who are potential targets of motorcycle-riding gunmen. In these circumstances, 16 women took the role of watchers of the night, eventually being dubbed the "Ronda Girls" (Patrol Girls). On January 28, 2017, the Women's Organization was established. They changed their name in 2019, now calling themselves the "Ronda ng Kababaihan" (Patrol of Women). According to Violy, one of the most senior members of the group, "As to why an organization was created, it is because the men are scared, right? Women have to stand guard."

Resisting drug violence through mothering

The Ronda Girls report to their duties every 10 in the evening by gathering at their makeshift outpost in front of the Chapel of Birhen Milagrosa. The mothers would start their first round of patrol in groups of two to five members while the senior members remained at the outpost. They were familiar with every corner, route, and block. They recognized the faces of people in their community and would remember those who were not from their village. As the women conducted their rounds, they would greet each person they passed a good evening and even joke with younger adults to go home and sleep.

Any other person could conduct night patrols, but the manner in which the Ronda Girls did it was different. The women enforced curfews by using their motherly concern and maternal authority (Marcaida 2021) when calling out minors violating curfew hours and engaging with men drinking in the streets at night. Jenny, their leader, explained their approach: "Confrontation is accompanied by appeasement. If we cannot win the trust of our neighbors, they will end up as enemies. We do not need to agitate them. We need to bond and cooperate with them. They just have to ask permission from us."

Through the practice of mothering, they were able to establish rapport with their neighbors and the police. For example, when engaging with men drinking in the streets at night, there were times when the mothers permitted them to continue the session as long as no noise would be made. The mothers also reinforced their rapport with the police on every occasion, serving them food, inviting them to rest at the outpost, or simply conversing and joking with them. The police were invited to the organization's Christmas, birthday, and anniversary celebrations. These cooperative relationships were crucial for the women to gain allies from the police ranks and report any instances of police brutality.

THE CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSSES OF THE MOVEMENT



A photo of the Ronda Girls receiving the "Best Practice" award from the Pateros Police. Photograph from Jenny Helo, Ronda ng Kababaihan leader

For some of the mothers, a personal motivation that drove them to take on the role of night watchers was the history of drug use by the men in their families. This resulted in hostility from their neighbors at the beginning, accusing them of harboring addicts and doubting their commitment to the initiative. A member shared her experience: "At first, our other neighbors laughed at us, saying that we were only volunteering to protect our loved ones who are addicts. We ignored that. It hurts to accept, but it is true, right? We are not perfect people. We have similar histories, but not all volunteers here have relatives who use drugs."

Even with the other mothers, there was this transparency on the drug use of their husbands and sons and their vulnerability to being the next targets of the drug killings. Notwithstanding the admission, the mothers refuse to sit back and watch their loved ones be killed by police vigilantism. By volunteering, they commit themselves to making sure that their loved ones would change while also protecting the lives of their family members. Moreover, not all members had the same motivation. The others feared that their sons' and husbands' common names might lead to mistaken identities. Additionally, there was the possibility of enemies manipulating the drug list. The general motivation shared by the women was to contribute to the safety of Sitio Pagkakaisa and to end the violence caused by the drug war.

Despite the initial doubts of their neighbors, the Ronda Girls proved their commitment to the cause through their consistent dedication to the patrol duties since 2017. As a result, they have successfully ensured that the EJK they witnessed would be the first and the last drug killing in their village. Furthermore, the Pateros Police awarded the Ronda ng Kababaihan with the "Best Practice" award for their contribution to the safety of Pateros and increase in police trust (PNP Pulis At Ur Serbis 2021).

The story of Ronda Girls is a heartfelt ode of a mother's enduring love for her family. However, it is also an account of the Pateros municipality's reliance on and exploitation of the unpaid labor of urban poor women—a reflection of its failure to ensure the safety of its citizens. To guarantee the continuity of the grassroots movement of the Ronda Girls and their active political and civic participation, the local government of Pateros must extend institutional support by providing allowances, training, and sufficient resources to the Ronda ng Kababaihan.

LESSONS FROM THE PATEROS MOTHERS



A photo of the Ronda Girls during their night patrol. Source: Jenny Helo, Ronda ng Kababaihan leader

What can we learn from the Ronda Girls' grassroots initiative?

While the grassroots patrols were not explicitly abolitionist, the women's motivations and objectives behind their volunteerism strongly resonated with what abolition feminisms are all about: "a long arc of ethical life-making and everyday practice that has always been at the root of abolitionist possibility, the heart of abolition itself" (Spade et al. 2022, 3). Their success in ending the killings in their village was a testament to motherhood as the most impenetrable stronghold of families and communities in the face of state violence and killings. Furthermore, their patrols demonstrated that an alternative approach to community safety could be better achieved through mothering, care, and cooperation with the members of their neighborhood, as opposed to fear, force, and violence employed by state forces.

The calls for drug policy reform expressed by the mothers also reflected elements of transformative justice—the primacy of addressing the root cause of the harm, the understanding that the behavior does not define the person, and the importance of healing and recovery. Jenny, the leader of the Ronda Girls, echoed the moral agency shared by their group: "It hurts when I witness someone being killed. My reasoning is: God is forgiving; why not give them a chance to change? Why not let them undergo rehabilitation?" They dedicate their nights to watching over the community to keep their loved ones alive. For them, an EJK victim is someone's father, husband, and son. While others might criticize them for condoning drug use, they would argue that by participating in the patrols, they commit to helping their loved ones change because having them killed is never the moral way to do it.



A photo of Ronda Girls in 2022. Photograph by author.

Patrolling beyond the drug war

From the initial 16 members in 2017, the Ronda ng Kababaihan grew into a group of 35, comprised of grandmothers, mothers, wives, daughters, and LGBT members.

As of 2022, the organization conducted voluntary patrols every other night in cooperation with the police. However, they aren't just "ronda girls" anymore—their volunteerism expanded into assistance in funeral services, fiestas, gardening programs, outreach activities, and other events of the municipality, all geared towards public service. Even with the new threat of the COVID-19 pandemic, the patrols endured.

With mothering as the centerpiece of their activism, their organization exemplified how love and care, not violence and fear, can provide safety within their community.

How can we support the cause of Ronda ng Kababaihan?

1. The lack of institutional support through allowances has resulted in obstacles to the sustainability of the voluntary patrols. Extend financial support to Ronda ng Kababaihan (2019) for the provision of patrol equipment and assistance to those struggling to seek health care for their family members.
2. Strengthen calls to shift the existing punitive and prohibitionist drug policy paradigm to a human rights- and health-based one. Demand for the review of RA 9165, also known as the Comprehensive Dangerous Drugs Act of 2002.
3. Contribute to shaping the public discourse on drug use from perceiving it as a criminal issue to a public health concern.
4. Support political leaders who advocate for alternative solutions to the drug problem that are grounded on health, compassion, science, and human rights.

What are their vision for drug policy reform under President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr.?

Having been directly affected by the previous administration's drug war, the mothers hoped that the administration under President Marcos Jr. would stop killing drug users and focus on rehabilitating them instead (Marcaida 2022). According to Jenny, the leader of the Ronda Girls, "I hope he [Marcos Jr.] has his own mindset, and he won't be a puppet of the outgoing administration."

One of the campaign promises of Pres. Marcos was to focus on drug rehabilitation and education. The challenge at present is to compel the administration to pursue drug policy reform and seek justice for drug war victims.

MOTHERS IN THE FRONTLINES OF THE DRUG WAR

The mothers of drug war victims have stood on the frontlines in the pursuit of justice and accountability. Apart from **Ronda ng Kababaihan**, other groups led by mothers have stepped up to engage in radical resistance.



A photo of Rise Up for Life and for Rights' protest. Photograph by Bulatlat (Umil 2023).

Project Support for Orphans and Widows in Payatas City, led by Vincentian Fathers, offers livelihood support to families of EJK victims. Livelihood programs through sewing production are conducted with the women to ease their financial burden. At the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, when mask supply was low, the mothers and widows contributed to the sewing washable face masks. Father Pilario (2020) described how these women who were "once victims of armed men wearing face masks and bonnets who killed their husbands in EJK... now turned "swords into plowshares" by helping us protect ourselves from COVID-19."

The mother-activists leading and constituting Rise Up for Life and for Rights (2022) speak truth to power as through their bravery in filing testimonies and pressing charges against perpetrators of the killings. The mothers, through, Rise Up filed a complaint to the International Criminal Court in 2018, stating that Duterte, "who has likened himself as one of the most evil men in history... be held to account for crimes against humanity" before the ICC (Gavilan 2018).



A photo of framed masks created by Project SOW mothers for Project BUSAL. Photograph from See (2020).



A photo of one of Rise Up for Life and for Rights' protest. Photograph by Bullit Marquez/AP. (Van Sant 2019)

THE STATE OF THE DRUG WAR POST-DUTERTE

The fight for justice for all victims of the drug war carries on even after Rodrigo Duterte stepped down from office. The Marcos administration has repeatedly ordered the government not to cooperate with the International Criminal Court investigation (Reuters 2024). The administration has yet to provide concrete support for the left-behind families of the drug war victims (Aspinwall 2024). The killings still continue under Marcos (AP News 2024). Furthermore, the return of the drug war looms beyond the current administration as Vice President Sara Duterte leads as the most favored political candidate for the 2028 election.

The road to justice is uphill, full of obstacles and barriers, marred by the deafening silence of authorities and the continuing culture of violence and impunity with regard to state violence and neglect, which has peaked due to the drug war. Despite all difficulties, hardships, and threats, the mothers and families of victims strive to speak truth against the killings and provide support for communities that suffered under the drug war. I write this booklet alongside my continuing research on the mothers' activism in support of these women. I stand with the mothers in their calls for political, economic, and social justice for all victims of state oppression.

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