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Resistance Through Mothering and Care Work Under the Philippine "War on Drugs"

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Abstract This study sheds light on the motherist community initiatives which emerged as a response to the state-sanctioned extrajudicial killings under President Rodrigo Duterte's 'war on drugs'. This research examines the role of motherhood in the formation of the political and moral agency of grandmothers, mothers, and widows whose loved ones have been victims of the drug war. By analyzing the mothers' stories of resistance located in three community initiatives, this article posits that motherhood has served as a liberating force in the face of state attacks against women, their families, and homes. Furthermore, this study attempts to argue the transformation of mothering and the collectivization of care work – a reaction to the crisis of care exacerbated by the gendered impact of the Philippine drug war.

Keywords Philippines. War on drugs. Duterte. Motherhood. Social movement.

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1 Background

The gendered impact of President Rodrigo Duterte's 'war on drugs'[1] has been overlooked in both policymaking and scholarly literature. The human costs of the drug war go beyond the 12,000 to 30,000 fatalities estimated by the International Criminal Court (ICC) (Ratcliffe 2021a). 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". As the *Oplan Tokhang*, the flagship anti-drugs campaign of the Duterte administration killed male breadwinners in urban poor communities, women are left behind to carry the multiple burdens of taking care of their children and grandchildren and providing for their families (Pangilinan et al. 2021). The widespread impact of the drug war ranges from elderly mothers and widows of EJK victims struggling to afford funeral and burial costs to children dropping out of school due to lack of financial support, bullying, and trauma (Pangilinan et al. 2021; PhilRights 2018). For Dionisio (2020), the gendered violence that the drug war has inflicted on women has turned them into the "new underclass among the urban poor" (v).

Through this research, I highlight the plight of grandmothers, mothers, and widows who have suffered the loss of their loved ones from the drug war. I aim to examine the ways in which these women have fought back and mobilized against state-sanctioned violence. This study builds on and stems from my previous work (Marcaida 2021) on the grassroots movement of urban poor mothers against drug-related violence in the Philippines, similarly employing the 'motherist' framework (Howe 2006; Schirmer 1989; 1993) that approaches motherhood as a social construct as opposed to the universalist and essentialist underpinnings of maternalism as a framework (Ruddick 1989).

The narratives and experiences of women directly affected by the *Oplan Tokhang* will be drawn from three selected community initiatives, each emphasizing various services for the victims. These initiatives include the legal support of Rise Up for Life and for Rights,[2] the livelihood programs of Project Solidarity for Orphans and Widows

1 Former President Duterte launched his electoral campaign for the highest elective position during the 2016 elections, promising to eradicate the country's illegal drug problem within three to six months. The self-proclaimed deadline was not met as Duterte's six-year term ended with the continued operations of the illegal drug trade within the country and thousands of human rights violations associated with the controversial policy.

2 Rise Up for Life and for Rights is hereafter referred to as Rise Up.

(SOW),[3] and the psychosocial rehabilitation offered by *Baigani*, all of which are directed toward the protection of families of EJK victims. The selection of cases was based on two aspects: first, those that emerged as a reaction to the violence caused by the drug war, and second, those that are directed toward addressing the needs and welfare of left-behind families of EJK victims. In analyzing these three community initiatives, I raised three questions. First, what are the effects of *Oplan Tokhang* on women in targeted communities? Second, what strategies and services do these community initiatives provide to address the needs of families of EJK victims? And last, in what ways do these women through the community initiatives resist the drug-related violence brought by the drug war?

I seek to forward two primary arguments. First, as the 'war on drugs' disrupts, harasses, and violates a woman's household and family, motherhood becomes a catalyst for political resistance. And second, the expansion of care work through the collectivization of mothering within the community initiatives serves as a response to both the state-sponsored killings of poor men accused of drug use and the state abandonment of the duty to protect the rights and welfare of women and children. Evidence to support these arguments will be drawn from the women's personal narratives and experiences from three selected community initiatives. My analysis is informed by a decolonial feminist approach following Million's (2009) "felt analysis" of the "emotional content" of "felt knowledge" (58) derived from the "individual and collective experiential pain as point of analysis" (71), as manifested in various forms, such as testimonies, interviews, social media posts, poetry, prayers, and protest actions.

The nature of this study is exploratory and constrained with limitations in terms of analysis and data. Further and extensive research can be conducted to determine the role of religion in transforming women's participation, given the religious nature of the community initiatives covered in this study. The Latin American 'marianismo' as a gender role script can be analyzed in the context of the rise of motherist movements in the Philippines.[4] Deeper analysis can also be pursued to examine the gendered understandings of the concept of justice.

3 Earlier reports covering Project SOW referred to it as Project Support for Orphans and Widows.

4 The politicization of *marianismo* by the Rise Up mothers has been the focus of my ongoing research (Marcaida 2023) and the development of my dissertation project.

2 The Politics of Mothering[5]

'Mothering' is defined as the practice of nurturing and caring for another (Glenn 1994) for the fulfillment of the demands of maternal work: "preservation, growth, and social acceptability" (Ruddick 1989, 17). Motherhood has been an essential resource for peace politics (de Alwis 2009), citizenship (Werbner 1999), and social justice (Lemaitre 2016). However, its deployment as a source and instrument of political resistance has been problematized. Existing literature has explored the tensions between the conservative nature and radical potential of mothering and being a mother. I have framed these opposing viewpoints in my previous study as 'motherist' and 'maternalist' politics to denote the opposing views on motherhood (Marcaida 2021). The former, drawn from Howe's (2006) "motherist tradition" and Schirmer's (1989; 1993) 'motherist movements', refers to the "historically and culturally variable relationship" of motherhood (Glenn 1994, 3). The latter is grounded on difference feminism and essentialism (O'Reilly 2016).

In analyzing motherhood and its role in community participation and volunteerism, I adopt the 'motherist' lens by approaching the mothering practice and role as social constructs and reconciling traditional motherhood with political resistance (Marcaida 2021). According to Schirmer (1993), the cultural essentialism ingrained in maternalism is drawn from an "anti-militarist model of mothering within 'politically stable' states" (59). Hence, maternalism dismisses contexts, such as the prevalence of state violence in the Philippines under the Duterte administration, in which repressive circumstances necessitate the politicization of motherhood (Schirmer 1993).

Instead of viewing women's volunteer activity as liberating women while keeping them in place (Kaminer 1984), this research perceives extending the mothering practice through community participation as enabling the transformation of the traditional 'mother' role beyond the confines of domesticity (Pardo 1990) and allowing for the negotiation of gender roles without sacrificing their moral identity and authority as mothers (Abrahams 1996). By allowing both the accommodation and resistance to traditional gender roles (Stephen 1997), feminist analysis can avoid relegating motherhood and mothering to the subordinate end (Glenn 1994) and being trapped into 'false duality' associated with the Western feminist lens (Schirmer 1993, 60).

Furthermore, I employ Naples' (1992) concept of 'activist mothering', which challenged the essentialist interpretations of 'maternal practice' and 'maternal work' (see Ruddick 1989). Naples (1992), in

5 The section builds on and extends the discussion from the literature review found in my initial study (Marcaida 2021).

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her study on African-American and Latina women's community work in low-income neighborhoods, used the term 'activist mothering' in defining how the women expanded their mothering practices beyond their own kinship group and in all actions to address the needs of their communities, including their children (448). The women's acts of resistance and experience in their community work "defined the dominant definition of *motherhood* as emphasizing work performed within the private sphere of the family or in face-to-face interaction with those in need" (449, emphasis in original).

I seek to contribute to the scholarship on the politics of motherhood in the Global South. While research on mother-based movements has been abundant in Global South studies, limited attention has been given to Asia and specific regions, such as Southeast Asia. Significant works that have been written include De Alwis' (2009) research on the feminist peace activism in Sri Lanka where describes the collective mobilization of maternalism as having the "seemingly unquestionable authenticity of these women's grief and espousal of 'traditional' family values," which allowed for the opening up of an "important space for protest at a time when feminist and human rights activists… were being killed with impunity" (84). Yang (2017) also wrote on Taiwanese women's participation in the Sunflower Movement where she argued the radical potential of maternalism contrary to the critique of its irredeemable conservatism. Both works, however, approach motherhood from a maternalist framework, which I seek to interrogate and challenge in my previous (Marcaida 2021) and ongoing research.

By writing on the mothers of the Philippine drug war, I seek to contribute and engage with the works written on motherhood that touch on the complicated and dynamic relationship between the moral worth of traditional motherhood and the strategic use of its political, social, and cultural value in the Southeast Asian context. For instance, Bolotta (2017), in his work on the leadership of Thai slum mothers' mobilization against eviction, argued how traditional gendered representations of mothers have served as valuable and productive political resources that enabled them to be in ideal positions surrounding the non-governmental organizations (NGO) discourses on childhood rights in the face of political and economic marginality. He touched on the strategic value of mothers' privileged relationship with children and the matrifocal nature of local family structures in establishing political alliances with both national and international actors. Works on motherhood have also been written in the Philippines, albeit not focusing on mother-based leadership and participation in social movements. In Parmanand's (2021) study, she analyzed how microcredit has reshaped Filipino mothers' relationship with their families, poverty, and the state, challenging the neoliberal discourse of female empowerment by demonstrating how

microcredit further entrenches burdens on women as it regulates motherhood on the moral basis of their willingness and ability to uplift their families from poverty. Gacad (2020) also studied the meaning and performance of good motherhood among urban poor women in the Philippines in relation to reproductive freedom and sexuality by arguing how sexuality and motherhood, even when shaped by patriarchal structures and material conditions, can serve as potent sites in challenging capitalist and patriarchal control over women's identities, bodies, and desires.

I intend to contribute to the scholarship of motherhood in the Philippines by demonstrating how traditional motherhood values, roles, and practices often deemed as oppressive and confining can serve as sites for radical resistance and empowerment through the study of Filipina mothers who have transformed from being victims of the drug war to women warriors fighting for justice and accountability. Through the framework of 'activist mothering', I argue the transformation of mothering and expansion of care work in response to Duterte's 'war on drugs', which both inflicted gendered violence against women and produced a crisis of care in society.

I also seek to engage in the scholarship surrounding the gendered rule of the Duterte administration. Several studies have focused on the masculinist rhetoric that accompanied the leadership of Duterte. Discourse analyses written by scholars have focused on his campaign and presidential speeches to understand the reasons behind the widespread support and popularity of his rule. Encinas-Franco (2022) wrote about the gendered rhetoric and practice employed by Duterte in governing Filipino migrants. Lanuza (2022) highlighted Duterte's misogynistic microassaults against strong women in his public speeches, describing how it contributed to the consolidation of his 'misogynist fascist power' while reinforcing the traditional sex roles imposed on women, such as "passivity, obedience, and docility" (143). Conversely, other studies paid attention to the emerging resistant discourses that challenge Duterte's rule, such as Ladia (2024) who highlighted the grassroots feminist rhetoric found in the public addresses of opposition leader and former Vice President Leni Robredo during the COVID-19 pandemic that promoted inclusive policies to address the impact of the virus. I seek to join the conversations surrounding the gendered order imposed by Duterte, focusing not on masculinist rhetoric that bolstered his populist rule but the acts of resistance of non-sovereign subjects, the urban poor families and women who have been harmed by Duterte's policies and who have sought to go against both the rhetoric and policy that has targeted and demonized their communities.

3 Methodology: Women's Narratives of 'Felt Suffering'

I approach the study on the gendered impact of the Philippine 'war on drugs' from a decolonial feminist lens. This research analyzes the stories of resistance of the mothers of drug victims by looking at and listening to the individual stories and actions, including the collective and concerted practices of resistance that reflect the shared and communal experiences and struggles of the women – the once silent victims speaking up against Duterte's drug violence.

The findings of this study are derived from three case studies – Rise Up, Project SOW, and *Baigani* – through the stories of mothers who are part of the community initiatives. These groups serve as the unit of analysis of this study. While other organizations with similar causes have long been established, this study is limited only to these groups with their distinct community services created from the outset of *Oplan Tokhang*, responding to the needs of impoverished communities targeted by the policy. Moreover, while there are other cases that sprung as a reaction to the drug war sharing the same objective as the cases covered in this study, I have specifically selected the three cases as the evident depiction, highly visible, and well-documented representation of the varying facets of state failure and neglect in protecting vulnerable groups which have been taken up by these civil society initiatives. Additionally, the study focused on the three cases for their distinct yet overlapping objectives and interconnected mobilizations.

The qualitative data come from transcripts of public interviews, social media posts, and artistic outputs made public by the mothers. The women's narratives are augmented with supporting information from the posts on the community initiatives' Facebook pages and public interviews with founders and church leaders. In the aspect of confidentiality, the use of all information and interviews are drawn from publicly available sources, most of which have been featured in multiple mainstream media outlets and online public platforms. While most of the names mentioned in this study are pseudonyms, the others have been disclosed by the individuals themselves in various public and political contexts, which in itself serves as a courageous act of resistance in going against the rampant attacks on free speech witnessed under the Duterte administration.

The decision to rely on publicly available data was made to adjust to the resource constraints and movement limitations brought by the COVID-19 pandemic when the study was conducted. The use of secondary material in conducting a narrative analysis, however, while allowing an expansive look at the workings of the groups and the testimonies of its members, presents certain caveats and weaknesses. For instance, social media posts may have been edited by people other than the stated author. Given such limitations, future research

undertakings are necessary to take an in-depth look into specificities of individual experiences of the mothers and the commonalities that they all share.

The method of this study is informed by the decolonial feminist and queer scholarship that considers "emotions as an embodied knowledge" (Million 2009, 71).[6] Specifically, this study follows Million's (2009) framework of felt theory in understanding the lived experiences of mothers who suffered from drug violence by looking into the emotional knowledge found in individual and collective stories found in interviews, prayers, posts, and poetry, among others. Million focused on Canadian First Nation women's political resistance through the first-person and experiential narrative on the racialized, sexual, and gendered nature of settler colonialism. Through 'felt analysis', she analyzed the works of Indigenous women and the impact of their scholarship in creating the language of native communities that reveals the history of their own people through their lived experiences grounded in rich emotional knowledge. The use of experiential narratives as evidential sources of knowledge significantly informs the ways in which my research on the gendered impacts of the drug war have been felt by urban poor women who have suffered the most under the policy. The act of 'telling' strongly relates with the acts of resistance of the mothers I focus on in this study, as regards their use of testimonies in sharing their grief, anger, pain, and hopes as a way of speaking truth to power and exposing the harsh reality of the 'war on drugs'. This study seeks to recognize the value of personal stories as felt knowledge, testimonies that carry the "emotionally-laden affective force to transcend the individual's experience", thus becoming collective stories (Million 2014, 32).

Finally, my positionality as a Filipina researcher currently undergoing academic training in Western academia has significantly influenced the pathways of research that I decided to pursue, privileging theoretical frameworks that reflect the complexity of the link between patriarchy, religion, and motherhood in conflict-ridden societies while critically interrogating feminist representations from the Global North that fail to capture the cultural nuances and material conditions found in the Global South, such as in the Philippines. Moreover, this research involves the interpretation of findings from

6 Part of the decolonial task of this study is to problematize the colonial conceptions of motherhood shaped by Catholicism and patriarchy. In line with Lugones' (2010) call "toward a decolonial feminism" I explore initially in this study and in more detail in my ongoing research the 'coloniality of gender' in the Philippine context, finding the ways in which resistors challenge their "colonized, racially gendered, and oppressed existences" (746). I examine this in the agency exercised by mothers in their use of religious, traditional, and conservative ideals of motherhood to legitimize their political actions as human rights activists under the Philippine drug war.

the evidential narratives of the mothers that are greatly constrained by my position as a middle-class researcher who has not been directly impacted by drug violence. Despite the limitations brought by my positionality as a researcher, I hope to shed light on the stories of the mothers, highlighting the feminist and radical nature of their activism anchored on motherhood and the mother's far-reaching love for their families, their community, and the entire Philippine society.

4 Findings: From Drug War Victims to 'Women Warriors'

The discussions in this section are dedicated to three case studies: the legal support of Rise Up, the livelihood programs of Project SOW, and the psychosocial rehabilitation of *Baigani*. The backgrounds of the civil society movements are discussed, focusing on the strategies and services they deliver for the women affected by the drug war. The narratives of women on how their families have dealt with the brunt of the drug war are also presented, highlighting the ways in which they resisted *Oplan Tokhang*.

4.1 Rise Up for Life and Rights and Its Legal Support

The first case this study seeks to analyze is the Rise Up alliance initiated by the Roman Catholic Church, the United Methodist Church, and the United Church of Christ (Stoner 2017).[7] The group serves as a network of human rights advocates, religious groups, and families of the victims of EJKs. Through the Rise Up alliance with the legal counsel of the National Union of People's Lawyers (NUPL), the mothers found the courage to protest against police corruption and violence (Lumibao 2017), file cases against the perpetrators before the Ombudsman (Marquez 2019), and forward a complaint against President Duterte before the International Criminal Court (Gavilan 2018).

Along with the six mothers first to publicly file a petition to the ICC is *Lola*[8] Llore, a massage therapist who became an activist for Rise Up after her two sons were executed and thereafter accused of

7 Religion has played a significant and powerful role in the history of Philippine politics. The union between the Catholic Church and the state marked the Spanish colonial rule which was thereafter replaced by a secular rule under the American occupation. This paved the way for the proliferation of other churches apart from the Catholic Church and their pluralistic participation in Philippine politics. An important episode in the history of church-state relations is the People Power Movement of 1986, leading to the end of the Marcos dictatorship, which the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations mobilized to overthrow.

8 *Lola* is the Tagalog word for grandmother.

being robbers who fought back against the police (Ratcliffe 2021b). As Lola Llore mourned her loss, she suffered economic hardships and intimidation from the police. In one of Rise Up's (2021) newsletters, she shared:

> Life is more difficult now. I have to look after my grandchildren and I still have to work, despite my age. Even though my sons were killed in 2017, the police still come and look for them in our place, sowing worry and fear in the family. (4)

While Lola Llore is aware that the pursuit of justice will be a long fight, she expressed that she must show courage and present her testimony in order to win the struggle. Moreover, in one of her public posts shared on Facebook, Lola Llore remembers her sons with the caption, "They tried to bury us. They did not know we were seeds" as she wore a "Stop the Killings" shirt and face mask that say, "I am Juan Carlos" and "I am Crisanto" (Pasco 2021).

Together with Lola Llore is Emily, a community leader in Caloocan who was initially in charge of reporting the drug dealings within the neighborhood to the police. However, when her 15-year-old son was killed during a drug raid and treated as collateral damage, she turned her back on Duterte's drug war, now actively working with Rise Up to seek justice for the killings (Agencia EFE 2018). According to her, "I used to be [a] simple mother. After the tragedy and with the support from advocates, I am now a fighting mother" (Rise Up 2021, 4). Emily always carries with her a folder containing photos of her son. She would show the photos every time she spoke with others who had lost family members due to *tokhang*, encouraging them to come forward and stand up against the killings (Qatar Tribune 2018). She added, "We want to show Duterte that we are working together and rising up against the violence". The mothers of Rise Up also collectively call for the end of the drug war. As stated in one of the public posts from the Rise Up (2022) Facebook page:

> The lives of the dead and their dreams will never be restored. From the very beginning, they knew that the WAR ON DRUGS was wrong – they were killing us poor people and they continued to do so left and right. The police did not even take action on the countless deaths… JUSTICE is what we want.

During a press conference of the Rise Up alliance, the United Methodist deaconess Norma Dollaga, one of the alliance conveners, stated that they would not ignore the killings of the poor and defenseless as they continue to document the cases of state killings (Mangiduyos 2017). The alliance also insisted "rehabilitation, counseling and community involvement" as the better way to address the drug problem

(Aurelio 2017). As Rise Up stands together with families in filing EJK cases, they declared in a statement that "Through court actions, Rise Up seeks to expose the evil being perpetrated upon the poor. We pray the courts will act with haste and show themselves as reliable venues for obtaining justice" (Nonato 2017).

The Rise Up mission also began from the collective efforts of priests and parishes in offering sanctuary to people involved in drugs who want to change their lives (Aurelio 2017). Within their network, religious groups provide other services such as counseling sessions, livelihood programs, and acupuncture sessions to drug addicts, while human rights groups provide training in documentation (Aurelio 2017). In addition, the alliance amplifies the campaign by mobilizing in protest actions (Nonato 2017).

4.2 Project SOW and Its Livelihood Programs

The second case study included in the analysis is Project SOW, an initiative focused on offering livelihood support to families of EJK victims. The community initiative was launched by the Vincentian priests and brothers, pastoral workers, and private groups and individuals in the Ina ng Lupang Pangako Parish, Payatas, Quezon City (Ladrido 2019). Livelihood programs through sewing production are offered to mothers and widows to ease their financial burden.

The mothers earn 250 pesos (about 5 US dollars) per day by creating household items and bags (Conde 2020). However, they struggle to be constantly present at work because they have to take care of their children and act as the sole breadwinners of their families (Ladrido 2019). According to Rhoda, one of the mothers working as a sewist:

> As a mother, I am unable to have a complete attendance in the livelihood program. I admit that, because sometimes, it cannot be avoided that my children get sick, and have problems in the household. There were times I am summoned at our barangay because I am a leader in our district. So, there were moments I cut my working hours. (Project SOW 2017)

Despite her struggles, she remains part of the livelihood program as it helps with her family's daily meals.

Apart from the difficulty in balancing responsibilities to their families, the mothers also shared the estrangement and stigma they experienced in their communities. Linda[9] mourned the death of her husband alone as she listened to the harsh words of her friends saying

9 An alias used by the media outlet GMA News and Public Affairs.

that her husband, who had a history of drug use and selling, was a *salot* or pest in society deserving of death (GMA Public Affairs 2019). According to her, what hurt the most was how no one sympathized with the death of her husband, who – like anyone else – was a human being. She found comfort in the words of a Vincentian Father who expressed that despite what people said, her partner is still a "loving father and a loving husband" (GMA Public Affairs 2019). As she worked hard for her family's survival, she still lived in fear that the same fate might happen to herself and her seven children.

Cris[10] shares the same yearning as Linda – the understanding and acceptance of people, a second chance in life, especially for her husband, who was released from his two-year imprisonment due to drugs in 2016 (GMA Public Affairs 2019). However, after seven months, her husband disappeared and was killed on their daughter's birthday. The last time they saw him was when he left their home to look for money to buy cake. In that same interview, the daughter blamed herself, saying that if it were not for her, her father would still be alive today (GMA Public Affairs 2019). As for her mother, she expressed focusing on working hard to ensure that her children would finish their studies while holding onto her belief in God and that justice would be served.

At the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, when mask supply was low, the mothers of Project SOW shifted their focus to sewing washable face masks. Father Pilario (2020), a member of the Vincentians, 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 Office of the Vice President (OVP) under Leni Robredo[11] also cooperated with the sewists in the local production of personal protective equipment (PPE) suits and gowns (Robredo 2020). In addition, the women of SOW were behind the sewing of masks for Project *Busal* (AieBalagtasSee), whose mission was to "[un]mask human rights abuses, protect free speech and expression, and defend press freedom" through the creation of common Filipino sentiments stitched on "statement masks" (Project BUSAL 2020).

Apart from livelihood programs, Project SOW (n.d.) also provides psychosocial interventions and treatments for children and other family members suffering from trauma (Project SOW), similar to *Baigani*, which will be discussed further in the next section. Additionally, identical to the efforts of Rise Up, the project is also involved

10 An alias used by the media outlet GMA News and Public Affairs.

11 Maria Leonor 'Leni' Robredo won the vice presidency in 2016. She served as a leader of the opposition under the Duterte administration, being a staunch critic of its bloody anti-drugs campaign. She ran as a presidential candidate during the 2022 Philippine Elections but lost against Ferdinand 'Bong Bong' Marcos Jr., who allied with the Dutertes and won by a landslide.

in documenting cases of EJKs and providing networks to legal and media groups as victims pursue accountability for the killings.

4.3 *Baigani* and Its Psychosocial Interventions

The last case included in the analysis is the women's group called *Baigani*. During the first year of the Duterte presidency, the community group was created to provide widows, mothers, and children of EJK victims psychosocial rehabilitation to process grief and share traumas in a safe space (Ladrido 2018). Baigani conducts a 'family camp' where they invite 10 to 12 families to go out of town for a series of therapy sessions (e.g., art therapy for children and laughing therapy for mothers) facilitated by licensed counselors (Ladrido 2018). Beyond the camp, the group supports families "to meet their food, education and livelihood needs, and helps empower mothers and children" (Baigani n.d.).

For Lea,[12] who resided in Caloocan and lost her husband to the drug war, *Baigani* became her new family, especially after her neighbors ignored and judged her after her husband's death (Lopez 2017). She said, "I almost went insane, that I even thought of ending my life, as well as my children's, to end our misery". Being with people who can relate to the same traumatic experience, she added, "For the first time, I am able to speak without others judging me. I am with people who understand me" (Lopez 2017). Grieving with other women who can understand the pain Lea has been harboring has become a source of strength and comfort for her, especially in a society and a government that has deprived the poor and accused of their right to live.

Oftentimes, mothers and widows of EJK victims are left with little to no time to grieve at all as they are immediately faced with the urgent responsibility of caring for the orphaned children. Lola Trining,[13] a grandmother aged 85, lost her youngest son to *tokhang* while her pregnant daughter-in-law was arrested in a 'palit-ulo' (exchange heads) scheme where the police would only release a relative in exchange for another person named in the drug list (Subingsubing 2017b). Due to the arrest and the killing, Lola Trining now finds herself responsible for the young lives of her seven grandchildren. According to her, "My grandchildren are the only reason I wake up in the morning. Without them I have no more reason to live". Furthermore, as she waits for her daughter-in-law to be released and for her son's killers to be arrested, "I leave it up to God to help us resolve this case

12 An alias used by the journalist Eloisa Lopez who covered this story and interview.

13 An alias used by journalist Krixia Subingsubing who covered this story and interview.

… I also ask forgiveness from Him for wishing that the (police), too, would experience the hell we've gone through" (Subingsubing 2017b). Through the support provided by *Baigani*, private individuals, and local church groups and the income she gets from selling street food, she is able to send the children to school and provide for daily needs.

To say that the drug war spares no one is untrue. The horrifying reality of *Oplan Tokhang* is that while it spares the rich and influential, it does not spare the youth and children. Olga,[14] a mother of six, while on her way to condole with another family of an EJK victim, witnessed her husband being shot by masked men in 2017 (Baigani Community 2018a). Despite the trauma, Olga and her children participated in protests to stand up for their rights and attended meetings on the actions families could take to seek justice. However, when her eldest son was diagnosed with leukemia, she had to work harder to pay for the treatment on top of caring for her six younger children. In 2018, Olga's son lost his battle against leukemia due to the lack of adequate and timely access to health care (Baigani Community 2018b). *Baigani* had stood with Olga during the death of her husband, supported her from the hospitalization of her son to his burial, and amplified the call for justice for both her husband and son.

5 Analysis: Mothers in the Frontline against the Drug War

5.1 The Impact of the Drug War on Women

The first question raised in this study is what are the effects of *Oplan Tokhang* on women in targeted communities? This research analyzed the narratives of mothers and widows of EJK victims who are part of three community initiatives: Rise Up, Project SOW, and *Baigani*. Across the stories of women, three interrelated and recurring themes emerged: *trauma, social exclusion, and worsened economic condition*. These themes coincide with the services and strategies provided by the three community initiatives: *legal support and documentation of killings, psychosocial rehabilitation and counseling, and financial assistance in the form of donation drives and livelihood programs*. These themes address the second question: what strategies and services do these community initiatives provide to address the needs of families of EJK victims?

The summary executions of husbands and sons have caused trauma among the women in this study. Even after the deaths of the men

14 An alias used by *Baigani*.

in their families, the mothers and widows continued to live in fear for their lives and their family members. In most times, these women were not even given the opportunity to grieve their loss as they were suddenly thrown into the harsh reality of being alone to care for their children and work for their survival. Furthermore, it is not only the women who suffer from trauma but also the children who lost their fathers to the drug war. A member of *Baigani* described how the drug war "is no different from conventional warfare as it, too, has created a nation of widows and orphans" (Subingsubing 2017a).

The trauma suffered by these women has further been exacerbated by the social exclusion they faced in their communities. The prohibitionist and punitive policy paradigm of the 'war on drugs' and the criminal rhetoric forwarded by former President Duterte to justify the killings have reinforced the stigma and discrimination against people who use drugs, which also shapes society's treatment towards left-behind families. Furthermore, the culture of violence and impunity during the peak of the killings enabled by Duterte's 'permission to kill' to the police (BBC News 2020) has compelled communities to completely shun and disassociate themselves from families with members named on the drug list and targeted by the police.

For Mercado, the founder of *Baigani*, "The deeper wound of our society is the numbness to the killings" (Gutoman 2021). She described this as the deterioration of the social fabrics that bind our communities: "When you suffer loss due to *Oplan Tokhang*, you will not feel the sympathy of the people around you because apart from trauma, the fear of other people, Tokhang is also stigmatized" (Gutoman 2021). These groups provide sanctuary to women suffering from collective trauma in a society that has shunned and abandoned them. Christine from *Baigani* shared how she became friends with her fellow widows, saying, "now we can joke around and talk about things other than our trauma" after she first narrated her husband's story to them as they shed tears from the shared pain (Lopez 2017). Furthermore, despite the difficulties in fighting for justice, she added, "while there is no justice for our loved ones yet, there is justice in the constant support we receive, because we draw from it our strength to fight" (Lopez 2017).

Apart from trauma and social exclusion, the women also suffer from economic conditions worsened by the deaths of the breadwinners of their families. Widows and grandmothers not only have to care for their children who experience trauma and bullying but must also desperately find sources of income for the survival of their families. The multiple burdens of caring and providing for the entire family placed on the lone shoulders of these women have led others to contemplate suicide, as seen in the case of Lea, who struggled with thoughts of ending her and her children's lives due to misery and hopelessness.

Without access to adequate health care to address the mental, emotional, and physical needs of the women and their children, community

initiatives such as Rise Up, Project SOW, and *Baigani* have stepped up to extend support in the form of psychosocial intervention and counseling, as well as financial assistance in the form of livelihood programs and donation drives. While these community initiatives can only go as far as the resources and political space will allow them to operate, they are fundamental in forging a safe space for these women who have suffered trauma, ostracization, and economic hardships.

The state's responsibility is to protect the welfare of women and children. The 'war on drugs' has done the opposite, resulting in a crisis of care. It has ruined the present and future of these families and aggravated the social and economic conditions that the women and children live in. According to Deaconess Dollaga from Rise Up, "It is the whole system of rottenness. The state could not deliver the best services to the people – the social justice, the social services. Poverty grips the jobless, the internal migrants, the poor" (Mangiduyos 2017). In the face of state aggression and neglect, civil society groups take on the duty to protect the oppressed and the marginalized, while grandmothers and mothers are driven to mobilize and assert their rights and seek justice.

According to Gilmore (1999), in her study of Mothers Reclaiming Our Children (Mothers ROC) in Los Angeles, grassroots organizing emerged in a hostile and bloody political climate that constituted the daily struggle of the mothers to reclaim their children by means of 'radical self-help', in which organizing strategies, grounded on mothering techniques that are extended beyond the traditional domestic spheres, are deployed in places where there is conflict (25). This radical self-help is evident from the ways in which the mothers of drug war victims resist drug violence and seek justice and accountability for the deaths of their loved ones.

5.2 Resistance in Its Multiple Forms

This study raised a third and final research inquiry: In what ways do these women, through the community initiatives, resist the drug-related violence brought by the drug war? The recurring themes of resistance that emerged from the narratives include *speaking truth to power, holding on to religion, and engaging in activism*.

The grandmothers and mothers resisted the killings and challenged the drug war rhetoric by speaking truth to power with the intent to raise awareness of the human rights violations and to expose the Duterte administration's 'war on drugs' to what it truly is – a "war against the poor" (Amnesty International 2017). As this study relied on the stories of women made publicly known and accessible to anyone, the act of telling and the decision to share their suffering with the public represented the courage mustered by these women to fight

for justice. Furthermore, mothers like Emily, who always carries with her photos of her son, encourage other victims to stand up and share their stories to call for solidarity and demand justice.

Mercado, the founder of *Baigani*, described how differently the women view justice: "Some are seeing it as judicial justice: there is trial, there is due process. While others, it is their stance. That they were able to say that the [drug war] was wrong and that the killings should stop" (Gutoman 2021). Speaking truth to power for these women – either through posts on social media, protest actions in the streets, testimonies in courts, and even in the form of poetry and dance – are manifestations of how there is strength in sharing the pain, grieving together, and fighting beside each other.

Normita, a mother of nine who joined Rise Up after losing her 23-year-old son, Djastin, from *tokhang*, felt the urge to draft a poem after listening to the indigenous people share their experiences of suffering from the summary executions in Mindanao (Espina-Varona 2017).[15] Entitled "Anak sa Sinapupunan ng Isang Ina" (Child in a Mother's Womb), the poem begins with the mother's joy of raising a child and witnessing them grow, only for the poem to narrate the abrupt end of her son's young life due to the drug war. The piece was Normita's way of speaking to her late son:

> Hindi bale anak, naging madali man ang ating pagsasama
> Darating din ang panahon, tayo din ay magkakasama doon sa buhay na walang hanggan
> Ako'y iyong hintayin at muli tayo'y magkikita
>
> Do not worry, son. While our union has been short
> The time will come when we will be together again in eternal life
> Wait for me and we will see each other again

The grief and pain of losing her son embodied in her poem end with a call for justice:

> At bago pa man lang pumikit ang aking mga mata,
> Sana mabigyan na ng hustiya ang iyong pagkamatay, aking anak.
>
> And before I close my eyes,

15 Under the Duterte administration, the Lumad (collective term for Indigenous peoples of Mindanao) suffered from military attacks leading to killings of Lumad leaders and children and the selling of their ancestral lands causing their forced removal from their homes and closing of schools (Tajon 2021).

> I hope justice will be served for your death, my son.
> (Lopez 2017 as cited in Ramos 2019)

Normita filed murder charges against the Manila police for the killing of her son, who was an epileptic. She asserted, "He was frail. How could he be a killer?" (Espina-Varona 2017). After 16 months, in a rare instance, the judiciary decided in favor of the poor victim by ordering the filing of the murder case and the dismissal from service of the police officer who shot her son (Cayabyab 2019).

Art and performance served as channels for the mothers to speak truth to power, as well as to process their loss, grief, and healing, as seen in Normita, who now has a notebook of her own poetry that she shares with other families suffering the same loss (Espina-Varona 2018). Apart from poetry, the mothers of Rise Up also use theatrical performances to release their pain. Nel[16] was one of the dancers in a performance that centered on waiting for loved ones to come back home during a protest in Duterte's State of the Nation Address in 2017 (Umil 2017a). Upon losing her 28-year-old son from the drug war, she said "I am waiting for no one now. I am just waiting for justice". For her, performing helped release the pain she felt from losing her son and witnessing her 10-month-old grandson being orphaned. Despite the pain, she commits to helping his son's left-behind family for the rest of her life.

Religion and belief in God have been integral sources of comfort and strength for mothers who suffer from grief and loss. Religious groups have been fundamental in comforting and uniting these women, fostering sympathy, compassion, and forgiveness in a society with a government that refuses to recognize the humanity of drug users. According to United Methodist deaconess Dollaga, "We rise and hope for every life that was sacrificed in the name of terror against people. Resistance is a gift. Redemption and liberation is what we need. Justice will shepherd us through" (Mangiduyos 2017).

Religious rituals through novenas and vigils also serve as means to remember the lives lost and platforms to condemn the violence inflicted by the state. In 2017, *Baigani* held the 'Prayer vigil for the slain: All Saint's Day of Women' to support families sharing traumatic experiences (Lopez 2017). In the vigil, artists dedicated songs and poems, volunteers and supporters lit candles and prayed for the EJK victims, and the women were given candles placed on the altar as they recited the names of the people killed in the drug war. The candles lit in front of a glass box containing yellow chicks that feed on grains, a practice usually done on top of a crime victim's coffin representing the traditional belief that the chick's pecking would eat away the

16 An alias used by journalist Anne Marxze Umil who covered this story and interview.

killer's conscience (Lopez 2017). Days before this, a novena was also organized by the EveryWoman human rights coalition, which *Baigani* is part of. A member described how the novena sought to recognize women's role as life-givers and "an important safeguard in the continuing deaths under the Duterte administration" (Subingsubing 2017b). Motherist resistance against the drug war is rooted in morality grounded in both religion and motherhood – the protection of life (Marcaida 2021). While the grueling pursuit of justice may be difficult, holding on to religion gives the women hope that justice will be served in God's time, as well as the strength to continue surviving for the sake of protecting their families.

The last remaining theme that emerged from the narratives of resistance is the engagement of the mothers in activism, who have been described as "fighting mother[s]" (Rise Up 2021, 4) and "women warriors" (Lopez 2017), capturing the meaning of "activist mothering" (Naples 1992, 442). With the lack of police action and slow pace of justice, the women of Rise Up took it upon themselves to volunteer to document the police killings and guard their villages (Umil 2017b).[17] The widows of Project SOW have sewn statement masks in support of political advocacies like Project *Busal* and produced masks and PPEs during the pandemic. Moreover, the three community initiatives with the mothers and widows also actively participated in the recent elections, campaigning for presidential candidate and former Vice President Leni Robredo, who was a staunch critic of Duterte's drug war.

Bolotta (2017), in his study of Thai slum mothers who have become "warrior mothers" as they held positions as social movement leaders, challenged the Western assumptions of motherhood as depoliticizing and confining to the domestic sphere by arguing that they can "become political actors outside the domestic space because of their role as mothers and by strategically adopting a local gender category highlighting the equivalence between womanhood and motherhood" (222). In the case of the mothers of drug war, the literal and figurative absence of men who have been targeted and killed by the drug war compelled women to mobilize against the state killings (Marcaida 2021), making them the strongest and legitimate voice as "human rights victims and claimants" (Racelis 2020, 1).

Despite the ultimate loss of Robredo and the landslide wins of now-President Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos together with his running mate and former presidential daughter, now-Vice President Sara Duterte, the mothers continue to mobilize to seek justice for the drug

17 This study is limited by its lack of in-depth data on the extent and details of the documentation and village volunteer work done by the individual mothers of Rise Up. To read more on civilian night patrols led by mothers during the drug war, see my previous work on the grassroots initiative of Pateros mothers (Marcaida 2021).

killings. Lola Llore from Rise Up wrote a poem written in Tagalog entitled *Ang eleksyon at bayan* (*The Election and Nation*) that reflected the shared persevering love for the country despite the outcome of the election (Pasco 2022):

Aming samu't tanging dasal
Sa poong Diyos nating mahal
Ang mga taong inihalal
Dinggin sana at lingapin
Suliranin nitong bayan
Huwag sanang ibasura
Magagandang pinagmulan
Nang sa gayo'y magagalak
Pilipinas nating mahal.

Our only prayer
To our loving God
That the people who got elected
Listen and care
For the plight of the people
Hoping it will not be put to waste
The good things we achieved
So that we can all rejoice
Our beloved nation.

Llore closes her poem with a dedication: "Para sa lahat ng mga nanay na handing lumaban!" (To all of the mothers who are ready to fight!). It is a vow to collectively and fearlessly pursue the journey for justice across all the difficulties and victories it brings. According to her, she wrote her first poem "dedicated to the mothers, encouraging them not to be sad, because they are not alone, because there are many of us rising up" (Cayabyab 2019). She describes her poetry as a combination of their experiences. Her work constitutes a source of community knowledge that manifests the lived experiences shared by the mothers fighting and resisting the repressive state. Llore served as one of the leaders of Rise Up, representing families of drug war victims and contributing to the submission of reports before the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) (Villanueva 2022).

As the drug war disrupted the home and created a crisis of care, motherhood became a catalyst for these women to enter the public sphere and demand justice and accountability for the drug killings. Evident in the narratives and experiences of the mothers in the three cases covered in this study, motherhood is shared among women who have gone through the same pain and loss, transcending the women affected by the drug war and forging an emotional and political connection to other mothers of *desaparecidos* during the Arroyo

administration (Espina-Varona 2018) and the Lumad community who have been targeted by military attacks under the Duterte administration (Espina-Varona 2017). Furthermore, mothering practice is expanded within community initiatives whose movements have been geared towards the provision of care to women and children and the protection of life, compelling acts of "radical self-help" on the part of the mothers (Gilmore 1999, 25).

The individual and collective stories of these mothers portray them as individuals that ought not to be reduced to passive victims of drug violence devoid of agency. The act of telling their stories of pain is an act of resistance in itself. By sharing that experience collectively with other mothers carrying the same struggle, the pain of losing their loved ones from the drug war is transformed into communal comfort for women who are not suffering alone, who are holding onto their belief in God together, and who are resisting hand in hand with the hopes of delivering justice for the deaths of their husbands and sons.

5.3 Mother's Agency and Faith

A prevailing element across the narrative experiences of mothers covered in this study is the role of religion in invigorating hope and visions of justice in spite of the lack of justice and accountability. In resonance with the acts of resistance found in my research, Racelis (2020), in her introductory chapter on *Women and the Duterte Anti-Drug Carnage*, noted how extended kin, neighbors, friends, NGOs, and faith-based groups stepped up in response to the government's refusal to take responsibility for the impact of the anti-drug operations on women and families. She also described how the brave women covered in the book have given their testimonies which served as the basis for human rights challenges against state perpetrators. She also narrated how the mothers engaged in public performances of lamentation and condemnation of the killings through community street dramas during religious events relating Jesus' suffering to the plight of the poor under the drug war.

The depictions of suffering in Catholic moral theology have been viewed as oppressive as it results in victim consciousness among women through "the putting up of the ideal woman as one who is self-sacrificing, long suffering, patient, meek, etc." (Mananzan 1999, 9). However, the interaction of religion with motherhood as seen in the mothers' stories complicates the link between patriarchy and religion. As they reinforce Christian conceptions of femininity and motherhood as suffering and sacrificing women, they simultaneously transform traditional and conservative virtues of good motherhood and roles into radical ones, embracing the identity as 'warrior women'

fighting for the lives of their children and husbands lost from the drug war most evidently demonstrated by the Rise Up mother-activists.

Mananzan (1999), a Filipina feminist theologian, argued how the role of Christianity in women's lives can allow both the co-existence of oppressive and liberative elements. She forwarded a feminist theology of liberation – which goes beyond calling out the roots of women's oppression in religion as non-redemptive in pursuit of remedying the situation through active participation in women's movements. Moreover, Roces (2008), in her study of Filipino Catholics nuns as transnational feminists, challenged the link between religiosity and patriarchy by arguing how in societies like the Philippines where the Catholic Church continues to be a major obstacle to women's movement, the location of religious women in feminist theorizing serves as a powerful and legitimate challenge to oppressive constructions of the feminine. My research on the politics of motherhood remains exploratory with limitations in terms of analysis and data leading to vast pathways for further study. Future inquiries can dig deeper into the constructions of the feminine among the mothers of the drug war and explorations of the cultural nuances of the Latin American gender role script of 'marianismo'[18] in the Philippine context.

6 Conclusion

This research sought to unpack the gendered impact of the Duterte administration's 'war on drugs' by analyzing three motherist initiatives which emerged as a response to the killings. By examining the narratives of women who have been directly affected by the murder of their loved ones, I explored the far-reaching consequences of the drug war in aggravating the social, economic, and psychological conditions of women and their children. The collective stories of the mothers forming the community initiatives covered in this study reflect their emergent resistant subjectivities grounded on motherhood and religion, which have been bastions of the sanctity and protection of life under Duterte's bloody rule. The 'activist mothering' (Naples 1992) embodied in the testimonies and practices of the women found in the community initiatives demonstrated a yearning for an alternative political society that is built through care and compassion and not brutality and force.

As the study juxtaposed the expansion of care work within the community and the state's failure to protect women and children, it

18 I focus on 'marianismo' and the complex relationship between motherhood and religion in the Philippine context in both my ongoing research (Marcaida 2023) and my developing dissertation project.

stresses the urgency for the current administration under Ferdinand Marcos Jr. to completely overhaul the 'war on drugs' and replace it with a drug policy that is grounded in "science, health, security and human rights"(Global Commission on Drug Policy 2011, 3). Since assuming office last July 2022, the killings have ensued and the promised reforms have yet to materialize under the Marcos administration (Human Rights Watch 2023). While Marcos attempted to reform the law enforcement institutions through mass resignations, the move was criticized by Fernandez and Tugade (2023) as ineffective in addressing the culture of corruption and patronage in the police as opposed to meaningful reforms that require overhauling the organization. Moreover, the current president's stance on shutting out ICC after losing an appeal to halt the investigation into Duterte's drug war is still resolute (Reuters 2023).

With Marcos Jr. completing his second year as president, it is time to demand the president to deliver his campaign promise to "treat drug addicts as patients, in need of a cure" and to pursue the anti-drugs campaign "in a different way" (Manabat 2022) that focuses on the prevention, such as youth education and rehabilitation (CNN Philippines 2021). Furthermore, the current administration must learn from the failures of Duterte's 'war on drugs' and seek accountability for the human rights violations and extrajudicial killings perpetrated by the state. Genuine drug policy reform and healing on the part of the grandmothers, mothers, and widows can only be achieved through the pursuit of accountability and the delivery of justice for all the victims of the drug war.

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