

The Life and Struggles of Victim-Survivors of Prostitution in the Philippines

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Capire spoke with Myles Sanchez and Jean Enriquez of CATW-AP about sexual violence, war on drugs, and other struggles faced by philippines

In Bulacan, a province in the Central Luzón area in the Philippines, Myles Sanchez and other survivors have started a community-based programme, with the help of [The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women](#). In this place, women who survived prostitution found a sanctuary from the violence that haunts their lives and their children, can study and learn a real profession, and have the support they need to build not only economic but also political autonomy. The survivors use the things they learn in their own process to help and organize other women. They assist whom they call sisters in cases of violence and they provide legal aid to get women out of jail when needed.

CATW-AP (its Asia-Pacific chapter) is an international network of feminist groups and organizations fighting domestic and sexual violence, especially prostitution, suffered by women around the globe. In the Philippines, they are part of the National Coordination Body of the World March of Women. Launched in 1988, in New York, USA, during the First Global Conference Against Trafficking in Women, their objectives are to bring attention to and take care of women and girls who are victims of trafficking, prostitution, pornography, sex tourism, and bride selling, by promoting campaigns and policy advocacy. Survivors and victim-survivors are how they call, respectively, the women and girls who were able to escape this reality and the ones who still depend on prostitution. They are assisted by CATW and participate in programs of education, training, and organizational development; empowerment; policy advocacy; and research and documentation.

For this article, Capire talked to Myles Sanchez, a prostitution survivor in the Philippines, and Jean Enriquez, the executive director of CATW-AP. "Our campaigns are not only about sexual violence of all kinds, but also about economy, globalization, militarism, and other political policies. We make a very clear connection with the idea of commodification of life and the commodification of women's bodies," says Jean about the CATW-AP work.

"When I heal, I can help other survivors. We train ourselves to become leaders. For us, being a leader is not like being a politician. For us, it is to act as models to encourage others. We are the leaders who guide and we are role models to show that positive change can happen in our lives," Myles explains. She argues that one of the most important things when it comes to working with victim-survivors is to listen to them and to their stories. By listening to these women and understanding their reality, the leaders can discuss with them how they can become autonomous and overcome prostitution and other types of violence to which they were submitted.

The methodology of working with victim-survivors is also what guides their action around their political demands. It is from these stories and experiences that they can accumulate and build knowledge and vision about the traps that lead women to prostitution. From Myles's perspective, which resonates into the stories of many other victim-survivors around the world, being sexually

abused as a child by her own father, seeing her mother who was forced into marriage after also having been raped by him, and many other situations have induced her life to this path.

Myles explains that she “never wanted to be in prostitution.” “No one of us would want to be used by many men we don’t know. I was brought to the brothel by a soldier when I was taking care of my own siblings. My sisters in my organization were also abused by their employers when they worked as domestic workers. None dreamt to be in prostitution but many things happened to us before we got to this place.” In their perspectives, prostitution is not just something to be dealt with, it is one of the types of violence against women in the framework of their struggles.

Listening to victim-survivors is also about building the organization’s political agenda. When it comes to the terms used to name prostitution nowadays, the organization is emphatic: there is no such thing as “sex work” or “sex workers.” These names are becoming hegemonic in some places, but they did not originate from their experience or their vocabulary, Jean explains, considering their experiences in the Philippines. “We usually hear these terms from funders or from academics. Historically, feminist movements have been talking about violence against women as a form of women’s rights violations, but it is important to understand that in cases of violence against women, there are the perpetrators and there are the victims, and that is why the term ‘victim’ is very valid.”

The word “survivor” was included because these women don’t remain as victims. When they fight or find strategies to survive, they become survivors. That’s when they start recovering some autonomy when it comes to their lives. “We take care of the empowerment process of healing and recovering. Recovering their lives, recovering their dreams and aspirations. Most of them proceed to formal education, some of them become teachers. Some of them aspire to become social workers. But almost all of them become activists who are now part of something that is not only changing their own lives, but also changing society,” says Jean.

The survivors who work in the community programme and with CATW-AP are completely against the legalization of prostitution. Myles says that “to us, pro-legalization groups want women to be abused, raped”. Many of those who are speaking about legalization are coming from the academe, wishing for post-structural, postmodern ideas, and talking about prostitution as if it was a matter of sexual identity.” Jean explains that this narrative “often comes from a very patriarchal idea. In the same manner as we have been very critical of men who are trivializing women’s experience of sexual violence. They are attempting to define prostitution for the women who live it.” This perspective is reinforced by the glamorization of prostitution, led by neoliberalism.

Besides academics, funders outside the Philippines are also dictating the discourse and many NGOs are only remaining alive because of funding from agencies whose perspectives are coming from liberal ideas. This is a process marked by North-South inequalities and colonialism that pushes the ideology that women are free to choose to be prostitutes, without acknowledging that the life of these women could not be more difficult. Having to be with men when they don’t want to, having no means to take care of their families.

Understanding these women’s lives, stories, experiences and needs is one of the ways to articulate a path out of prostitution. It is important to address the roots of the problem of all forms of violence suffered by women, which are patriarchal and also, in the case of prostitution, capitalist, as in the neoliberal idea and practice that all things can become commodities, including human beings. Women want real jobs, not prostitution, and the labor movement in the Philippines understood that.

“We are happy with how we earn our money now with our feminist, fair-trade, and ecological livelihood program. We were the ones judged before. Previously, when we saw lawyers and the police, we were embarrassed. Now, we talk before them. We talk about our rights. We should be the

ones being asked what is the real situation in prostitution. I come out on television [and say] that I never dreamt to be in prostitution, I dreamt to have a good life,” Myles told us. Fighting for their autonomy, victim-survivors agree that prostitution is not a real job, and they got together to push an anti-prostitution law that doesn’t see them as the criminals, like it is today, but as the victim-survivors for whom support programs should be formulated. The real criminals are the hustlers and the buyers. “We want to have communities that are free, such as this that we organize with the help of CATW-AP.”

The movement demands an anti-prostitution law that strengthens the penalties against the buyers. As Jean says, “our analysis is that the main perpetrators of violence against women are those who are using women’s bodies.” The law today punishes the traffickers and hustlers, but accountability against the buyers are not implemented, which is a perspective that avoids the issue of patriarchy, according to Jean. Capitalism relates only to profiting on the system of prostitution, but the idea that the consent of women can be bought and that men have the right to purchase women’s bodies is a patriarchal relationship. That is why the survivors in Philippines want to get the anti-prostitution law passed, which clarifies this as a public policy.

Another huge problem faced by victim-survivors is the drug issue. “I was forced to use drugs because it numbs us. It makes us numb to what customers want to do to us,” says Myles. Women are led to use drugs by drug dealers, which make them constantly in debt with the traffickers and the hustlers, and make them even bigger victims of this system that profits from their lives.

The use of illegal drugs in the Philippines is [lower than the global average](#). Even so, the right-wing authoritarian, conservative, and populist president Rodrigo Duterte, who assumed office in 2016, has been carrying out a war on drugs with the help of the National Police that has led to the deaths of [five to 20 thousand Filipinos](#), mostly urban poor (the numbers vary based on different sources of information coming from the government or civil society groups). These killings increased more than [50% in the early months of the pandemic](#).

Increasingly, women in prostitution are used as couriers by the police to take drugs to buyers. They are forced to use drugs, and therefore a lot of them are arrested and jailed, some even charged not only with drug use, but also with selling. Besides that, Myles told Capire that since Duterte came into power, many of the victim-survivors have been raped by the police in exchange for the life and freedom of their partners who have been charged, even with no proof, by this war on drugs. “Women in prostitution are particularly targeted. Bulacan, where Myles lives now, is in fact a relocation area for poor urban women and it has one of the highest rates of killings since 2016. At least 210 women who are members of CATW-AP had relatives killed by the police,” Jean says.

About women and Duterte, Myles told us that “some of our members were pro-Duterte, but after he became president, their relatives were killed and they realized how bad he is. He attacks those who are critical of him, he trivializes rape. It is very painful for us survivors of rape, all of Duterte’s talk normalizing rape, flaunting his molestation of their domestic worker, all his sexual remarks against women.” To her and to all of the women organized with CATW-AP, if there were no feminist groups, they wouldn’t know where they would be. “We are thankful because of them. Because of these women and their experiences, we know how to resist and fight.”

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