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**Towards a Gender-Responsive Human Rights Documentation
System on VAW in the Philippines: The HURIDOCS-WinEvsys
Experience**

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Introduction: The struggle for women's human rights

We exist in an era where the very basic discourse of mainstream human rights is being challenged not only by feminists but also by other marginalized sectors in our society. From Vienna, Cairo, and Beijing, women have been struggling to make their voices heard. By giving a face to women in the over-all human rights discourse, it goes beyond recognition of women rights. It demands for the re-examination of instruments and basic human rights documents and ensuring that substantive changes could be made to capture the violations done to women.

The struggle for human rights has been particularly vocal about violations committed by the state against our civil and political rights, and yet has been silent in terms of exposing the violence that happens to women in the privacy of their homes--violence perpetrated by individuals who more often than not are trusted and known by the women themselves. Furthermore, the human rights movement has been active in terms of pointing out to different governments their inability to implement laws, the absence of laws and the state condoning the violations. Yet, the very act of violence that happens to women as a result of economic and social disempowerment remains unheard.

The struggle for women's human rights reiterates the need to struggle not just for equality but considering also the many facets of diversity and the disadvantaged situations of women in our society. While pushing for concrete enabling conditions to make women claim and exercise their rights to the fullest, it continues to challenge the human rights concepts, definitions, understanding and meaning as it relates to women's experiences. It also puts forward a need to establish connections and links to other human rights groups and look more intricately at how these violations affect women differently and disproportionately.

The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women-Asia Pacific in its effort to contribute to the International Women's Movement to making women's human rights part of the whole human rights agenda, envisioned a documentation system that would systematically capture the extent, magnitude and features of violence against women.

Its exposure to various international conferences and gatherings of women, encouraged a more introspective look at how NGOs working directly on issues of VAW and who are also doing advocacy work on women's rights have been doing documentation work. It stimulated dialogue and continuous collaboration in terms of examining the basic principles and concepts of women's human rights towards systematization and further sharpening of our analyses of women's oppression. The Coalition believes that by making more visible the violence that women encounter in their everyday lives, it could hasten the process of making the society acknowledge and be accountable for it.

Humble beginnings

When the Coalition embarked on a documentation project in partnership with the HURIDOCS¹, its objectives are plain and simple. It stems from our own recognized weakness of the need to develop a tool that could help us do our advocacy work better.

Members of the Coalition encounters so many cases of violence against women in their everyday interactions with women and yet, there is no systematic and unified tool of collecting, recording and retrieving the information. We needed a credible tool that would help us strengthen the basis of our advocacy issues. On the other hand, HURIDOCS itself admitted that while their documentation system is strong in terms of using the human rights language and framework, it lacks focus on women's particular issues. Thus, sprung a partnership of more than a decade now.

Like any other new tool, the HURIDOCS database had its share of birthing pains in the Philippines. It has undergone numerous "intellectual beatings" and should I say "violence" in terms of making it more useful to the Coalition's work. Through continuous exchanges and dialogues, whether through email, faxes or personally, women's human rights terminologies were integrated into the system. Finally, in 2000, HURIDOCS came up with a Windows Based Database that has incorporated more or less the changes proposed by the Coalition.

The HURIDOCS-WinEvsys 2000² version is a more gendered database model that the Coalition has been using. We are not saying that the database we have is close to being perfect but more of a work in progress. We have seen that through continuous use of our own member-organizations, partner NGOs, People's Organizations, and even some government organizations, more and more specific violations are being added to the database making it more reflective of women's conditions.

With (9) nine³ organizations located strategically all over the country, we have documented 791 cases of VAW in year 2000 alone. 423 of which consist of

¹ Human Rights Information and Documentation Systems, International

² Windows Event System (WinEvsys)

³ The initial batch of documenters came from NCR (Batis Center for Women, Bukluran ng Kababaihan sa Lansangan or BUKAL), LUZON (BUKLOD ng Kababaihan sa Olongapo, WEDPRO—Angeles City,

domestic violence, rape and sexual harassment while 268 were prostitution and trafficking related cases. By 2004, there were 7⁴ more organizations documenting Discrimination, Sexual and Reproductive Rights Violations, and Migrants Issues. They were able to document 258 cases by the first quarter of 2004.

To date, the Coalition has trained 28 organizations from Luzon, 11 from the Visayas region and 10 from Mindanao. We were also surprised to have known that HURIDOCS-Winevsys-VAW has grandchildren—organizations that launched their own initiated issue specific, area-wide or regional trainings on human rights documentation inspired by the Winevsys-VAW database model. This is being done in the area of children's rights, women's rights in other parts of Asia⁵ and the Pacific, and more recently, of women in situations of armed conflict in Africa.⁶

The CATW-AP experience

While it is true that there'll be no stopping the spirit of continuing the HURIDOCS-Winevsys-VAW in documenting more specific areas of concern, allow me to go back to how the Coalition benefited from using this documentation system.

Specifically, the Coalition aimed at “developing a core of women's organizations who will collaborate with us in evolving a systematized and standardized method of data recording that will capture forms, extent, prevalence and trends in VAW.” To date, we have 16 women's organizations committed to continuing the dialogue and sharing of experiences and even expertise to review from time to time the framework of analysis that we have evolved in the course of our documentation work.

Prior to the Anti-VAWC Law⁷ and the Anti-Trafficking Law⁸, members of the coalition found it necessary to have data available as basis and evidence especially in dealing with legislators and policy makers. This is not to say that women didn't have any data at all, but rather, it lacks systematization and standardization. This core of women's organizations helped develop what is now called the Winevsys-VAW Microthesaurus—a list of vocabularies and terminologies used by women's rights advocates. It also tells you the agreed meaning and definition of each term that is in the database. Why is this important? Especially, in our advocacy work, the language used in a document tells so much about the difference in perspective. We had to ensure that we are talking about the same thing and the meanings attached to it while doing the documentation work. In this way, we are putting forward our advocacy and at the same time educating those who are new into using the database.

EBGAN—Baguio City), CEBU (Bidlisiw Foundation Inc, Lihok Pilipina), BACOLOD (Dawn Foundation), and DAVAO (Talikal).

⁴ LEAP, DAWN, WomenLEAD, KAKAMMPI, AmanPhil, ZOTO, KANLUNGAN, DPF

⁵ Nepal, Bangladesh, India, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Pakistan

⁶ 51 women's organizations from all over Africa through ISIS-WICCE

⁷ Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children Act of 2004, signed into law last March 8 during the Women's Day celebration.

⁸ Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2003 or RA 9208.

Another area that the Coalition aims to develop is to “integrate a clear gender-perspective into the documentation system.” The earlier version of HURIDOCs database model is heavy on civil and political rights. The WinEvsys-VAW has successfully integrated specific acts of violence against women as acts of human rights violations. Aside from achieving a common frame of reference, it allowed the integration of local categories such as ethnicity, educational attainment, sexual orientation and others. It has made visible the forms of violence against women that may or may not be reflected in other documentation system. It was noted however that one of the key to gender-sensitivity of the system is the gender-sensitivity of the documenters themselves. That is why during the course of the project, several capacity building activities were also conducted apart from the main training course on documentation and women’s human rights.

Though there were efforts from the government, particularly the statistics department to compile gender-disaggregated data, there is no specific government agency that collects information solely on VAW. This is one of the influential factors in pushing for a systematic databank on VAW that is accessible and retrievable. While the project has been successful in building a systematic database on VAW, data on perpetrators were still scarce. This is mainly due to the fact that most of the partners’ only rely on the victim herself as the source of information. In terms of information retrieval, the technical group of HURIDOCs in Geneva is looking for ways on how to make the database available on-line to facilitate sharing of information without sacrificing the confidentiality of data in the system.

When the Coalition embarked on the documentation project it needed a tool to aid women’s groups towards effective advocacy, lobby work and casework on VAW by utilizing the data generated through the documentation system. During the project, member-organizations were able to use the system to effectively monitor their cases, look into their local situations more closely and the integration of women’s human rights framework into their existing training modules on VAW.

They were also able to utilize data from their documentation in their information work, especially when invited to give a talk VAW. The partners also made sure that data and statistics generated from the system were brought back to the survivors through workshops and focused group discussions. This has paved the way for survivors strengthening their ties with the assisting organizations.

What could be the most promising result of the documentation project is that partners were able to use the data in their policy advocacy work. During the 16 Days of Activism Against VAW, partners took advantage of this event to present the data to local officials while at same time asking for concrete policy reforms on VAW. Local officials particularly in the provinces of Cebu, Bacolod and Davao City met this with concrete responses. Soon enough, local ordinances and resolutions on VAW were on the offing.

It has also helped in raising the awareness of local people and even those in media towards understanding VAW and how it affects not only the victims but also the society as a whole. Some of the possible use of the database that the partners themselves enumerated were: data can be used for comparative studies, monitoring cases and court decisions on VAW, a more effective service provision and assessing the progress of victim or survivor after victimization, facilitate designing of intervention to involve men and the family in eliminating VAW.

Lastly, the Coalition through this documentation work in partnership with HURIDOCs has succeeded in its hope to contribute to deepening the understanding of the nature of women's human rights violations. As more and more organizations from all across the globe would come across the WinEvsys-VAW and utilize it for their human rights documentation work, the new list of vocabularies and terminologies would somehow encourage organizations to keep on adding up to the list of gender-based violations that women in their particular situations experience. Thus, in our own little way, contributing to the over-all development of the human rights discourse on women.

The documentation project brought to the fore the extent of the rights violated particularly in the context of VAW. It has reiterated that the violation comes in various forms and in multiple ways that one can ever imagine. It has also brought the attention to the gravity of violations suffered by women in prostitution and those who have been victims trafficking.

The process of gathering the data was never an easy task. We noted above that sensitization of our documenters was necessary to be able to grasp and cull from the many stories of women the specific gender-based violations. It was an educational endeavor for both the documenters and the victim-survivors themselves. During the process of interviews, victims were able to know and realize their rights that were violated while documenters understand more deeply the person behind those stories.

An uphill battle

Like any other project, the documentation experience neither is nor free from problems and constraints. Though the Coalition tried to find creative means of continuing the project, the world of donors willing to fund documentation work remains small. While encouraging our partners to negotiate with their donors and make their documentation work an integral part of their mandate, continuous consultations and dialogue were still being done by the Coalition ranging from the technical side to the more conceptual and relational aspects of documentation work.

We have seen that documentation work needs to be realized by many advocates of women's rights as part and parcel of their service to women. The lack of funds and resources for documentation work need not be a reason to stop the initiative. Rather, it must be one of the driving forces behind finding the resources and funds that would support a project that carries with it a systematic documentation work.

During the course of our documentation project, we were able to convince some government organizations to adopt the HURIDOCs-WinEvsys-VAW. Unfortunately, the requirements of using the database proved to be more of an uphill battle for government agencies than with the non-profit organizations. First and foremost, while attempting to target the women and children's desk unit of the PNP, we found out that over the years it has remained to be literally, a desk for most of the country. It seems like the NGOs are the only ones who are lacking in operational funds but also the bureaucracy. The documentation system requires a computer, and requires someone to be trained as a documenter. After the training, and during our monitoring visits, we hear complaints of not having the minimum support to continue with the project.

This is not to say that the government is not doing documentation work. What we noticed during field researches is that the bureaucracy collects data in many different ways and in many different forms on the issue of VAW. The danger lies in data duplication, different parameters and indicators that is also relevant in terms of understanding the nature of services and redress that the government could give and offer to victims of VAW. In terms of services and resources, the Coalition believes that the government has the mandate and is in a better position to make documentation a necessity to agencies working on the elimination of VAW.

It is not a surprise to hear differences between government agencies in terms of their usage of terminologies on VAW. This adds up to the problem of data collection that is not systematized. A systematic and standardized data collection is important especially when we want government services to women that is also of standard and at the same time leaves enough room to give more appropriate and case-sensitive level of services.

Information sharing has also been identified as one of the major considerations in using the database. Though at this point, the WinEvsys-VAW can be lightly transported from one computer to the next, it does not allow sharing the database online, HURIDOCs technical staff in Geneva is doing such modifications.

There are two main points that users expressed during various evaluation workshops on the project. For one, if the perpetrator is a government official or a member of the police, how can the assisting organization whether from the NGO or GO ensure the safety of the victim from her perpetrator? And second, some of the data contained in the system are very sensitive e.g. being HIV positive, how can this be protected and ensure that it doesn't go to the wrong hands?

The database though run through Microsoft Access enables a security password for the whole database and allows for different sets of data tables. This for now is the only remedy to this problem. It can store through a Local Area Network and we can be sure that the data stored are protected. However, we are still working with the technical group to help us on how to make this database available publicly while at the same time restricting access to sensitive files. It will definitely require more time to make it work both ways.

The question of support comes into mind especially when speaking in terms of available resources for non-profits, POs and local agencies tasked to collect data for the mother government agency. Support always comes in two levels: one, the technical side of it; and second, increasing awareness and sensitivity to women's human rights issues.

We often hear complaints of having substandard tools like a computer that is not only used for documentation but for the whole organization's other projects as well. Oftentimes, the machine would crash together with all the data stored in the hard disk. It is a good thing that WinEvsys-VAW relies also on paper formats other than the software installed in computers. Unfortunately, the poor documenter has to encode it all over again and squeeze herself into the busy schedule of having only one computer for the whole organization, most especially when she has forgotten to make a back-up copy.

Apparently, technical problems can be remedied and be manageable. What is troubling is when the documenter is reassigned to other tasks and area of work.

This has happened several times before and because there were no skills sharing among other members of the organization, the documentation stopped if not was carried only until a new documenter has been trained. This brings us to the point of information sharing. When we say we want to share the information, we are not only referring to the data that we have gathered but also of the skill in doing documentation work.

This holds true also in government service. While it may take a little while longer before a staff is reassigned to a different post and area of work, skills in documentation—gender-sensitive documentation--should not be a monopoly of some. For gender-sensitive documentation is not learned overnight but through constant interaction, sharing and dialogue with women victim-survivors themselves. We have said over and over again that documenting VAW is not just about numbers and prevalence. It goes beyond the very statistics that tells us it is real and it is happening right on our very own doorstep.

A Final Note

We are documenting VAW because we want to see real and substantive changes. We would like to make government do something to better the condition of women. We document because we want to say to the world that violence against women happens even in the most unexpected places like our homes and bedrooms. VAW is when there is no available and accessible remedy, whether legal or social for the victims. Violence is when women are not free to decide on their bodies. VAW happens because our society condones and even makes violence the norm. VAW goes against the very principle of human rights.

By using the language of rights, our documentation examines the very foundations of human rights as it applies to women. It gives a new meaning to the rights enshrined in many international documents and treaties. "Women are saying that the right to life, liberty and the security of person applies to women

who is being battered by her spouse. Women are saying rape, whether committed in war or during peace time should be considered as torture; and that a woman who is in prostitution and/or victim of trafficking is in a modern form of slavery.”⁹

Throughout history, human rights discourse has exhibited a male bias while claiming to be universal, indivisible and interrelated. And because human rights prescribe the highest standards of living, it is indeed a powerful tool for women’s rights advocates to fight for inclusion and eliminating the systematic and patriarchal institutions that makes it impossible for women to enjoy rights in the same way as men.#

⁹ Proceedings of the Human rights Documentation Training for Asian Women’s NGOs Concerned with VAW; December 2-10, 1995: Quezon City.