

Bantay Banay (Family Watch) of Cebu City, Cebu
Top Ten Outstanding Program Awardee & Special Citation Awardee for Gender-Responsive Local Governance (2003)

"Domestic violence is a public concern."

This is a city where violence against women (VAW) is not just a "domestic" and private affair, but a battle of the entire community.

What started from a shocking revelation 12 years ago is now a multi-sectoral program called "Community Initiatives and Partnerships to Respond to VAW and Other Gender Concerns". A 1991 survey conducted by non-government organizations showed that six out of 10 women in Cebu City were victims of battering and sexual abuse. "This is a skeleton in the closet that the government needs to address," says Cebu City Mayor Tomas Osmeña.

The situation needed multiple interventions: providing immediate shelter for the battered wives and their children, food, counseling, legal assistance, medical and medico-legal checkup, temporary livelihood, and support services. To meet these needs, the local government created the Bantay Banay (Family Watch) program. Support eventually grew with the participation of the private sector and various NGOs.

At present, Bantay Banay has more than 5,000 volunteers throughout the city. Each barangay has its own group of volunteers where women could go for support. "These are leaders, specific persons whom people could run to. This is not a paper organization, but a real and active organization," Mr. Osmeña says.

Bantay Banay organized and trained volunteers on gender sensitivity, and on critical issues such as VAW, basic counseling, family dialogue, laws and legal processes on women's issues. It also formed inter-agency bodies to render services, and coordinate with local authorities, the police, NGOs and private sector groups.

Since 1998, around 13,000 cases had been reported to Bantay Banay. Many of the cases were solved through dialogues, mediations and counseling in the barangay level. Only about 10% of the cases end up as lawsuits as many women still prefer to settle matters out of court. To provide moral support to women victims, Bantay Banay members attend court hearings and seek media attention on possible lapses or delay in the legal proceedings.

Bantay Banay not only put VAW issues on the mainstream, it also earned a lot of “firsts” for Cebu City. The local government passed an Anti-Domestic Violence Ordinance, the first of its kind in the country. It was also one of the first local government units to install women’s desks in city police stations and to enact a Gender and Development Code that provides the framework for gender and development program in the city.

It also established the Cebu City Women and Family Affairs Commission with the private sector and NGOs as members, and passed an ordinance creating the Committee on Decorum and Investigation at City Hall to look into cases of sexual harassment and abuse.

Since 1998, an annual women’s summit has been held to provide a venue for discussing gender issues and concerns. In 1999, the city mayor signed an agreement with barangay captains to set aside 5% of the annual budget for gender and development activities.

As a result, reported incidents of VAW have been reduced to only two out of ten women in 2002. Bantay Banay is also being replicated in as many as 65 LGUs all over the country.

Source: Galing Pook Foundation