



Policy Brief

Surviving the Present, Imagining the Future: Narratives of Children Left Behind by the Philippine ‘War on Drugs’

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1. Introduction

The Philippine War on Drugs has claimed about 5, 176 of lives of drug suspects since July 2016 until early 2018 and left 18,000 to 32, 295 orphaned children (Delizo, 2019). A memory work research on orphaned youth living in urban poor communities in Metro Manila in 2018 showed that children who lost one or both parents from the drug war are placed in a vulnerable state of being. They experience worsening poverty, intense psychological trauma, and social stigma. They rely on their faith in God, the kindness of relatives and strangers and their hopes for a better life to endure the hardships caused by the violent death of their loved ones (Martinez, et al, 2018). Narratives of the orphaned teens reveal on one hand, high sense of insecurity and vulnerability as well as continuing struggle for daily survival. On the other hand, it also shows their strength and resilience arising from a sense of hope, gratitude, a desire to give back and a wish for a better life in the future.

Memories of tokhang: a home destroyed in darkness

Orphaned teens' memories of *tokhang* is a narrative of loss and injustice: of bloodshed in their home; of merciless killing of loved ones; of excruciating pain of loss and anger at injustice and a feeling of helplessness. The orphaned youth recounted witnessing or hearing about their parents and family members' violent death through *tokhang*. They narrated forced entry of men into their homes, the repeated sound of gunshots, and the merciless killing of their loved ones. They shared their experience of shock, horror, and disbelief at the “nightmare” of seeing the dead body of their loved ones. Their memories of the past were filled with the excruciating pain of loss and the raging anger at the injustice and helplessness of seeing and hearing their loved ones dying a brutal death, being accused of fighting (*nanlaban*), and killed with no mercy.

Narratives of the present: a home buried in hardship and sorrow

Orphaned teens and their families live in deepening poverty in a constant struggle to meet daily needs for food and basic necessities. Mothers need to spend more time working to put food on the table. Some of the adolescents were forced to find work to stay in school while some dropped out to find work and help bring food on the table. *Tokhang* also forced some families to live separately as siblings, living with different relatives to survive. Alongside the experience of economic hardship, their families were stigmatized as *natokhang* or killed in the “war on drugs”. They are teased and isolated in school for being children of drug pushers and drug addicts.

Holding on to hope through faith and the kindness of others

Despite the enduring pain and hardship of poverty that has befallen them, narratives of the orphaned youth hold on to hope to live on with life, through faith in God and the kindness of others. It is in others that they find hope in themselves, that as long as there are those who believe in them, they can believe in themselves.

Narratives for the future: the hope for a new home that will rise above the pain and injustice The orphaned children hope that someday their sadness will fade away, that they will achieve justice for the death of their loved ones.

While the adolescents shared the dream of rising above poverty, finishing school, finding work, supporting their siblings, surviving parent, and families, they shared their wish for a life without *tokhang*. In wishing for the killings to stop, they search for justice and peace beyond themselves and their families. They wish for a good government (that will stop the “war on drugs”). They wish for good police (that will not kill). They even dream to become policemen and women to demonstrate how a good police person should behave and what it means to be good.

Shaped by their experience of *tokhang*, their dreams for themselves and their families are now embedded in their wish for the nation – a country where there is peace, where there are no killings, where there is justice. In the end, they wish to give back to their parents and their families. But more than that, they wish to give back to the people who have shown them kindness in the present. They ask not to be forgotten.

2. Relevance of this topic

(a) The orphaned children and their families are collateral damage of the Philippine drug war

The drug war was intended to ‘clean up’ drug-affected communities and to promote national safety and security. Leaving thousands of orphaned children and their families as a result of the drug war was not foreseen by the government- an unintended and unplanned ‘disaster’, which now requires its attention.

As a State Party to international human rights agreements, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Children, the Philippine Government bears the primary duty to uphold the rights of these orphaned children and enable their families to access the wide range of welfare services entitled to them. Without government-initiated interventions, these orphaned youth could potentially become prone to more violence and an ongoing cycle of poverty. Ignored, neglected and left behind with bare minimum support, these children-at- risk become a valuable loss of human capital.

(b) Some barriers prevent orphaned children and their families from accessing government welfare programs

Despite being aware of some government services, victims of *tokhang* live in constant fear as the drug war continues. The government, which is supposed to protect the population against serious threats, is the perpetrator of violence. Mistrust, fear and suspicion pervade in the community, as the risk of being named a drug suspect increases (Balay Rehabilitation Center and DIGNITY-Danish Against Torture for the Global Alliance, 2017), eroding the *bayanihan* (community) spirit where neighbors go out of their way to help those in need (Espenido, 2018). A related study on orphaned families in Metro Manila also revealed that families who avail of financial assistance from some local government units in Metro Manila were denied assistance, when the cause of death indicated was drug-related (Espenido, 2018).

(c) Assistance from faith-based institutions and non-government organizations is inadequate

While there are individuals and organized groups providing assistance to orphaned children and families, their resources are limited and the provisions of services are sporadic, fragmented and short term. The need for funding of programs and for skilled and experienced personnel to manage cases extends beyond their capacities.

3. Policy recommendations

The Philippine Government, through its mandated national agencies and the local government units, needs to take action and leadership in fulfilling the needs and upholding the rights of orphaned children and their families, using a human security framework:

- Acknowledge the on-going efforts of faith-based institutions, non-government organizations, individuals and groups in assisting orphaned children and their families;
- Convene a committee of child protection experts, professionals and advocates under the Council on the Welfare of Children to design a comprehensive, integrated and rights-based strategy in response to the needs of orphaned children and their families, aligned with the Government's international and regional commitments in ending violence against children, utilizing evidence-based research on the situation analysis of children affected by the drug war;
- Ensure the availability of funding support for the implementation of supportive, protective and developmental programs and services for orphaned children and their families, at the national and local levels;

- Highlight the plight of orphaned children, particularly adolescents, affected by the drug war are given attention to in the implementation of the Plan of Action on ending Violence against Children, at the national and ASEAN levels;
- Re-think the Philippine drug war policy on the basis of its tragic, devastating and enduring impact to orphaned children and bereaved families.

Relevant publications

Balay Rehabilitation Center and DIGNITY-Danish Against Torture for the Global Alliance (2017). Position Paper on Urban Violence: Seven Essential Questions to Ask about the War on Drugs. Answers from Bagong Silang, Metro Manila. Available at: <https://dignity.dk/wp-content/uploads/SEVEN-ESSENTIAL-QUESTIONS-TO-ASK-ABOUT-THE-PHILIPPINE-WAR-ON-DRUGS_digital.pdf> [Accessed on 17 May 2019].

Delizo, M. J. (2019, March 22). Second Chance: An Orphan's Wish Amid Drug War. ABS-CBN News. Available at: <<https://news.abs-cbn.com/spotlight/03/22/19/second-chance-an-orphans-wish-amid-drug-war>> [Accessed on 17 May 2019].

Espenido, G. (2018). Philippines' War on Drugs: Its Implications to Human Rights in Social Work Practice. *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work*, 3(3), 138-148.

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