

An Exploration of Factors that Motivate Human Rights Workers in Areas of Armed Conflict in the Philippines

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This study examined the experiences and motivation of human rights workers (HRWs) in areas affected by armed conflict in the Philippines. Six human rights workers from Karapatan responded to semi-structured interviews. Karapatan is a Philippine NGO whose mission is to uphold human rights and document instances of human rights violations. The results described the risks experienced by human rights workers in conflict affected areas in the country. Intrinsic factors that motivate HRWs to continuously engage in human rights work despite facing adverse situations include altruism, belief that they are advocating a just cause, feeling a sense of fulfillment, and strongly identifying with their work. Findings likewise show that human rights workers draw strength from the relationships that they have with their partner communities. They are motivated to match the courage of community members (*tumbasan ang tapang*), and are strengthened by the strong and reciprocal bonds that they have with the communities that they serve. Implications on selecting, preparing, developing and providing organizational support to human rights workers are discussed.

Keywords: human rights workers, community, armed conflict, intrinsic motivation, Philippines

Liberation Front (MNLF), and the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army (CPP-NPA) are present in the country. Recent conflicts include the Mamasapano encounter where several Philippine National Police-Special Action Force (PNP-SAF) personnel and members of opposing militant groups were killed, the Lumad¹ killings, and similar armed encounters in the different parts of the country (for more detailed accounts, see Amnesty International, 2017; Karapatan, 2015).

With armed conflict comes violations of human rights (Human Rights Watch, 2012). The current focus of conversations on human rights violations in the country are alleged extrajudicial killings, torture, and incarcerations in the urban areas related to the government's war on drugs. However, human rights violations committed in the context of armed conflict remain prevalent in different parts of the Philippines (Indigenous voices in Asia, 2017; "Report: Philippines Dominates," 2017; US Department of State, 2017).

Due to the prevailing conflict and volatile security situation in the country, human rights workers (HRWs) in areas with armed conflict are highly susceptible to various risks as they perform their duties. Generally, humanitarian workers, including those focusing on human rights, experience physical injury and threats to mental health (McFarlane, 2004; Sheik et al., 2000). Despite the important role they play in upholding human rights and promoting peace, there is a dearth

focus on the motivation of HRWs in areas affected by armed conflict. We argue that there will be nuances in the experiences of human rights workers as compared to other humanitarian workers (e.g., health professionals or international humanitarian workers) as their work entails documenting rights violations of groups involved in armed conflict in a country where they themselves are organically located.

Armed Conflict in the Philippines

The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), an initiative that has produced and documented data on conflict for more than 20 years, differentiates areas experiencing armed conflict based on fatalities resulting from political incompatibilities of armed organized groups (Strand & Dahl, 2010). UCDP defines an armed conflict as a “contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory over which the use of armed force between the military forces of two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, has resulted in at least 25 battle-related deaths each year” (Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2005, p.3). The Philippines was tagged as one of the countries experiencing internal armed conflict with at least 1,000 battle-related deaths from 1998 until 2008 (Strand & Dahl, 2010). However, the internal armed conflict in the country started decades before 1998 and is still ongoing.

According to a report published by the US Department of State (2017), groups with organized armies that have been engaged in decades-long conflict with the Philippine government include Muslim separatists (e.g., MILF and MNLF), communist insurgents (CPP-NPA), and terrorist groups (e.g., Maute Group). Most, if not all, human rights issues are related to these groups in armed conflict with the state and include “killings by security forces, vigilantes and others allegedly connected to the government, and by insurgents; torture and abuse of prisoners and detainees by security forces; often harsh and life threatening prison conditions; warrantless arrests by security forces and cases of apparent government disregard for legal rights and due process; political prisoners; killings of and threats against journalists; official corruption and abuse of power; threats of violence against human rights activists; violence against women; and forced labor” (US

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Karapatan: Alliance for Advancement of People's Rights

Karapatan is an alliance of organizations, programs, institutions, and individuals that seek to promote and protect human rights in the Philippines (Karapatan, 2007). Its founding leaders and members have been at the forefront of the human rights struggle in the country since the time of Martial Law in the early 1970s. It is one of the few organizations that conduct fact-finding missions in areas where there are reported violations of human rights (Karapatan, 2007). They operate primarily in areas with an occurrence of active conflict between armed government and anti-government troops. This has led to experiences of harassment and even alleged killings of some of their human rights workers. For instance, in 2003, Eden Marcellana, the Secretary-General of Karapatan Southern Tagalog, was allegedly summarily executed in Oriental Mindoro (Tayao-Juego, 2014). In 2015, Human Rights in ASEAN, published an open letter addressed to the Secretary of the Department of Justice stating that "Karapatan's leaders and staff members in the Southern Mindanao region are constantly under attack, as they experience surveillance, threats and harassment from the military. Human rights defenders attribute these violations to the intensification of military operations, especially in Mindanao, where 60% of the total troops of the Armed Forces of the Philippines are deployed" (par. 5).

Participants

The six participants of this study were recruited using purposive sampling. All were HRWs employed by Karapatan and were selected based on the following inclusion criteria:

1. Must have been an employee of Karapatan for at least three years;
2. Must have been deployed to an active conflict area at least three times while working for Karapatan;
3. The total deployment time should be at least thirty days; and
4. Is considered a worker in good standing by Karapatan leaders.

The minimum of three years of service was required to ensure that the participants have more experiences working in the field and have

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identified and preferred by the interviewees.

All interviews began with an introduction that stated the rights of the participants to confidentiality, anonymity, and to withdraw from the study at any point during and after the interviews. The interviewers also took note of the participants' non-verbal expressions and actions to determine level of comfort in sharing information. The researchers noted that contrary to expectations, the participants were very comfortable, open, and eager in sharing their thoughts and experiences. Interviews were recorded with consent using a digital voice recorder for accurate documentation and transcription. The interviews were conducted primarily in Filipino. Verbatim transcriptions of the interviews were produced. Codenames were used to mask the identity of the participants. All interview data were kept in an encrypted and password-protected file accessible only to members of the research team.

Reflexivity

In the research planning and implementation stage, the authors constantly had consultation meetings that included sharing of their own backgrounds, experiences, and views about the human rights situation in the country. We thus share the following information about the authors that may be relevant to the readers as they read the presentation of findings in the succeeding results section.

All authors are Filipino citizens who spent most of their lives in the Philippines. Only one of the authors had worked in an NGO that advocates for workers' rights. The other authors do not have any political affiliations and do not have any association with human rights organizations. Most of the authors were aware of the injustices happening, especially in the rural areas of the Philippines, but were nonetheless surprised these were happening on a scale much larger than they had anticipated.

RESULTS

primary objective was to gather detailed accounts from credible witnesses who were usually members of the local community to verify and document allegations of human rights violations. During their missions, they had to ensure the information they gathered from the witnesses were accurate and detailed. As such, their work environments were naturally high-risk areas. The nature and gravity of risks in the communities are seen in the following stories shared by Art:

Sa ano naman 'to. Sarangani province...biktima ng mga sundalo nag-operation, nagpunta sa community nila, may mga binugbog, may torture case. Yung isa dun di ko makalimutan yung si (name of a member of indigenous tribe) nilasing ng tuba, yung wine, tapos inipit ng plais yung mga kamay para lang umamin. (This happened in Sarangani province... there were victims of military operations. They went to the community and people were beaten up and tortured. I cannot forget (name of a member of indigenous tribe) he was made to drink coconut wine, then they used pliers to press on his hands so he would confess.)

Isang buong sitio, giniba yung bahay, giniba yung eskwelahan, giniba yung barangay hall...Gusto nating malaman ano ba

killings. It was quite difficult because it's not just our lives, their lives too. I cannot forget that because I need to handle it. I want to push their issue but not put them in danger. The perpetrators identified by the people were goons of the councilor and mayor. From the captain, councilor, mayor and governor. There was even someone killed in front of the police station. I said, my God, this is a news blackout!)

Experiences of direct intentional violence. There are times when risks were more directly felt such as when participants themselves experienced harassment and death threats while conducting fact-finding missions. These instances were no longer novel experiences in performing their tasks as seen in the following accounts of Rez, Amy, and Poy:

Rez: Marami...confrotations sa military? Marami. Mga inaccost kami. Pag may...Pag pumapasok kami sa communities. Usual yan. Yang "pag pumasok kayo...babarilin namin kayo!" ; UbnUb hUU[U"G]bUgUM] b]`Uni b"5`a cghU`cZh YZMMÙbX]b[missions that I've joined, search missions. Kahit nga nung nandun...Commissioner on Human Rights.

kaming 30 katao... natulog kami sa isang chapel, lahat kami dun, at pwede nilang palabasin na ratratin ang chapel na ang pader ay kahoy lang, ratratin yun at pagkinabukasan lagyan ng mga baril tsaka bomba yung loob ng chapel, palabasin na encounter o nagkuta umano yung NPA dun sa ano. Natulog talaga ako na dilat ang isang mata, naka-ready yung text message sa cellphone, ready to send. Isang putok lang yan, send na agad sa mga kinaukulan. Ito yung bilang namin, uh, ito yung bilang ng mga sundalo, ito yung unit ng sundalo, ito yung lugar. (The entire community is surrounded by the military, encamped by the military. We had to stay in one of the chapels. We only saw less than 10 military personnel, those that were only visible to the community. They were not in uniform but they were armed. They were in combat fatigue pants but wearing civilian shirts. Around 5 PM, our marshals said that there were many others surrounding the area in full battle gear. We were surrounded by mountains and forests. There were less than 30 of us..participants in the fact-finding mission. We slept in the chapel and they may use open fire on the chapel with wooden walls, fire on us and plant bombs inside the chapel and say that it was an encounter with the NPA camping there. I slept with my eyes open. I was ready to send the text message in my cellphone. One gun shot and I'll send it to our colleagues/authorities - how many people in the mission, number of soldiers, unit of the soldier and the area.)

Poy: HUdcg'a Um]gU'dU'_cb[hM'ã ž]gUb[ZMM'ÜbX]b[bUã]b k]hã

sila, nag-uusap kami verbally na magkakaharap. (Then I had another team, one fact-finding mission we did with international friends.. From Quezon, the furthest we went was to San Andres to Gumapa. You might travel that in two hours, but us, we left at 6 AM, and we left Gumapa 12 midnight. Do you know why? We

Intrinsic Motivation

Majority of the participants said that they joined Karapatan because they felt they had to provide assistance to those who need it most, in one way or another. They feel satisfied whenever they see the positive effects of their work. This was seen in the desire of the participants to conduct missions in the communities they visit without

Notably, some participants have already been involved with projects or occupations advocating for people's rights, providing welfare and service, or humanitarian work before working for Karapatan:

Art: Syempre nung college ako, naging miyembro rin ako ng organization na nagtataackle, nagpapahalaga ng karapatan ng mga estudyante, sa kabuuan sa mga tao, yung student. (Of course when I was in college, I was a member of an organization that tackles and gives importance to students' rights, and people as a whole.)

Rez: Well, my personal history of activism started when I was still in college at the University of the Philippines-Diliman when I became an officer of the student council at the local college level sa College of Arts and Letters, and then the nationwide Alliance of Student Councils in the UP system. So it was there when I was engaged in not only student issues--issues on students' rights and welfare--but on the realities outside the university.

Amy: Nung estudyante kasi ako, aktibista na ko e. Naging socially aware ako through the student publication. Learning about the society, the problems of society and what needs to be done bilang isang member ng lipunan. (When I was a student, I was already an activist. I became socially aware through our

mo, mga matatanda na natutulungan mo. Makita ko lang silang ganun, makita ko lang na nagsusurvive sila, nakikita ko lang na natututo sila. (I just feel happy seeing the children that you help, the old people that you help. Just seeing them like that, seeing them survive, seeing them learn.)

The HRWs find their happiness in helping others. Art said that his

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the work also integrates itself into their personal identity, and it becomes difficult to separate one from the other.

When asked if she had ever questioned her decision to work for Karapatan, Lex expressed, "*May mga araw, pero dumaan na din yan. Di na nagbabalik.*" (There are some days when I do, but they pass. The feeling doesn't come back.)

The members of Karapatan still continue their work because of the meaning it gives to their lives and the fulfillment that they receive from it. As shared by Rez and Amy:

Rez: I think I'm happier as a person and I feel more fulfilled as a member of the middle class knowing that I am living not just for myself and that thought keeps me going

Amy: *Personally, I chose na ilaan ito sa mas makabuluhang bagay na mas maraming makikinabang. So kung mamatay ako diyan okay lang. Kahit papano may mga natulungan na rin ako.* (Personally, I chose to give this (life) for a more meaningful thing where more can benefit. So if I die, it's alright. At least I helped others.)

Participants were aware of the imminent danger that they face at work but also expressed that this is what they want and what they have to do. They identify with and find great fulfillment in doing their work, thus continuing to engage in it despite the risks.

Drawing Strength From Partner Communities

Karapatan workers going to areas with armed conflict also integrate themselves well with the people of the communities that they visit. Based on their accounts, their interaction and relationships with members of the communities gave them the strength to overcome their

interesting theme that surfaced is the concept of *"Tumbasan ang Tapang."* A part of the participants' motivation to continue in this line of work is their sensitivity to the experiences of those people in the

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and enjoyment on the job that they do (Franco, 2008).

The theme Work as Identity describes how the participants are not motivated by the benefits they receive or their position, but rather by their desire to help despite the risks involved plus their own fulfillment upon seeing the impact of their engagement in the community. The positive meaning that they derive from their work may explain why they highly identify with the work that they do. According to a study done by Franco (2008) on the meaning of work of Filipinos, NGO workers who usually see their work as internally motivating and fulfilling, identify more with their job. They also felt more involved and experienced better job fit.

The theme Drawing Strength

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and the communities that they serve that are almost indistinguishable from that between family members.

The Filipino's sense of *kapwa* may also clarify the nature and dynamics of the HRWs' relationships with the community. *Kapwa*, the Filipino concept of a shared identity, is a central idea in Filipino

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