

GALANG: A MOVEMENT IN THE MAKING FOR THE RIGHTS OF POOR LBTs IN THE PHILIPPINES

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GALANG: A Movement in the Making for the Rights of Poor LBTs in the Philippines

By Anne Lim

Introduction

Galang is the Filipino word for respect. The word signifies respect for human rights and human diversity, which lies at the core of GALANG's struggle for equality and justice. We believe that galang or respect is a message that should resonate not only in local lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT)¹ communities, but also in mainstream Philippine society.

Registered with the Philippine Securities and Exchange Commission as a non-government organization (NGO) on August 29, 2008, GALANG takes pride in being a lesbian-initiated, lesbian-run feminist human rights organization that works with lesbians, bisexual women, and trans men (LBTs)² in urban poor communities. It also includes women who either self-identify as lesbian or bisexual and/or have relationships with women but self-identify as heterosexual, as well as persons labeled as females at birth but self-identify as male (trans men). Our organization has both male and female, heterosexual and gay staff and volunteer professionals, and we espouse the feminist values of respect, economic justice, equality, diversity, fairness, and empowering processes at all levels of our work.


GALANG aspires to be a catalyst for the empowerment of economically disadvantaged Filipino LBTs to attain social and economic equity (access and control); and to create an enabling policy environment in support of the attainment of empowerment and equity among LBTs in urban poor communities. This two-fold mission seeks to contribute to the attainment of social and economic equity for Filipino LBTs by confronting the issues of homophobia (both external and internalized) and discrimination, poverty, sexual and physical violence, rape, suicide, unemployment, and lack of access to health care.

There are a number of LGBT organizations in the Philippines, as well as a lot of NGOs working on issues of economic justice, particularly with respect to the urban poor. However, to the knowledge of its leaders, GALANG is the only development organization whose working model involves grassroots community organizing of LBTs living in poverty. When the group was formed, the initial intent of its lesbian founders was not movement building, but rather to catalyze change in the fledgling Philippine LGBT movement. GALANG sought to give a voice to economically disadvantaged sexual minorities who are often not heard, if not completely forgotten, in the class-biased local discourse on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. Although GALANG's work proceeds from an analysis that Filipino LBTs

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1. LGBT refers to a diverse and complex range of identities based on sexuality, gender identity, and gender expression. The term is used loosely in this paper to refer to all gender and sexuality non-conforming people, including but not limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons.
2. GALANG's current organizing work involves only urban poor LBTs or lesbians, bisexual women, and trans men. LBT is distinct from LGBT in that the latter includes not only lesbians, bisexual women, and trans men, but also seeks to encompass a wider range of sexual identities including men who self-identify as gay, homosexual or bisexual; trans women or persons labeled as males at birth but self-identify as female; as well as persons who label themselves as transsexual, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual or celibate. GALANG's leaders decided to focus on organizing poor LBTs for now despite shared issues and advocacies between LBTs and other sexual minorities—or for that matter, between rich and poor LBTs—to acknowledge and better address particular forms of oppression that target only LBTs living in poverty. Hence, GALANG tries to create and foster a separate safe space for economically disadvantaged lesbians, bisexual women, and trans men.

are more oppressed than gay men, and the organization espouses feminist values, GALANG has not always embraced the label “feminist”.

This case study seeks to contribute not only to global learning about feminist movements and organizing, but also to the growing body of work that investigates the intersections between sexuality and poverty. By sharing its story, GALANG hopes to promote the strategy of grassroots community organizing in the Philippine LGBT movement and worldwide, and to receive constructive feedback and suggestions on how it can further refine its organizing model and increase its chances of success in its interventions among urban poor LBTs.

Context

Under Philippine law, homosexual behavior is not criminalized and while the Bill of Rights is silent on the protection of sexual minorities, it upholds the equality of all persons. However, the lives of Filipino LGBTs are replete with stories of discrimination for which they have no legal recourse. Skilled and qualified LGBTs are deprived of jobs on the basis of perceived immorality. Lesbians continue to be raped and beaten, sometimes by their own families, to “cure” them of their lesbianism or because their male peers are challenged by their seeming imperviousness to male attention. Gay men and trans people suffer from harassment by law enforcement agents, both bona fide and not, who cite outdated criminal laws on morality to extort money from their defenseless prey.

When one talks about LGBT activism in the Philippines, the anti-discrimination bill is most often referenced. LGBT human rights advocates have been trying to pass a bill seeking to protect LGBT rights since 1999. The first anti-discrimination bill was filed in 2000 during the 11th Congress of the Philippines, but to this day it continues to languish in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, and this

has caused much frustration among activists. Despite the intense discrimination and lack of specific LGBT rights in the Philippines, the bill has largely been ignored by Philippine legislators for almost over a decade now and has once again failed to get enacted during the 14th Congress.

The Roman Catholic Church as well as fundamentalist Christian groups in the country have been at the forefront of the opposition to the anti-discrimination bill. In 2001, the Church framed the proposed law as part of the D.E.A.T.H. campaign supported by groups that they labeled as anti-life, anti-family, and immoral. The acronym D.E.A.T.H. stands for divorce, euthanasia, abortion, total contraception, and homosexual relations—all issues that the Church claims diminish the value of life and tarnish the Filipino family. For years, religious personalities have spread disinformation and scare tactics to encourage people to withdraw support for the bill and not vote for candidates who push for the anti-discrimination bill as well as other progressive legislation, such as the reproductive health bill. In 2006, one legislator, a Baptist pastor, who was also then Chairperson of the Committee on Human Rights of the national House of Representatives, blocked the passage of the anti-discrimination bill, claiming not only that the bill invited the wrath of God but also that it violated the equal protection clause of the Constitution (“House Human Rights Chair” 2006).

Indeed, religious texts have found their way into popular anti-LGBT rhetoric including formal proceedings of avowedly secular institutions. In 2009, the Philippine Commission on Elections, a constitutional body tasked to oversee both national and local elections, cited verses from both the Bible and the Koran when it handed down a decision which sought to prevent an LGBT party from participating in the 2010 party-list³ elections on the grounds of immorality and being a threat to the country’s youth. While the party was eventually allowed by the Supreme Court to run for a congressional seat when it overturned the electoral body’s 2009 resolution⁴, this was not the first time that the Commission ruled

3. Party-list is a system of proportional representation in the election of representatives in the Lower House of the Philippine Congress. By reserving twenty per cent of all seats in the House of Representatives to party-list lawmakers, the system seeks to give Filipinos belonging to marginalized and underrepresented sectors such as the LGBT sector a better chance of becoming members of the Legislature and of participating in policy formulation.
4. Based on partial unofficial results of the 2010 elections, the LGBT party ranked 68th among 187 party-list contenders and garnered insufficient votes to qualify for a seat in the House of Representatives (“National Election Results Tally”).

against representation of LGBTs in the country’s party-list system. In 2007, the same constitutional body had denied the accreditation of the LGBT party on the grounds that it did not have sufficient presence in the majority of the regions in the country.

As a result of these political developments, some activists have chosen to work with local governments where, in recent years, a few relatively progressive leaders have emerged. In at least two cities, one municipality, and two *barangays*⁵ in the

country⁶, local ordinances have been passed penalizing LGBT discrimination. In the Philippines, it seems that justice is somewhat more accessible at the local level than at the national level, especially for marginalized actors such as LGBTs. On September 2, 2003, Quezon City where GALANG’s organizing work is concentrated, became the first and until very recently the only city in the Philippines that has enacted an ordinance that protects LGBTs from discrimination in the workplace (see box).

Protecting LGBT workers’ rights

City Ordinance No. 1309, Series of 2003, prohibits all discriminatory acts committed against homosexuals in the matter of hiring, treatment, promotion or dismissal in any office in Quezon City, whether in the government or private sector.⁷ Violations of this ordinance may merit a fine of not more than five thousand pesos (Php 5,000) or roughly one hundred dollars (US \$100) and/or a prison term of not more than six months. In July 2010, Dagupan City followed suit by passing a similar ordinance criminalizing discrimination based on sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Two years earlier, a municipality in the Province of Albay in the Bicol Region also passed a local law protecting LGBTs. Today, efforts to pass similar local laws are under way in different parts of the country, even as far as Davao in the southernmost part of the country.

The History of GALANG

GALANG started out in mid 2008 as a small group of lesbian friends who were either keenly observing or actively engaged in the LGBT activist community in the Philippines. Regular and casual conversations eventually turned into meetings about what else the group could do to concretely advance LGBT rights. As GALANG started out as a loose group of activists, leadership structure was not given much importance by its founders other than for purposes of complying with government registration requirements. GALANG founders selected their officers partly according to their respective skills and competencies, but mostly based on who had the most time to devote to the organization’s

work, since all of them were working fulltime elsewhere. However, it was agreed upon from the beginning that the group was committed to promoting and adhering to non-hierarchical leadership structures and decision-making by consensus.

The definition of the word “feminism” that is relevant for GALANG is the one put forward in Basin and Khan’s (1986) essay, “Some Questions on Feminism and Its Relevance in South Asia”. In a workshop attended by South Asian women, feminism was broadly defined as, “An awareness of women’s oppression and exploitation in society, at work and within the family, and conscious action by women and men to change this situation.” This definition points to a two-fold character of feminism—theory and praxis. When this definition is applied to

5. A *barangay* is the smallest unit of government in the Philippines and is comprised of about 30,000 to 50,000 residents.
6. There are 138 cities, 1,496 municipalities, and 42,025 *barangays* in the Philippines.
7. The well-publicized case of a gay librarian from a Catholic women’s college in Quezon City has been celebrated for giving a face to LGBT discrimination in the Philippines and credited for galvanizing Filipino LGBT groups against discrimination. The complainant who had a commitment ceremony with his same-sex partner witnessed by some of his co-workers claimed he was illegally dismissed for having a “gay wedding”. He filed a criminal complaint against the school’s top officials for violating the city’s anti-discrimination ordinance.

GALANG's work, it is worth noting that while the organization has not always embraced the label "feminist", it can be considered as an intrinsically feminist human rights organization by virtue of its values and its gendered analysis of lesbians, bisexual women, and trans men as an oppressed class and its decision to focus GALANG's meager resources on improving the lives of Filipino LBTs.

GALANG believes in affirmative action as an intermediate strategy for achieving gender equality, and has put this into action by stating a preference for female staff. While the organization now has heterosexual staff and volunteer professionals, it takes pride in being a lesbian-led human rights organization to this day. The organization recognizes the value of maintaining women-only spaces, but also appreciates the importance of building coalitions and networks with other LGBT and LGBT-supportive individuals and groups. It also espouses the feminist values of respect, economic justice, equality, diversity, fairness, and empowering processes at all levels of its work.

When GALANG started, its founders did not see themselves embarking on a project of movement building as much as working as catalysts for change in the fledgling Philippine LGBT movement. The faces and voices of the local LGBT community had predominantly been those of middle-class, college-educated, and mainly gay male urban professionals, and some felt that this was neither accurate nor representative of the Filipino LGBT sector. For various reasons, including the use of English as the predominant mode of communication in meetings and discussions, as well as the fact that few poor LGBTs could afford transportation to attend these activities, key organizing events were populated by homogeneous groups of LGBT urban elites, sometimes leaving both organizers and participants with a sense that they were all just "preaching to the converted".

Because its leaders believe in a continual cycle of action and reflection, as well as in the importance of egalitarian learning where both teacher and student gain wisdom from each other's experiences (Freire 2007), GALANG's founders felt the need to learn

more about the realities of the people that it wanted to help—poor, uneducated, and unemployed or underemployed LGBTs. It seemed clear that in order for the Philippine LGBT movement to gain ground in advocating to and for the rights of sexual minorities, its activists could no longer ignore the huge socio-economic gaps in the country: out of around 88 million Filipinos (National Statistics Office, *Census of Population, 2007*), 27 million are poor, earning less than US \$320 per year or less than enough for their basic needs (National Statistics Office, *Philippine Poverty Statistics, 2006*). The gap between the rich and the poor is significant: 20% of Filipinos control more than half of the country's total family income while the other 80% have only 47.2% share (National Statistics Office, *Census of Population, 2007*).

Confronted with these numbers, GALANG felt it was urgent to develop a model for organizing LGBTs in poverty—who comprise the majority—because without a critical mass of organized Filipino LGBTs, activist voices would continue to be drowned out by fundamentalists who, with the backing of the Religious Right in the West, and armed with political power and financial resources, would continue to deprive them of visibility, voice, and rights. GALANG believed that the only way to challenge the formidable machinery of conservative forces was to contribute to consolidating and empowering Philippine LGBT communities from the grassroots up. GALANG was formed with the assumption that advocacy at the national level could not fundamentally alter the lives of ordinary LGBTs without an organized grassroots base.

After a series of planning workshops from mid 2008 to early 2009, GALANG's leaders came to a decision that they would work directly with poor LGBTs, who are the most vulnerable to the backlash of homophobia and discrimination, despite this being a daunting task for a small group of neophyte activists on a shoestring budget. One key organizing principle was that people act on the basis of self-interest (Alinsky 1971). So when discussions and key informant interviews initiated by GALANG revealed that LBTs in its organizing areas are less visible yet more susceptible to horizontal hostility⁸, rape, physical abuse,

8. Horizontal hostility is a phenomenon that often results when members of targeted groups of people believe, act on or enforce the dominant system of discrimination and oppression. Horizontal hostility can occur between members of the same group, i.e., among butch and femme lesbians, or between members of different, targeted groups, i.e., between gay men and transsexual women. ("Horizontal Hostility").

suicide, and unemployment than gay men, it was logical for GALANG's lesbian founders to decide to focus on organizing and building the capacities of urban poor lesbians, bisexual women, and trans men in the organization's first five years.

GALANG chose to explore grassroots community organizing as its core strategy because this model is consistent with the organization's bottom-to-top approach to development, where the people have a direct hand in improving their condition and are not treated as mere recipients of aid or passive receptacles of knowledge. GALANG believes that the development of grassroots advocates of LBT human rights is crucial in pushing for social and economic equity and creating a critical mass of people capable of countering the powerful tide of religious fundamentalism that is sweeping the Philippines and the rest of the world, bringing a virulent form of homophobia in its wake.

While there was a consensus about the need to organize and mobilize people, the group had misgivings because while most of GALANG's founders have been involved in development work for years, they all had limited experience in direct organizing. Of the six founding members, only one had some direct organizing experience. To address this limitation, the expertise of accomplished development professionals—who had been involved in either the women's movement or other social movements for decades—was mobilized through the formation of an Advisory Committee⁹.

GALANG Goals and Strategies

At the core of GALANG's organizing work is the identification and development of a cadre of local LBT leaders in poor communities nationwide who have sufficient self-confidence and capacities as LBT human rights advocates. It is hoped that by 2014, at least 15 LBT leaders in three sites are able to discuss and explain LBT rights and the issue of

discrimination, and have been able to mobilize at least 45 of their peers as advocates who are also able to understand their rights as LBTs. By this time, at least one LBT organization per site, each with a membership of at least 20 LBTs, will have been established. Toward this, GALANG's capacity building activities are focused on equipping urban poor LBTs with the skills to analyze and articulate the rights and issues of their constituency, organize and mobilize their peers to support advocacy for LBT human rights, and influence policy makers to develop policies that advance these rights.

In mid 2008, GALANG began the entry phase of its work with LBTs in two urban poor areas in Quezon City, the largest city in Metro Manila with close to three million inhabitants. Quezon City was chosen for two reasons: first, because GALANG recognizes that Quezon City is a trailblazer in terms of pro-LGBT local legislation; and second, because most of GALANG's leaders live or work there as the city is informally known as the NGO capital of the Philippines. It was clear that familiarity with the terrain of its organizing work would improve GALANG's chances of success in its interventions, especially since regular interaction would allow the organization to better integrate with residents of the areas.

On October 12 and November 23, 2008, focus group discussions with mixed groups of LBTs and gay men participants were conducted in each of the areas. One of the objectives of the discussions was to more clearly define the target population of GALANG's interventions. In these preliminary discussions, GALANG found that at the level of the *barangay*¹⁰, LBTs were more marginalized than gay men as they were less likely to find jobs and more likely to be victims of violence. It was also obvious that lesbians were far more reticent and timid than gay men as the latter were quite participative and willing to share their stories while, in contrast, it required quite a bit more prodding for the women to open up. The discussions also revealed that the predominant stereotype of LBTs in urban poor areas is that

9. All of GALANG's four advisers have years of organizing experience with marginalized groups like sex workers, battered women or indigenous peoples. One of them is a professional community organizer who continues to help GALANG in developing its organizing model by drawing from her own experiences in successfully organizing other marginalized communities in the country.

10. The smallest and most basic political unit in the Philippines, the *barangay* often serves as the critical link between its residents and the national government. Quezon City which has 2.68 million residents, is composed of 142 *barangays*.

they are violent, volatile, and “useless” as they are commonly associated with street fights, fits of jealous rage, and drunken revelry. Gay men, on the other hand, were far more readily accepted by the rest of the community because they were perceived as fun and creative, and were seen as academic achievers and excellent community leaders. In one area, several elected local government officials were self-identified gay men who bore multiple university degrees and public service citations.

To validate the findings from the mixed group discussions, another round of focus groups were conducted on July 4, 2009, this time with only lesbian and bisexual women and trans men participants. The outcome of these discussions was consistent with the results of the mixed group discussions and confirmed that there was a greater need to invest in interventions specifically targeting poor LBTs. Armed with this knowledge, GALANG further refined its target group. The first five years of the group’s operations—which the founders had previously decided to dedicate to working with LGBTs in poverty—were now allotted to working with the most vulnerable segment of the Philippine LGBT sector: urban poor lesbians, bisexual women, and trans men.

Thus far, three pressing problems have surfaced in GALANG’s work: unemployment, sexual and physical violence, and unhealthy habits coupled with lack of access to health care. GALANG observed that there appears to be a strong link between each of these key problems and diminished self-esteem among poor LBTs.

One of the most pervasive reasons that LBTs are passed up for employment is not their lack of skills but the prejudice toward homosexuality. Many qualified LBTs have experienced being told by prospective employers at some point that they don’t hire lesbians on grounds of immorality. As a result, many of them have developed a phobia for job interviews and have almost lost hope of landing good jobs. These negative experiences further erode what little self-esteem that poor lesbians have, perpetuating a vicious spiral that further prevents LBTs from seeking advancement in their lives.

Many cases of sexual and physical violence against LBTs are nothing but blatant hate crimes

against sexual minorities. GALANG’s data on cases of violence against LBTs reveal that many cases of rape of butch lesbians and subsequent unwanted pregnancies have been reported to the authorities. It appears that these crimes are often committed by their own male friends or drinking buddies who admitted that they were aggressive toward LBTs because they felt challenged by the latter’s seeming lack of interest in men. While these cases are reported, criminal charges against the perpetrators are rarely pursued because of the high cost of legal services in the Philippines and the stigma that comes with being a lesbian rape survivor.

Internalized homophobia or intense self-loathing also causes many poor LBTs to engage in risky sexual practices and other unhealthy habits such as alcoholism, drug abuse, and chain smoking. Besides the fact that many LBTs do not value their health, societal prejudice also contributes to self-harming behavior. It is also the reason why most do not seek medical help—they fear the negative judgments of health professionals about their life choices.

GALANG’s activities are geared toward improving the life skills and self-confidence of urban poor LBTs to help them cope with this pervasive homophobia and discrimination. Through its capacity building trainings and campaigns to promote positive images of LBTs, such as GALANG’s lesbian community comics, educational discussions, partnerships with government and non-government allies, and research projects¹¹, the organization hopes to contribute to pushing the envelope for equality and diversity.

The GALANG Organizing Model

Grassroots leadership development forms the core of GALANG’s work because it believes in participatory methods that give poor LBTs a better chance to not only have access to scarce resources but also to gain control over them. GALANG seeks to build the capacities of local LBTs so that they can be their own advocates who can assert their rights and make state actors accountable to their immediate community—the *barangay*—and to the LGBT sector as a whole. Leadership

formation and capacity building of grassroots women are crucial strategies in movement building as they facilitate the creation of a critical mass of people who can push for policies protecting LBT human rights. These are feminist strategies insofar as they are fair, egalitarian, non-hierarchical, empowering, and respectful of diversity. They also promote a type of leadership that is built on transparency and accountability to the collective will and agenda of its constituency.

The participants of the LBT focus group discussions in July 2009 responded positively to the prospect of being organized into their own support group. Many of them found it very telling that while the local gay men have formed clubs or sports groups of their own, lesbians have remained rather loose, factionalized, and antagonistic toward each other mostly because of petty in-fighting. In the end, the women left the discussions in high spirits and committed to attend GALANG’s future activities.

The focus groups were followed up with an orientation on sexuality and gender in each of the two areas. In Barangay Pansol, the LBTs expressed readiness to be organized—although on hindsight, their enthusiasm could have been diminished had they realized the implications of their commitment to organize and mobilize their peers. The concept of people empowerment was easy enough for them to grasp in theory, but difficult to put into action perhaps because of the pervasive culture of dependency and feudalism in the Philippines. The participants surely liked the idea of having their own group, but they did not seem to realize that it would take a lot of work to make this idea a vibrant reality.

GALANG helped them work out a plan of action, and encouraged them to form an *ad hoc* committee of leaders who would take a lead role in developing and mobilizing their peers for LBT human rights. Seven LBTs volunteered to form the committee, calling it Circle of Pre. *Pre* is short for *compadre*, a Spanish word that means “friend” or “godfather”. However, in the other area, GALANG did not sense that the LBTs were ready to be organized nor to commit to a plan of action. GALANG leaders were initially disappointed that there were a lot of poor LBTs who were not interested or ready to organize around LBT human rights. In the end, because GALANG believes that the local women are in the best position to know what they can—and cannot—do, the organization respected their sentiments and merely encouraged the LBTs to

identify point persons who could coordinate future activities.

On September 12-13, 2009, the *ad hoc* LBT leaders and area coordinators underwent a joint leadership training. At around that time, it became even clearer that between the two communities, Barangay Pansol had the most potential. GALANG welcomed the chance to focus on helping Pansol LBTs for now as their situation seems more dire and urgent. The group is confident that initially concentrating on only one geographic area would allow it to more thoroughly test its organizing model before replicating it in other communities.

During that time, GALANG did not have the means to engage the services of a fulltime community organizer whose task would have been to identify, train, mentor, and mobilize local LBT leaders. With a skeletal force of volunteer professionals, GALANG chose to adopt and adapt a model which consisted of training a leader-organizer who was organic to the area to perform a two-pronged role: first, she was envisioned to be GALANG’s link to local LBTs, capable of mobilizing the local leaders into action; and second, she was expected to be the voice of her peers within GALANG, providing the organization with crucial insights and information about the LBTs in the area.

After explaining to the *ad hoc* leaders the role of a leader-organizer, they were asked to decide among themselves who should undergo a structured training for this role. GALANG was careful not to influence this decision as it was crucial for their leader-organizer to have the *ad hoc* leaders’ full backing and confidence. After two weeks of heated internal discussions among the leaders, they made their choice. Of the seven *ad hoc* leaders, six were butch or masculine lesbians and one was a femme or feminine lesbian who did not readily embrace a lesbian identity. The latter had consistently displayed an intense drive to learn more about LGBT identities, albeit acting with submissiveness and deference toward her butch peers, one of whom was her long-time partner. The other leaders tended to boss her around, so to speak, and it came as a minor surprise to GALANG when it was the femme lesbian who emerged as the *ad hoc* leaders’ choice.

This particular “femme” leader-organizer managed to mobilize her peers to join the 2009 Manila Pride March, an event that has historically been attended mostly by elite LGBTs. She was

11. Visit GALANG’s website at www.galangphilippines.org to view some excerpts of these resources.

given the task of ensuring the participation of at least 20 LBTs from her *barangay* in order to give a face to the plight of urban poor LBTs during the march. On December 5, 2009, for the first time, 31 lesbians from GALANG's partner communities marched proudly and as one, carrying the message of respect for Filipino lesbians, lesbian rights as women's human rights, and lesbians for peace in Mindanao. Because of this milestone, GALANG received numerous accolades for breaking the class barrier in the Manila Pride March by making the issues of poor Filipino LBTs visible.

Since June 2010, two fulltime community organizers have been assigned to Barangay Pansol to build on the initial strides that have been made in the area. They are currently undergoing on-the-job training on LBT community organizing which requires them to live in the area for its duration. The trainees are also required to attend regular study sessions on community organizing and sexuality to enable them to understand theories and concepts which they regularly see in action on the ground. Among their tasks is to integrate into the community and facilitate the development of competent and dedicated local LBT leaders, including the leader-organizer and members of the *ad hoc* committee.

On November 20, 2010, GALANG's formal training program for local LBT leaders was launched. The organization hopes this structured learning process, coupled with field exposure and mentoring by GALANG staff, will further encourage LBTs in the area to take on an increasing role in their *barangay* and be mobilized to support the advocacy for equal rights.

Campaigns and Alliance-Building

These initial successes of GALANG's organizing model would not have been possible without alliances with local, regional, and international organizations that work for the benefit of women and

LGBTs. One of the organization's key strategies is to strengthen partnerships and alliances with advocates of the sector to push policies in support of LBT human rights at all levels across sectors. GALANG recognizes the need to continuously build and deepen relationships with other human rights and LGBT-allied organizations including legislative champions, private sector actors, the media, and other private and public stakeholders for them to help in improving the access of urban poor LBTs to basic social services.

GALANG's campaign against homophobia has spanned the miles when it was given the opportunity to exchange stories and experiences with other LGBT advocates during the 16 Days of Activism Campaign in Yogyakarta, Indonesia on December 10, 2008; TARSHI's¹² Regional Institute on Sex, Society, and Culture in Delhi, India on May 11-18, 2009; and the International Dialogue in Buenos Aires, Argentina on January 14-17, 2010 where GALANG was upheld as a model of best practice by ARC International and Mulabi¹³. Its organizing model, the only best practice chosen among Southeast Asian countries, received very encouraging feedback from LGBT advocates from neighboring countries in Asia as well as those from Europe, Africa, and both South and North America.

On September 4, 2010, GALANG launched the first issue of its groundbreaking community comic book series that promotes positive images of LBTs, a means of operationalizing The Yogyakarta Principles, a set of international equality and non-discrimination principles on the application of international law to human rights violations based on sexual orientation and gender identity. GALANG distributed copies not only to LBTs and straight allies on the ground, but also to partner organizations and potential supporters including progressive universities, in the hopes that the comics can serve as a springboard for further discussion on LBT human rights among their respective constituencies.

To help GALANG address the problem of unhealthy lifestyles, risky sexual behavior, and lack of access to health care among poor LBTs, the

Likhaan Center for Women's Health, a feminist NGO that provides primary health care to indigent women, has agreed to provide free medical consultations to GALANG's community partners. The Center has provided GALANG's LBT partners with materials on emergency contraception to address the problem of unwanted pregnancies among lesbian rape survivors. A referral system to access a medical expert specializing in women's health has also been established for GALANG's local partners with Likhaan's help.

Accurate research-based evidence is necessary to push for public policies that can improve Filipino LBTs' access to social services and legal redress. Because reliable data on poor lesbians, bisexual women, and trans men in the country is sorely lacking, GALANG carefully documents its interventions and conducts research activities to strengthen its advocacy for LBT human rights. For instance, through GALANG's documentation of cases of rape and other forms of sexual abuse against poor LBTs, it has uncovered several cases of rape of butch lesbians, some resulting in unwanted pregnancies, often committed by the victims' own male friends or drinking buddies. There are also several cases of butch lesbians who had been arrested or illegally detained by the police for false charges of kidnapping their femme partners. GALANG has started exploring a formal engagement with a feminist legal NGO working on women's issues in order to assist lesbians who have been raped, abused or falsely accused of criminal conduct.

GALANG has also had the privilege of participating in several prestigious feminist network activities such as the first Feminist Technology Exchange in the country, and consultations between the Philippine police and army brass with representatives of women's groups, respectively organized by the Association of Progressive Communications' Women's Networking Support Programme and the Alternative Law Groups. In participating in these activities, GALANG not only hopes to raise awareness that violence against LBTs is also violence against women, but also to strengthen alliances and partnerships with other change agents who share GALANG's vision of a society free from prejudice.

In the hope of helping to address the problem of unemployment, GALANG is documenting cases of urban poor LBTs who have been denied employment on the basis of their perceived sexual deviance. GALANG hopes to put together a formal report

compiling these narratives for publication in order to bring attention to the fact that even though the Bill of Rights legally guarantees equality and human dignity for all, in reality, discrimination is widespread as qualified and skilled Filipino LBTs are routinely denied employment and safe livelihoods. To date, GALANG's ongoing research on unemployment has already been cited in separate reports linking sexuality and poverty, commissioned by the Arcus Foundation and the Sexuality and Development Programme of the Institute of Development Studies.

GALANG Structure

Like most lesbian organizations in the Philippines, GALANG operates as a collective made up of peers. Its Board of Trustees makes decisions by consensus and, when it requires guidance, seeks the advice of the Advisory Committee. Until very recently, GALANG did not have paid staff, and program implementation had been undertaken by a working Board of volunteer professionals, with the help of GALANG's advisers and local leaders. For more than a year, it did not have an office or a website and its founders worked from their respective homes and/or offices and met in cafes to plan their activities. Occasionally, the group conducted discussions in venues owned by other NGOs that allowed GALANG to use their facilities for a minimal fee. These proved to be very difficult not only because a large part of the organization's resources ended up being spent on venue and equipment rental, but also because the arrangement had made GALANG somewhat inaccessible to its grassroots partners.

GALANG's leaders realized early on that the kind of organizing that was needed to achieve the organization's goals required full-time immersion in the life of its partner communities. Most of its volunteer professionals continue to struggle to balance their commitment to the organization and to their profession. To maximize the impact of GALANG's programs and to ensure its sustainability, and with much-appreciated support from its institutional partners—Mama Cash, the Fund for Global Human Rights, and the Global Fund for Women, the decision was made to establish a physical office and to hire fulltime staff, including an administrative/finance officer and two community organizers. At present, GALANG maintains a modest office where

12. Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues or TARSHI is an India-based NGO working on sexual rights.

13. ARC International is a Canada-based organization designed to make a contribution to the development of a strategic LGBT human rights agenda while Mulabi is an NGO based in Buenos Aires that seeks to generate visibility and programs for low-income trans and intersex people throughout Latin America.

day-to-day operations are managed by an Executive Director who is also a member of the Board of Trustees. A staff house in the area is maintained for GALANG's community organizers who are required to live on-site, and this also serves as a venue for regular meetings of local LBT leaders.

The LBTs in the area who have been collaborating with GALANG likewise act as a collective that is fully autonomous in making decisions concerning their group, in consultation with their peers. On March 7, 2010, they conducted their first ever public activity by organizing a film showing to celebrate International Women's Day. This was a defining moment for them because it was the first time that a group of LBTs was seen and acknowledged as civic actors and productive members of the community.

Part of GALANG's long-term strategic plan is not only to train local LBT leaders to be grassroots advocates, but also to encourage them to become more active in GALANG's leadership and to invite the most dedicated and promising leaders to become members of the Board of Trustees. However, as GALANG's organizing work is still at an early stage, their role remains consultative.

Organizing Gains

For GALANG, its most important accomplishment thus far is having been accepted as a genuine partner in development by both LBT and straight partners—both individuals and grassroots organizations—in the area. Many residents, including LBTs, were initially wary of the presence of GALANG volunteer professionals perhaps because decades of patronage politics in the Philippines have taught them to be suspicious of anyone who claims to want to help them. However, with GALANG staff's constant and consistent presence in the community as well as their efforts to patiently explain the organization's objectives for organizing poor LBTs, the community has become more open to GALANG, its leaders, and staff. GALANG is encouraged by the response of urban poor LBTs who have expressed excitement and hope. They realized that with GALANG at their side, they can make significant changes in their lives that were once marked only with despair and desperation.

For example, in a recent meeting with grassroots partners, the GALANG facilitator asked the LBT participants to give a brief introduction of themselves and their expectations. What was expected to be a routine session turned out to be a very poignant sharing of personal experiences of discrimination, and an unexpected testimonial to GALANG's work. One participant narrated that she sometimes doubted herself and whether she deserved to have a good life despite being gay, because she had always been told that homosexuality is a sin. She wanted to learn how she can counter these arguments because while she has doubts about whether homosexuality is indeed a sin, she could not find the words to argue against this age-old worldview. Another participant talked about how, after attending one discussion tackling the prevalence of horizontal hostility among lesbians, she went home to her partner to apologize for having physically abused her in the past. While she admitted that the violence in their relationship had ceased long before GALANG's involvement in the area, she understood only now why she had a propensity for violence toward her partner.

The organization is also encouraged by the response of local government officials whose cooperation it has earned by consciously maintaining a relationship that is respectful, firm, and transparent. For instance, one official requested the group to support him in his bid for a higher office, but he graciously accepted the organization's apology and explanation that it cannot do so because it cannot compromise its organizing work by engaging in partisan activities. Some local officials have also requested GALANG to expand the geographical scope of its work to include organizing LBTs on a district-wide basis. Local lawmakers of both partner communities have also passed ordinances against LGBT discrimination in the last two years, at around the same time that GALANG began to mobilize LBTs in their areas. These local laws prohibit and penalize acts of discrimination based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity such as refusal of employment, denial of entry to an establishment with no legal ground, and refusal to provide medical services to an LGBT person. While the fines for violating these local laws are almost insignificant¹⁴, GALANG welcomes the passage of

14. For instance, one of the ordinances punishes infractions with a fine of around US\$7 while the other leaves it to the discretion of the local gender officer to determine what punishment is "proper and equitable".

these ordinances as it is proof that the local governments have begun to recognize the importance of their LBT constituents, and the need to address their pressing problems.

GALANG's contribution to bringing attention to the value of grassroots community organizing as a strategy for LGBT rights advocacy is also an achievement. This is an important milestone considering that from the very beginning, GALANG's leaders have always wanted the organization to stand for bottom-to-top development and empowerment through participatory processes. A little over two years since GALANG was established, its organizing model has already received both local and international recognition. Colleagues in the local LGBT and feminist movements have lauded GALANG's organizing work with LBTs living in poverty.

Finally, GALANG has contributed to raising awareness on the plight of Filipino LBTs in urban poor communities. The visible presence of 31 poor LBTs marching as one during the 2009 Manila Pride March had encouraged some fellow activists to look at discrimination and homophobia in a new light. GALANG's conscious decision to focus on the intersections of class, poverty, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression has contributed to popularizing the message that in order to advance LGBT rights in the country, there is a need to confront and address the fact that the Philippines is a developing country and that the majority of its people, including LBTs, live in dire poverty.

Emerging Challenges

Early into its community organizing efforts, GALANG has learned that the strongest resistance to its work comes from the same people it wants to organize and empower, largely because of their resignation and apathy. The organization has also learned that it takes patience, as much as skill, to break through this deeply embedded sense of victimhood and hopelessness.

The most significant threats to GALANG's work are the twin phenomena of the culture of poverty and the layers of discrimination against Filipino LBTs. The extreme poverty in the area plus the phenomenal gap that exists in the country between rich and poor have fostered a profound sense of helplessness and fatalism. GALANG continues to

battle with the colonial legacy of a feudal mindset, a mendicant mentality, and internalized homophobia that runs so deep that most poor LBTs believe they must accept discrimination as a fact of life. While many of them have been quite open to new ideas and have expressed interest in organizing and mobilizing their peers into a support group of their own, these *barangays*—as is most of the country—are embedded in a deeply rooted culture of dependency where leaders are seen as saviors and custodians of valuable but scarce resources. With this prevalent mindset, dole-outs and service provision are widespread expectations, such that GALANG finds it challenging to demonstrate to local partners why this is not empowering, and why it is unsustainable and undesirable in the long-term.

Significant breakthroughs have been made in some of the women, but changes in the culture of fatalism among LBTs in poverty will take time. Indeed, an organizer must start where the people are but must not end where they are. In Alinsky's (1971) words, "As an organizer I start from where the world is, as it is, not as I would like it to be. That we accept the world as it is does not in any sense weaken our desire to change it into what we believe it should be—it is necessary to begin where the world is if we are going to change it to what we think it should be. That means working in the system."

Evaluating our Work

Since GALANG began its work a little over two years ago, it has been consciously fine-tuning its strategies for grassroots community organizing of urban poor LBTs with an eye to developing a model, if not several models, that can be replicated for other poor LGBT communities in the Philippines—and possibly in other developing countries as well. As in all participatory development processes, there must be a continual cycle of action and reflection. GALANG continues to develop its model not only because it wants it to be beneficial for the entire LGBT sector, but also because all models should be a work in progress—they are a means, not the end. For GALANG's leaders, the moment that they think that their model is perfect is the moment that the organization sets itself up to fail.

One way for the group to evaluate its work is by conducting regular "tactic" sessions wherein the

staff examines the LBTs' level of trust in the organization and their willingness to mobilize around community issues. The women's willingness to tell their stories is a good indicator of their degree of trust in the organization as well as GALANG's level of integration in the community. Another measure of success is gauging the LBTs' willingness and ability to apply in their daily lives the knowledge and skills that they have learned through GALANG's capacity building activities. Some evidence of this, for instance, was when the local LBTs participated in the 2009 Manila Pride March, where fundamentalist Christians hurled verbal assaults from the sidewalks, shouting chants like "God hates sinners!" and "God did not make you gay!" GALANG leaders initially feared that the local women might become reticent in the face of bible-wielding fundamentalists. But, as it turned out, such fears were unfounded. Instead, the poor LBTs were energized by the sights and sounds that most of them experienced for the first time. They marched tirelessly, peacefully, and without incident while shouting lively chants about LGBT rights. Afterwards, some of them said that taking a stand amidst violent opposition from the so-called "moral majority" felt very liberating. They have begun to realize the importance of being visible and of being heard.

Conclusion

By addressing the issues of class and poverty in its work with Filipino LBTs, GALANG sought to engage and influence the local feminist movement to which many of its allies and colleagues belong, but whose culture remains largely heteronormative and ambivalent about giving LBT rights advocates a place at the table. GALANG leaders have discussed the organization's work in mainstream feminist spaces and are pleased that the response has generally been positive and supportive.

For a very young lesbian organization, GALANG is on its way to making substantial contributions to the Philippine LGBT and feminist movements by virtue of its clear focus on organizing urban poor LBTs and building a mass base. It has built strategic alliances and encouraged fellow advocates and change agents to revisit grassroots community organizing as a viable strategy for mobilizing vulnerable sectors such as LGBTs. GALANG has also encouraged mainstream feminists to recognize that the rights of lesbians, bisexual women, and trans men are women's human rights.

GALANG's organizing work provides insights and analyses on the lives of LBTs in poverty through the lens of gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation, deepening Philippine society's understanding of the role that urban poverty plays in their marginalization. As the organization grows and builds this movement, GALANG hopes that its work will not only benefit urban poor LBTs in its partner communities, but anyone who is interested in women's empowerment and participatory processes of development. Above all, GALANG hopes that its experiences would contribute to developing a renewed faith and confidence in bottom-to-top approaches to alleviating poverty among constituencies that have remained largely invisible thus far.

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Timeline of Events

2000	LGBT anti-discrimination bill was filed for the first time in the Philippine legislature; at present, it has yet to be passed into law
September 2, 2003	Quezon City Anti-Discrimination Ordinance covering workplace discrimination was passed
February 27, 2007	Philippine Commission on Elections denied accreditation to an LGBT party for lack of sufficient presence in the majority of the country's regions
July 2008	GALANG founders decided to employ grassroots community organizing as their core strategy in working with LGBTs in poverty to contribute to building a critical mass of LGBT advocates in the Philippines
August 29, 2008	GALANG was officially registered as a non-profit corporation with the Philippine Securities and Exchange Commission
October 12, 2008 & November 23, 2008	discussions with LGBTs in two urban poor areas in Quezon City revealed that lesbians are more prone to be victims of violence and workplace discrimination and are more likely to be poor and unemployed than gay male peers; knowing this, GALANG decided to focus on organizing urban poor lesbians, bisexual women, and trans men (LBTs) during its first five years
December 6, 2008	GALANG joined the annual Manila Pride March for the first time; it was also the first time that the march was disrupted by religious fundamentalists
January to April 2009	meetings with key informants and educational discussions were conducted to prepare for grassroots engagement
June 28, 2009	GALANG joined the annual Baguio Pride March for the first time
July 4, 2009	discussions in the two areas were conducted, this time with only LBT participants; the response of the participants to organizing was promising
July 26, 2009 & August 30, 2009	results of the previous focus groups were validated during orientations on sexuality; three pressing LBT problems in the area were identified: unemployment, sexual and physical violence, and unhealthy habits coupled with lack of access to health care; seven <i>ad hoc</i> LBT community leaders in Pansol were named, while three coordinators were identified in the other area
September 12-13, 2009	<i>ad hoc</i> LBT leaders showed much enthusiasm during a joint leadership training while the response of the coordinators in the other area was not as promising; GALANG decided to focus on one area for now and to take a step back in the other community
October 2009	<i>ad hoc</i> LBT leaders selected their leader-organizer
November 2009	first batch of LBTs went for medical check-up at Likhaan; experimental training of leader-organizer began

December 5, 2009

31 local LBTs from GALANG's organizing areas marched together for the first time during the annual Manila Pride March; it was their first time seeing religious fundamentalists carrying hate placards and shouting anti-LGBT rhetoric

January 14-17, 2010

GALANG was upheld as a model of best practice at the International Dialogue in Buenos Aires, Argentina entitled *Rising Through the Challenge: Documenting and Analysing Best Practices for Advancing Human Rights based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity/Expression*

February 1, 2010

GALANG established its first physical office with a modest conference area and library

March 7, 2010

Pansol LBTs debuted as civic actors in their public plaza when they organized a film showing in celebration of International Women's Day

May 14-29, 2010

aspiring community organizers went for immersion in GALANG's areas

June 2010

two fulltime community organizers were assigned to live on-site to undergo on-the-job training on LBT community organizing and to build on the initial strides that have been made in the area

August 18-19, 2010

GALANG community organizers and a local LBT leader participated in consultation dialogues with Philippine police and army brass, where they reiterated the need to sensitize law enforcers about the situation of sexual minorities; a core group of LBT youth leaders in the area was formed at about the same time

September 4, 2010

GALANG's lesbian comic book series, *Tatsulok*¹⁵ *Komiks*, was launched, giving poor Filipino LBTs a heroine to call their own in Pamboy D'Tomboy ("Pamboy, The Tomboy"), the series' lesbian protagonist

15. *Tatsulok* is the Filipino word for "triangle", a universally accepted symbol of lesbian power.

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