

## ***Marimar (Mare, marami pang chika!): Chikahan as Space for Conscientization, Resistance, and Collective Action to Counter Violence against Women***

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### **Abstract**

Violence Against Women (VAW) is a human rights violation inflicted by individuals, from strangers to family members. In the Philippines, one in every four Filipino women aged 14 to 49 are victims of it, with 41% struggling to seek help (Philippine Commission on Women, 2012). Although conventional mechanisms such as laws exist as means for protection and prevention, hostile environments impede victim-survivors from reporting or even talking about it. Due to this, women, in their intimate circles, use *chikahan* to respond to VAW and to resist the dominant cultures of patriarchy and silence. Contrary to the perception that *chikahan* is unproductive, Women in Magandang Lugar utilize this as their response to VAW through its integration into their everyday mundane activities and duties as Barangay Public Safety Officers. This article provides insights on how women use *chikahan* as a feminist organizing strategy, arguing that women-led community-based initiatives countering VAW must be examined.

**Keywords:** *Violence Against Women, Chikahan, Spaces, Women-led Community-based Initiatives, Feminist Organizing, Female Resistance, The Everyday Life, Cultural Politics, Patriarchy*

## Everyday Chikahan

Coffee, *pandesal*, and *chikahan* under the cooling shade of a tree constitute the mornings of women in Magandang Lugar<sup>1</sup>, a close-knit community in Quezon City. Embedded in their morning routine is conversing about mundane things relating to the responsibilities of a mother, a wife, and a woman. In their conversations about the seemingly monotonous life, they would talk about meals for the day, budgeting, and personal challenges and feelings. They would also tell intimate stories about their sexual lives, primarily through teasing one another, if they had fun in their sexual intercourse with their partners. However, beneath these stories is another layer of deep and exclusive occurrences that shed light on the dark truths of being a daughter, a wife, a mother, and a woman.

Maris choked on her tears as she recalled her traumatic experience of being locked up behind bars for playing cards at the wake of a friend. She shared how the holding cell made her uncomfortable, confined, and dirty. This made her feel sorry for herself and her daughter, who saw her in that state. Another thought that kept her awake at night was her experience of being forced by a male prisoner to provide sexual pleasure. Maris also shared how she was sold to a police officer by a friend when she was 16-years-old to satisfy his sexual desires.

Margo also narrated her experience with her previous partner and described that their relationship was life-threatening. “*Para akong nasa hukay* [I feel like I had one foot in the grave],” Margo said. She shared that even during her pregnancy, she was beaten and sexually harassed. What broke her heart further was that her daughter witnessed these things. Moreover, during their abusive relationship, she could not fend for herself and her daughter. She was disoriented, full of wounds, and felt dirty. Often, she would think of hanging herself because it was like living in hell every day. Margo recalled, “*Para siyang nagiging demonyo* [It’s like he transforms into a demon],” when her previous partner becomes violent.

Maricel shared how her partner forced her to have sex in front of their daughter. If she refused her partner, their daughter would be the one to suffer. Often, Maricel was held at knifepoint by her spouse; scared and left with no choice, she was raped.

Marya also recalled how her former partner would beat her for sex, leaving her with no choice but to cry and endure. There were also instances when he would demand intercourse in front of their child. Scared of what might happen, Marya would give in every time. She also recalled how her former partner would bring over his friends to their house and persuade her to use her body for their pleasure.

### **Introduction**

Maris, Margo, Maricel, and Marya's stories are among the many narratives of Filipino women who are victim-survivors of violence against women (VAW). In the country, these cases, manifested in different forms, are prevalent. Reports show that rape cases rose from 1,656 in 2018 to 2,168 in 2020 and by the end of 2020, rape cases reached 6,548 (Khullar, 2021; Philippine Statistics Authority, n.d.). While in Quezon City, the Women's and Children's Desk recorded approximately five reports of domestic abuse weekly pre-pandemic, which increased to 12 complaints during the pandemic (Calleja, 2020). While reports suggest the struggle against VAW, they fail to capture the harrowing experiences of individuals like Maricel and Marya whose lives and dignity are violated.

Due to this, the state has established mechanisms responding to VAW, which can be primarily seen in the establishment and implementation of policies such as Republic Act No. 9262 (Anti-Violence Against Women and their Children Act), programs, and institutions. Along with these, civil society organizations (CSOs) also configured initiatives to contribute to countering VAW through offering services such as counseling, referral, and education. However, in the Philippines, VAW remains one of the most pressing issues that undermine the fundamental rights of women (Khullar, 2021).

Gleaning on the experiences of Women of Magandang Lugar, these mechanisms are insufficient. Women like Marya and Maricel experience barriers in acquiring protection and justice as the “one-size-fits-all” procedure makes it almost impossible for victim-survivors to push through with their cases. Many of them back out due to the fear of having no means to provide for their families should their partners be punished, among many reasons that suggest the insufficiency of existing mechanisms.

Hence, women—through their means—create mechanisms that are responsive and sensitive to the needs of victim-survivors. Many of these mechanisms are rooted in their everyday routine and spaces that are accessible to them. Therefore, it is critical to look at these mechanisms where they channel their agency as women and foster spaces where they can freely speak, empathize, make sense of their struggle, and even respond to cases of VAW. One empirical example of this is the *Samahan ng Kababaihan ng Magandang Lugar* (SKML) where Margo, Maricel, and Marya, among others, aim to foster an environment that is sensitive and responsive to the needs of women who are victims of violence through organizational activities. The Samahan ng Kababaihan ng Magandang Lugar<sup>2</sup> was established in January 2021. It was a response to the organizing efforts by students and the absence of a women’s organization in their community. At the onset of the COVID-19 lockdown, prior to the organization’s establishment, women in their community were already active in the community pantry efforts. Originally, the membership application of the organization was intended for those who wanted to be recipients of *ayuda* (aid) during the pandemic. It is also interesting to explore that while state-led mechanisms are insufficient, the Women of Magandang Lugar still recognize that protection and support for restoring their autonomy and dignity cannot be alienated from the state. Hence, aside from creating independent mechanisms, they have incorporated identities and spaces tied with the state such as operating

as volunteer Barangay Peace and Safety Officers (BPSO) and members of SKML in responding to the prevalence of VAW in their community, especially through chikahan.

This study argues that responses to issues of VAW are not necessarily bound to the establishment of legislation, programs, and institutions. It also relies on initiatives done by women themselves at the community level. This study aims to look at this through the following questions:

1. How do the Women of Magandang Lugar understand their issues regarding VAW?
2. How do they understand the accompanying threats to their safety and well-being?
3. How do they understand the role of their women-led community-based initiatives in responding to the issues they have identified?
4. How do they understand the opportunities and threats of these initiatives in promoting feminist organizing?

This article used Haraway's (1988) concept of *situated knowledges* to understand the realities lived by the Women of Magandang Lugar; it argues that women acquire knowledge from their experiences. According to Haraway, objectivity or the truth is shaped by its *situatedness*—a location definable by space and time. Therefore, based on this situatedness, all truths come from a position within a specific “historically, culturally, and personally anchored context” (Kolb, 2024 p. 37). These positional perspectives lead to a more accurate understanding of a community, given their reflexivity of all positions it consists of (Haraway, 1988).

In order to understand the situation of the Women of Magandang Lugar, the data collection and analysis methods will take into account the subjectivist approach relying on their narratives.

To deepen our understanding, we used a narrative approach to recognize the uniqueness of each experience through stories highlighting their involvement in women's

organizational activities, intimate relationships with each other, and engagement in chikahan.

First, we identified 10 participants who are members of the women's organization and are friends or familiar with each other through a series of visits. We then interviewed nine participants and discussed the study's objectives and ethical considerations. The participants then chose their preferred pseudonyms, which were used throughout this article to secure their identities. Furthermore, we gave them a copy of the consent form to help them decide on their participation.

Second, we interviewed six women in Magandang Lugar in spaces where they felt safe. We then gave them a list of support services they may need should they experience distress after the interview. We also gave them copies of their answers to ensure the validity and their willingness to share the information gathered.

Third, for the participatory workshop, while one interviewee was unable to attend, three additional women joined since it took place in the Barangay Outpost, totaling eight participants. It consisted of five parts: (a) *kumustahan*, (b) chikahan map, (c) contribution to VAW, (d) discussion on VAW, and (e) synthesis. Lastly, we interviewed Barangay VAW Desk representatives to corroborate the stories of women in Magandang Lugar.

To present the findings of the study, the article has five sections. First, it will discuss the responses configured by the state and civil society organizations to respond to VAW. This section includes gaps that continue to undermine the rights and well-being of women in Magandang Lugar. This is followed by the stories of the Women of Magandang Lugar, the narratives that surfaced, giving life and meaning to the everyday challenges and resistance they make, particularly, those relating to VAW. The next section is a discussion on the organizational activities of Women of Magandang Lugar and how these activities can be attributed to feminist organizing strategies. This includes their mechanisms as

members of the SKML, how they navigate their identified safe and unsafe spaces, and their forms of resistance as manifested in their everyday lives. The fourth section discusses women-led community-based initiatives that respond to the prevalence of VAW. The discussion of this section is guided by a conceptual framework and Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis of the data collected. Finally, the last section discusses the conclusions based on the individual narratives and organizational activities of the Women of Magandang Lugar.

### **Gaps in the Conventional Responses to Issues of Violence Against Women**

The preliminary findings of the National Demographic and Health Survey in 2017 reported that 26% of women experience physical, emotional, and sexual violence from their spouses. Therefore, one in every four women aged 15 to 49 has experienced physical, emotional, and sexual violence (Philippine Statistics Authority, n.d.). This necessitates the state to implement mechanisms to address VAW.

#### ***State-Led Mechanisms***

1. **Philippine Commission on Women (PCW):** The PCW was first established under a different name in January 1975. Strengthening the mechanisms to achieve their goals, “The Magna Carta of Women,” or Republic Act No. 9710 was signed in May 2009—one of its objectives is “to develop plans, policies, programs, measures, and mechanisms to address discrimination and inequality in the economic, political, social, and cultural life of women and men” (RA 9710, 2009, Section 2). They envision “to be the premier policy-making and oversight agency successfully influencing development efforts towards gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls” (Philippine Commission on Women Citizen’s Charter, 2020, p. 2).
2. **Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children Act:** To ensure empowerment among women and girls, on March 8, 2004, Republic Act No. 9262, or the

“Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children Act” was signed into law. It defines violence against women and their children (VAWC) as “any act ... against a woman who is his wife, former wife, or against a woman with whom the person has or had a sexual or dating relationship ... which result in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, psychological harm or suffering, or economic abuse (RA 9262, 2004, Section 3).” Physical violence includes hitting, stabbing with a knife, and the like. Psychological violence includes intimidation, repeated verbal abuse, and marital infidelity. Sexual violence includes rape, sexual harassment, and treating a woman or a child as a sex object. Economic violence includes the deprivation of the right to engage in economic activities, and to use and enjoy conjugal property.

3. **Barangay Violence Against Women Desk:** “To ensure that violence against women cases [are] fully addressed in a gender-responsive manner (RA 9710, 2009, Section 9),” the Magna Carta of Women requires Local Government Units (LGUs) to establish a VAW Desk, a “physical facility,” that victim-survivors can immediately access to seek help, “managed by a person assigned by the [barangay captain]” (Barangay VAW Desk Handbook, 2012, p. 8). It emphasizes the right to their clients’ privacy and security by ensuring their confidentiality and intake interviews are conducted in spaces where clients feel comfortable and safe (Philippine Commission on Women, 2012).

### ***Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)***

Due to the issue of a weak or absentee state emerging from developing countries, CSOs are most likely encouraged to engage in “gap-filling” (Whaites, 1998). These organizations go against the conventional approach because they penetrate grassroots activities, ensuring that development processes are democratic and participative (Tonny & Ahmed, 2020). The following CSOs employ various mechanisms in countering VAW:

1. **GABRIELA Partylist:** GABRIELA is a national alliance of women's organizations in the Philippines that aims to increase the participation of marginalized and underrepresented Filipino women in political processes. Considering the pervasive issue of VAW as the foundation for their gender-based campaign, they have launched campaigns to educate schools and communities and encourage victim-survivors to break the culture of silence (The United Nations Organization, n.d.).
2. **Likhaan Center for Women's Health:** Likhaan is a non-government, non-profit organization that operates to "help women and poor communities harness their resources and engage government and other power-holders to transform unjust and inequitable situations" (Likhaan Center for Women's Health, n.d., Who We Are section, para. 3). They examine issues, including poor health services, domestic violence, alternatives, and collective action that women can take to address their concerns. It runs eight cost-effective primary care clinics for women in low-income communities and conducts outreach services like counseling and referral for gender-based violence (GBV) in hard-to-reach areas (Likhaan Center for Women's Health, n.d.).
3. **Lunas Collective:** Lunas Collective is an online, private safe space for individuals experiencing GBV and for those seeking assistance with their sexual and reproductive health (SRH). They believe that listening is the first step towards actively helping victim-survivors and people who are seeking assistance with their SRH through their feminist, inclusive chat service. They support their clients' choices and give them a sense of relief and power by giving them options for counseling, specialized services, and referrals (Gacad, 2020, as cited in Cepeda, 2020).

### ***Gaps in the Conventional Responses***

Despite the existence of formal mechanisms implemented by the state and spearheaded by CSOs, VAW remains pervasive. Issues relating to VAW are exacerbated by popular cultures in the Philippines. According to Afkhami (2019, p. 6), violence is a social phenomenon resulting from historically rooted gender inequalities that became “embedded in culture and law.” Given the culture of patriarchy in the country, maltreatment of women is normalized in communities such as Magandang Lugar. Moreover, the belief that men are “dominant” and women should be “devalued” is legitimated through different ideological state apparatuses (Guieb, 1991).

Due to the legitimization of patriarchy, victim-survivors have often backed out of reporting their perpetrators, heightening the culture of silence. The PCW (2012) states that the culture of silence stems from the embarrassment of experiencing such harassment and the lack of faith in the justice system. Aside from the internalization of such cultures among victim-survivors and women, cultures like these are further maintained by people entrusted with the power to respond to cases of VAW. This is primarily exhibited by facilitators from the Barangay VAW Desk (2023) when they advise victim-survivors to allow their husbands to sober up first before proceeding with their cases claiming that it is normal for drunk husbands to be violent.

Furthermore, the procedure and requirements of reporting are burdensome for the victim-survivors, further reinforcing cultures that objectify women. Victim-survivors have internalized that they cannot raise their children alone, leaving them with no choice but to stay with their perpetrators. Maribeth shared that there are many cases where victim-survivors choose not to report their partners because no one will be able to provide for their family. They cannot forego a day’s worth of income. This supports that there are harmful social norms and beliefs that significantly contribute to VAW, including the notion of

unequal power relations between men and women (Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence, 2018).

## **Marites' Stories: Situation of Women of Magandang Lugar**

### ***Women of Magandang Lugar***

Margo is a person you could always ask, “*Mare, anong bago?* [Girl, what’s the latest?]” as she was born and raised in Magandang Lugar. She is always in the loop of what is happening in the community and in the organization. While Maribeth is a person you could always confide in as she would always say, “*Mare, bet ko yan!* [Girl, I like that!]” She is the person that people would usually go to when they are in trouble or during emergencies. Maribeth is also intimately close with her fellow members of the women’s organization and the BPSO volunteer team.

Maris is your *kumare* (a woman you are close with) who is also always updated with news in the community. She keeps tabs on what is happening whilst juggling tasks in her community and productive work. She is your “*Mare, ano ang tsimis?* [Girl, what is the latest gossip?]” type of woman. With Marichu, they make a good team, as Marichu would be your “*mareng echos.*” They would work together to oversee the community at night, especially the children who play on the streets of Magandang Lugar past the curfew hours.

But this task is impossible to deliver without Marikit and Marinela, your “*Mare, kita mo,* [Girl, I told you]” and “*Mare, anong sabi nila?* [Girl, what did they say?]” type of women who have sharp ears and eyes for unusual events in the community.

Maricar is your *kumare* who just arrived (“*Mare, kararating lang?*”) in their *chikahan* because she is always busy with the religious activities arranged by their organization.

While Mariche, Maricel, and Marya are the women who would always say “*Mare, pa-check-out.* [Girl, check this.]”, “*Mare, pa-cancel.* [Girl, cancel this.]”, and “*Mare, pakopya.* [Girl, let me copy.]” to the group to stir laughter.

“*O, magma-Marites<sup>4</sup> na naman ba kayo?* [Oh, are you going to gossip among each other again?]”—the Women of Magandang Lugar have heard these comments from members of their community whenever they gather around different spaces. Among the organization members, they would even point fingers as to who the real *Marites* are. These comments manifest the negative connotations that are intertwined with *chikahan* or *pagma-Marites*. Behind the negative outlook on such phenomena are personal stories that are shared and ideally kept secret between two people who trust each other. Included in the stories of the Women of Magandang Lugar are their experiences of violence from their partners. Through writing from, through, and about these spaces, women can reclaim the narrative that they are not mere objects of representation and not worthy of being pioneers of discourse (Salvaggio, 1988).

Everyday life has been considered a “distinctively female sphere” (Felski, 2000, p. 94). Women in society have been traditionally perceived as masters of reproductive work, which is reflected in the community of Magandang Lugar. Mothers have ingrained in their daily lives a fixed schedule to perform their everyday obligations, mostly focusing on their reproductive work. However, the everyday life of women, as made evident in this study, is predominantly dictated by popular cultures of patriarchy and silence that are detrimental to the lives of women. However, it is through their organizational activities, that the Women of Magandang Lugar can resist these dominant cultures and reclaim their agencies as members of the community worthy of it. Scott (1985) talks of *routine resistance* where the marginalized are often silent about the intent of their resistance. This routine of resistance, present in the everyday lives of the Women of Magandang Lugar, reflects the “taken-for-granted resistance” that often happens as a result of institutions of repression.

The Women of Magandang Lugar shared their everyday lives alongside their struggles and resistances. Each voice gave different meanings to what it is like living in Magandang

Lugar as a mother, a wife, and a woman.

### ***Magandang Lugar***

Amidst the rapid urbanization of Quezon City, there lies Magandang Lugar, a close-knit community that thrives on the simplicity of life. It houses up to 200 families that depend on various livelihoods such as scavenging, construction work, street sweeping, and selling of goods. Magandang Lugar also faces challenges that undermine their safety and well-being as the community sits on privately-owned land, where they face threats of demolition.

According to Marya, due to the threat of demolition, some women in Magandang Lugar are left with no choice but to become mistresses of “blue guards<sup>5</sup>” in the area so they do not lose their houses.

Marichu also shared that the presence of people with substance abuse poses a threat, which supports Margo’s experience from her previous partner who used drugs. “*Yung [kaligatsan] na dapat nararanasan ko, hindi ko mararanasan habambuhay iyun hanggang nasa kanya pa [ako]* [The feeling of safety I should have, I will not be able to experience that for as long as I stay with him],” said Margo. This is precisely true as Maribeth argues that being in the same household with your perpetrator is a clear threat to their safety and well-being. According to her, children dragged into marital arguments or those who serve as collateral damage also experience threats to their safety and well-being, where some result in having trauma.

Moreover, the Barangay VAW Desk suggests that the occurrence of VAW in Magandang Lugar is low. In 2022, six cases were reported, spread throughout January, April, August, September, October, and November; two cases were reported in May, totaling eight in 2022. In 2023, three cases of VAW were reported to the barangay from

January to June. However, Marinela, president of the women's organization, approximated that they assist in one case every week, indicating its pervasiveness in their community.

Victim-survivors are also required to have non-monetary resources, such as time, to find justice—evidently, this is not the case for all. “*Maproseso kasi* [It is tedious],” according to one of the Barangay VAW Desk Facilitators; victim-survivors are forced to undergo a lengthy process to file and win cases against their perpetrators. Moreso, facilitators of the Barangay VAW Desk simply perceive circumstances where victim-survivors back out as a source of amusement. They laugh about the stories of those who are *bugbog-sarado* (beaten-up) and *duguan* (bloodied and beaten) who chose to back out of reporting their partners. According to the facilitators, victim-survivors back out of seeking justice because of their emotions—“*mahal nila [at] naaawa sila [sa asawa nila]* [They love and pity their partners].”

These responses from the Barangay VAW Desk Facilitators do not manifest their goal of addressing VAW “cases in a manner that is gender-sensitive” (Philippine Commission on Women, 2012, p. 9). Moreso, the Barangay VAW Desk Facilitators stated that they did not choose to work as such; they simply applied for work in their barangay and were assigned by the incumbent Barangay Captain to the VAW Desk. According to their handbook, to be designated as a VAW Desk Officer, one only has to be a woman barangay *kagawad* or *tanod*. Gender-sensitivity training and orientation on Anti-VAW laws are not part of their qualifications. Instead, these may come after their appointment at the VAW Desk (Philippine Commission on Women, 2012).

The Barangay VAW Desk Handbook also states that they provide a referral system to victim-survivors. To properly implement this, the assigned VAW Desk Officers must “refer the victim-survivor to the appropriate institutions and agencies” (Philippine

Commission on Women, 2012, p. 34), including but not limited to government offices, educational institutions, and CSOs. Contrarily, the Barangay VAW Desk Facilitators claim no implementation of such a system, and they merely refer victim-survivors with medical needs to hospitals. Lastly, according to them, most cases of Magandang Lugar are first responded to by their BPSO. However, their handbook does not include their role in the protocols and procedures, making the roles of BPSOs as responders to cases of VAW ambiguous.

The lack of a survivor-centric approach in dealing with VAW forces victim-survivors to live in silence and with the imminent threat in their homes. These gaps are multi-layered; victim-survivors experience intersectional abuse when relating to different societal actors. Given the gaps that further exacerbate the powerlessness of the Women of Magandang Lugar, it is critical to look into the potential of their everyday organizational activities in countering VAW cases in their community.

### **Organizational Activities and Chikahan as Feminist Organizing Strategies**

In more formal spaces, members of the women's organization who are also volunteers of BPSO do rounds in Magandang Lugar during nighttime to ensure the safety of the community. They ensure that no children are outside, and no men are drinking past curfew hours. They are also on standby during emergencies that might happen during the night. Marinela shared that they are often the first ones to respond to a domestic dispute at night. Maribeth added they encountered a child outside their house past curfew hours who said that they did not want to go home because their parents were arguing. The dominant idea that only the state and institutions have the power to promote social order, and the idea that only men can lead is debunked by their participation as BPSO volunteers. Through participating in such tasks, women become agents of the government to reinforce the safety

of their community. They integrate their identity as mothers by doing rounds throughout the community as they enforce the community curfew among children and other community members.

Performing their duties as BPSO volunteers also allow them to engage in chikahan enabled by the formal space of their Barangay Outpost. Contrary to the popular culture that women have no space outside their homes, the Women of Magandang Lugar exhibit ownership over their Barangay Outpost where no one can threaten their safety because they themselves raised funds to establish this, and since this is also where most of their organizational activities are being held.

Other organizational activities include managing and operating the Roman Catholic masses in their community twice a month. The Women of Magandang Lugar play an important role in religious activities since they make the Roman Catholic masses more accessible to their community by organizing this celebration in a space within their community, the nearby basketball half-court. They also have events, tasks, and interests that go beyond their usual religious activities. They participate in the celebrations of fiestas and even join barangay-level competitions with their children. Zumba, livelihood activities, community pantry, community kitchen, distribution of ayuda, clean-up drives, and participation in barangay raffles are also some activities that were identified by the Women of Magandang Lugar. Whenever they prepare for these activities, they also engage in chikahan.

They reinforce the idea that women, like men, have such power and agency, and their collective movement and participation that is anchored in their everyday lives is an act of resistance. Hendessi and Higelin (2019, p. 3) stated that:

[S]afe, inclusive women-only spaces where women can come together to develop

their leadership, agency, and collective capacity are a vital element in supporting women to define and drive their own protective needs. By doing so, the power to plan and implement community-based protection activities is shifted to the women affected by the crisis.

The Women of Magandang Lugar, through their activities, hinged on it being women-led and community-based, can protect and empower each other to fulfill their roles as mothers, wives, and organizational members despite experiences of marginalization and even violence. This is crucial in their struggle for agency, and peace from violence against women.

### ***Created Space***

During the ‘Chikahan Map’ in the participatory workshop, the Women of Magandang Lugar identified the safe and unsafe spaces in their community, especially for their chikahan. They said that this always happens in *eskinitas*<sup>6</sup> and outside Margo’s house, wherein they could talk about finances, their partner’s attitudes, and other life advice. Margo stated that because they are always together during organizational activities and chikahan, they are already familiar with each others’ behavior. Maris added that if they have misunderstandings with someone in the group, they directly talk to that person for resolution.

Women of Magandang Lugar participate in spaces where they freely speak—resisting the dominant culture of silence. Particularly, the created chikahan spaces are organic spaces which emerge out of sets of common concerns or identifications [mentioned above] and may come into being as a result of popular mobilization, such as around identity or issue-based concerns, or may consist of spaces in which like-minded people join together in common pursuits (Cornwall, 2002 as cited in Gaventa, 2006, p. 27).

It “simply involv[es] natural places where people gather to debate, discuss, and resist, outside of the institutionalized policy arenas” (Gaventa, 2006, p. 27). Gaventa (2006, p. 27) added, “those who create [the space] are more likely to have power within it,” as observed with the Women of Magandang Lugar.

### ***Alternative Definitions of Everyday Life***

Most of the time, the Women of Magandang Lugar talk about their reproductive work as mothers and wives with their friends as per the participatory workshop. Marya said chikahan is an enjoyable pastime activity for them. It is when they cook, eat, and talk about their household concerns together.

Felski (2000) considered the home as a highly gendered space. It is a place of female “subordination”, but it can be transformed into a site where women can exhibit their power within and show their strength and competence in their reproductive roles.

In the context of the Women of Magandang Lugar, their significant alternative homes are their chikahan spaces where they feel safe, and physically and emotionally comfortable. These spaces allow people to feel supported and respected. As mentioned, the chikahan spaces identified include alleyways that are hidden, allowing for more discreet conversations, and outside Margo’s house because it is comfortable and spacious. It is also a space where they are comfortable with their companions and where they are willing to open up. Margo identified that communication could be a great avenue to address issues. So aside from having their homes where they master reproductive roles, these alternative homes also serve as a foundation of their agency.

### ***Feminist Organizing***

Drawing from the popular cultures reflected in their community and the forms of resistance that are manifested by the Women of Magandang Lugar, it can be inferred that chikahan does not just provide them an avenue to talk about their troubles. Below are some examples

of how these are manifested.

According to Tannen (1990), mutual support stems from the similarity of matching experience. This means that women talking about their troubles become a form of bonding among themselves. There is also a sense of intimacy and femininity that can be attributed to mutual support. *Reciprocal self-disclosure* is also present among the women as a manifestation of this support. Specifically, matching troubles, and repetition of syntactic patterns, keywords, and phrases (e.g., use of the words *Marites*, *resbak*<sup>7</sup>, and *chikahan*) are present, as well as physical touches that symbolize oneness and sympathy to their friends. Additionally, one-on-one conversations where victim-survivors are able to confide in their friends are also present. Because of these, there is a shift from women pertained to being mere victims into victim-survivors who are capable of employing effective coping survival and resistance strategies (Proffitt, 1996). For the closing activity of the participatory workshop, the Women of Magandang Lugar wrote inspirational notes they can share with the women and victim-survivors in their community. This mutual support is a positive first step in reclaiming their agency on VAW and how they can challenge the system that perpetuates this.

While there are imminent everyday threats to the safety of the Women in Magandang Lugar, such as being in the same household as their perpetrator, the Women of Magandang Lugar continue to exhibit resistance against these. As a BPSO volunteer and a survivor herself, Margo shared that she can provide comfort and protection to women who are abused through her willingness to let them stay at her home while waiting for the barangay response team. Maribeth, as the barangay coordinator, said that she had been approached by women in the community multiple times to ask for help; she shared a specific case where she safely hid the victim-survivor before the barangay officers arrived to respond. These responses serve as an opportunity for the Women in Magandang Lugar to

find safety and protection in the presence of these volunteers.

Aside from providing mutual support and protection to others, the Women of Magandang Lugar have configured mechanisms to create their own safe spaces or what they call “*tambayan ng mga Marites*.” For their chikahans, they have chosen physically safe alternative homes within their community, such as comfortable spaces far from fast-passing vehicles and the main roads. From the ‘Contribution to VAW’ portion of the participatory workshop, the participants determined their responses if someone asked for help. In these spaces, they can share their personal stories with the individuals they trust the most, and in turn, their friends give them good moral advice—“sharing is caring.” They also mentioned the importance of not spreading entrusted stories to other people. They also believe that they are empowered to *resbak*, especially for the victim-survivors of Magandang Lugar. Despite the negative notion of this behavior, they concluded that *resbak* is not necessarily to fight someone right away or “*away[in] agad*.” Instead, it simply means being there for one another and making sure that no one is left alone. Just as importantly, they will refer and assist the victim-survivors to their barangay coordinator to help them report their case to the Barangay VAW Desk.

Furthermore, the chikahan of Women of Magandang Lugar also exhibits conscientization, which Freire (1970), describes as a process of having critical consciousness or awareness of the reality that shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality. It is the ability of the oppressed to understand their reality and oppression in all its forms as they have become desensitized to it. In the context of the Women of Magandang Lugar, it is seen that they understand their experiences of violence inflicted by men as inhumane and therefore unacceptable. They also said that some victim-survivors became martyrs who would endure everything for their children and family. This is a dark period in the lives of Marya and Margo, and possibly of more women

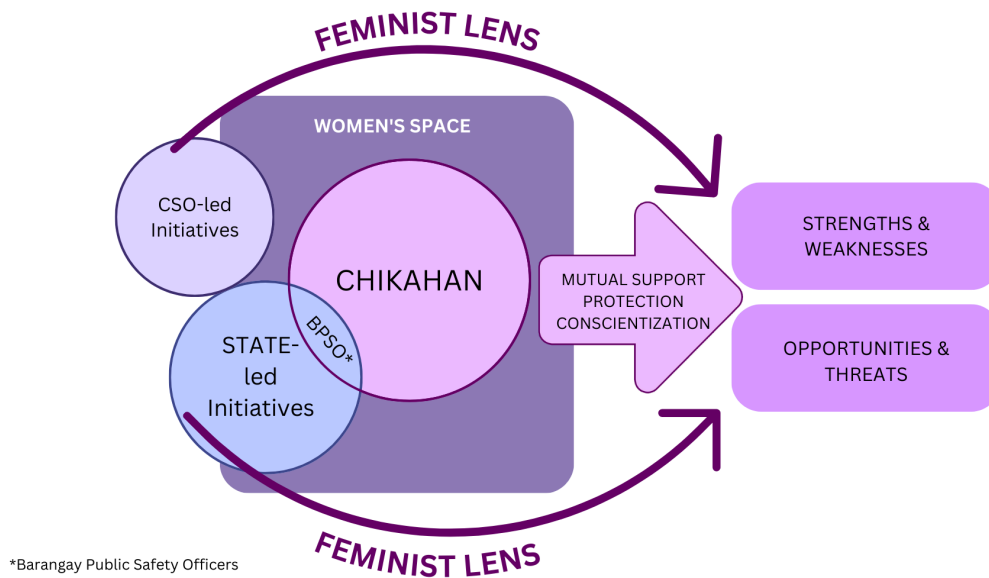
in the community and the country with untold stories.

Now stronger, *palaban* (defiant), and empowered due to their past experiences, Women of Magandang Lugar have identified that for women to be free, they should be equal to men, should not be seen as “*pangkama o pang-display lang* [for sexual pleasure or for display only],” and should not be abused or used as “punching bags” by their partners. Marya emphasized that men have no right to abuse or even hurt their partners. In this very nature, the Women of Magandang Lugar are now able to reject objectification and sexual abuse by fighting back and speaking of their power, showing that they are not weak. This is expressed by Marya who “*naramdama[n] [a]ng tunay na [pagka]babae noong pinaglaban [niya] ang kanyang karapatan* [felt the true meaning of being a woman when she fought for her right].” With the hopes for the women in the community to attain their freedom and safety, the empowered Women in Magandang Lugar are willing to share their past experiences to empower others. They also lead responses to similar situations in their community. The habit of *chikahan* contributes to women’s consciousness-raising. These “are seen as opportunities...where citizens can act to potentially affect policies, discourses, and relationships that affect their lives and interests” (Gaventa, 2006, p. 26). The women’s participation in these spaces can “strengthen [their] collective power to act” (Hendessi & Higelin, 2019) to generate women-led community-based protection mechanisms for themselves.

## Organizing and Creating Safe Spaces for Women to Heal, Build Solidarity, and Take Action Against Violence

Figure 1

*Conceptual Framework*



To respond to issues of VAW, we looked into state-led, CSO-led, and women-led community-based initiatives. Because of the gaps in the state-led initiatives and different CSOs, women-led community-based initiatives, we explored the chikahan of the Women of Magandang Lugar. The intersection between state-led and women-led community-based initiatives includes the BPSO with its volunteers who are the Women of Magandang Lugar. As mentioned, while doing their volunteer work, they also engage in chikahan. Their chikahan included the elements of provision of mutual support, protection, and conscientization. Through the feminist lens, we assessed the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) of the chikahan space and its elements:

**Table 1**

*SWOT Analysis of Chikahan Space and its Elements*

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Established organization with officers and consistent activities</li> <li>• Physical location of their <i>tambayan</i> and outpost is easily accessible to most if not all members</li> <li>• Relationships among members are strong enough to encourage the participation of others</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Weaknesses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low participation of other organization members</li> <li>• Disappropriate number of organizational activities and active members</li> <li>• Lack of financial assets and as a result, weakness in the design and implementation of organization programs and projects</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Opportunities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychological First Aid Training and/or Feminist Care Workshop</li> <li>• Establishment of a temporary shelter as a preventive measure for immediate cases of VAW</li> <li>• Educational Discussions on women’s rights</li> <li>• Couple Gender Sensitivity Training</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Threats</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blue guards that are red-tagging the women in Magandang Lugar</li> <li>• Community members who stigmatize the <i>chikahan</i> of the women in Magandang Lugar</li> <li>• Drug addicts that are suspected to do “usual crimes” at night during the shift of BPSO volunteers</li> </ul>

Presented are the identified internal and external factors of chikahan space and its elements of mutual support, protection, and conscientization through the Feminist Lens. On the organization’s human resources, relationship-building was found as a strength, but relationship-deepening was a weakness. Opportunities for empowerment through learning activities were also determined. These are challenged by the threat to safety in Magandang Lugar. From this, we suggest the collaboration of all actors involved in successfully countering VAW not just in Magandang Lugar, but in the whole country.

Community-based organizations, therefore, must not be perceived merely as a means to easily access ayuda. Instead, they must move towards transformational changes rooted in the power within its members. The Women of Magandang Lugar has already established an active organization, however, there are still many opportunities to consider to counter VAW in the community.

Chikahan is already embedded within their culture as women in Magandang Lugar and as members of their organization. From this culture of chikahan, the Women of Magandang Lugar are already taking steps towards helping victim-survivors, as Lunas

Collective states that listening is the first step to doing so (Gacad, 2020, as cited in Cepeda, 2020). They may consider creating a more formalized support system to enable victim-survivors, even those who are not part of their organization, to externalize and express their survivorship. The Samahan ng Kababaihan ng Magandang Lugar has also shown their capacity to create spaces with the establishment of their Barangay Outpost. Similarly, they may organize initiatives to raise funds for a temporary shelter for victim-survivors who remain unsafe from their perpetrators, which Maribeth also envisions. Women of Magandang Lugar who engage in their created spaces may be empowered and in turn, empower others.

The power of the Women of Magandang Lugar may also be catalyzed by others to support the success and sustainability of safe spaces for women. Involvement is essential for other community members to understand the current threats that women experience and the benefits of their created spaces for them. Moreso, safe spaces created for women are evidently intertwined with the community dynamics, therefore, they must not be treated as a separate entity, but rather “an extension of broader community life” (UNFPA, 2015, p. 7).

Empowerment may also be achieved through women-led activities such as Educational Discussions that explain their rights as women, Psychological First-Aid Training and Feminist Care Workshops as guides for caring for themselves and others, and other similar learning activities. They may also organize Couples’ Gender Sensitivity Training that is made open for other community members of Magandang Lugar. These women-led and community-based initiatives may serve as measures in countering VAW cases in their community, showcasing their inherent power to influence people and society’s behavior.

These recommended mechanisms, spearheaded by the Women of Magandang Lugar for their community, exhibit that women-led community-based organizations may work

with the support of CSOs who already implement such projects. These partnerships may build and utilize machinery to advocate justice for victim-survivors. Because of the potential of their women's organization, the negative perception of chikahan is now transformed into an empowering means of sharing their matching struggles, reinforcing their collectivism and resistance to the oppressive dominant culture.

## **Conclusion**

VAW is prevalent in the country. We conclude that responses to issues of VAW are not limited to legislation and programs that protect the interests of women. Through the struggles women continue to face, they stratify various mechanisms for empowerment, resistance, and reclaiming their agency.

Women of Magandang Lugar have already established an organization with innate strengths for resistance and protection against oppression. One mechanism they use is chikahan, which is integral in their everyday lives and is amplified by their 'power within.' Their organization's 'power within' each other is a basis for further empowerment of its members and other women, through the inspiration and influence of empowered women in the community.

We believe that women are capable of transforming more spaces into their alternative homes, just like their chikahan spaces. Women of Magandang Lugar are able to solidify and establish these spaces into genuine safe spaces for women. This is essential for those who are yet to find that space and those who continue to adhere to the culture of silence due to fears they may have. Pushing forward the everyday spaces led by women to be truly transformative for their communities exhibits the women's 'power to' "exercise agency and to realize [their] potential of rights, citizenship, or voice" (Gaventa, 2006, p. 24).

To conclude, women, girls, communities, and the country should sustain conversations about women's power and experiences, and promote dialogues recognizing the value and productivity of chikahan in countering VAW. With this, there must be a paradigm shift highlighting her-stories—not only to validate it, but to inspire and empower victim-survivors and other women to speak up about their experiences. As the title of this article states, "*Mga mare, marami pang chika*"—there is still a lot to talk about, stories are unending, which is why chikahan is here to stay.

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## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Magandang Lugar is used as a pseudonym for the privacy of the community in Quezon City that was studied.

<sup>2</sup> A portion of the actual name of the organization containing its location was changed for privacy reasons.

<sup>3</sup> From the Spanish word ‘chismis’ meaning gossip.

<sup>4</sup> Short for “*Mare, ito ang latest*” (Girl, this is the latest news). It is associated with a person who is all ears and in the loop with all the latest gossip or new information (De Leon, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Hired security personnel that aims to protect privately owned properties from individuals who would want to occupy the area illegally.

<sup>6</sup> Filipino term for alleyways.

<sup>7</sup> Filipino slang that comes from the words ‘wrest back’ which means retaliate or to avenge something or someone. In this case, what is being taken back through retaliation is the dignity of a person who was maligned, offended, insulted, or physically harmed (Limos, 2019).