

Fighting for Their Right to Food and Education: The Case of Lakas ng Nagkakaisang Kababaihan Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

Glennie Marie M. Sina-on
Precy D. Dagooc

Abstract

This paper presents the experience of Lakas ng Nagkakaisang Kababaihan sa Barangay UP Campus (Lakas, Inc.), an all-women people's organization based in Pook Aguineldo, Barangay UP Campus, Quezon City. This paper utilizes the story of Lakas, Inc. to inspire other women-led people's organizations in addressing food insecurity and education-related challenges, brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, which are experienced in the household and community levels. Lakas, Inc. built an urban vegetable garden and a community learning hub as solutions to their problems. Further, this paper reveals the following: a) Structural Social Work and Feminist Social Work provide the realization that the problems of women in Pook Aguineldo in Barangay UP Campus in education and food are best understood if social structures that produce and maintain inequality and personal hardships are analyzed; b) Food security is attainable when there are food and land sovereignty, whereas, community learning hubs can be sustained when the land where they are built is secured; c) Feminist Social Work and Empowerment Theory tell us that the key to the Lakas women's success in organizing is when they recognize that women are capable of making decisions and of utilizing each individual member's strengths to start a collective action and d) that Community Organizing can take place in the middle of a pandemic.

Keywords: pandemic, right to food, right to education, digital divide, neoliberalism, Feminist Social Work, Structural Social Work, Empowerment Theory, Community Organizing

Introduction

Background of the Study

The Philippine economy shrank significantly after the country was recognized as one of the fastest growing economies in the world in 2019 (Mendoza, 2021). No less than 12 million people from the National Capital Region (NCR), people from different walks of life, most specifically those belonging to the vulnerable sectors, were immediately affected. The Philippines' economic model itself was found to be particularly vulnerable to disease outbreaks. It is built around the mobility of people, yet tourism, services, and remittances-fed growth are all vulnerable to pandemic-induced lockdowns and consumer confidence decline (Mendoza, 2021).

In the 2021 year-end report of the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), the country's unemployment rate grew at 6.6% from 6.5 as reported in November 2021. In other words, there were 3.27 million unemployed persons in our country in December 2021, up from 3.16 million during the preceding month.

Less than half (33.9%) of the Philippines's unemployed persons belong to ages 25 to 34, followed by age group 15-24 at 28.9% and most are males (PSA, 2022). Both age groups are believed to be an individual's prime years in terms of economic productivity. However, the statistics showed that people who belonged to these age groups mostly comprised the unemployed sector during COVID-19 pandemic.

From November to December 2021, five sectors experienced employment shed-off (PSA, 2022). First in the list was (1) the fishing and aquaculture sector. This was followed by (2) other service activities, (3) education, (4) public administration and defense, compulsory social security, and (5) information and communication (PSA, 2022).

Transportation services which fall under the service sector were severely hit during the pandemic. As soon as most modes of public transportation were suspended early on in the pandemic, jeepney drivers were seen begging on the streets, trying to ask for help to make ends meet. Some even had to live in their jeepneys (Simeon, 2021). As of October 2020, more than 100,000 jeepney drivers were jobless, as the Land Transportation Franchising and Regulatory Board (LTFRB) was yet to reopen their routes (San Juan, 2020). Within the University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman community, the UP-Transport Group—an alliance of four different jeepney routes in the UP Campus—took the initial hit when their vehicles were immediately grounded as public transportation was barred from plying their daily routes. Jeepney drivers in UP were seen appealing for help along the campus' streets like C. P. Garcia, right outside their residences in Pook Aguinaldo in Barangay UP Campus, Barangay Krus na Ligas, and other adjacent barangays. Since jeepney services were forced to stop, workers and commuters had difficulty in finding vehicles for daily transport. "This is no longer just a matter of our livelihood but the role of public transportation to help our dying economy," said Mody Floranda, national president of transport group Pinagkaisang Samahan ng mga Tsuper at Opereytor Nationwide (PISTON) (San Juan, 2020). In addition, being banned from operation was just one problem. Jeepney modernization was yet another challenge—one that was even more unimaginable during the pandemic where drivers lost P500 to P700 of their daily income (Cabrera, 2020).

The jeepney drivers in UP, most of whom were males with roles as husbands and breadwinners, could not put food on their family's table during the months-long lockdown. Consequently, their wives had to find strategies to fill this gap. Again, women came to the rescue of their respective families—women who already carry most of the burden in sustaining the household needs particularly food and nutrition, as well as the monthly water and electricity bills and house rental. Food and financial aid from the government came late, forcing some to break health protocols in order to earn money, or demand immediate aid from the Barangay UP Campus for the 14,000 households within their locality. The Barangay itself had to find other means to provide for the community as the mayor's office was also stockpiling food supplies to provide for the entire Quezon City population.

Ranked third among the sectors that experienced employment shed-off was education (PSA, 2020). This was the result of banning children and youth as well as school employees from coming to school during the pandemic lockdowns. UNICEF (2021) reported that 214 million children globally had missed more than 75% of their face-to-face learning for an entire year. By mid-2022, the Philippines was one of the remaining countries worldwide that had not resumed in-person classes since the pandemic began, affecting the right to education of more than 27 million Filipino students (UNICEF, 2021). How could Filipino children even maximize

the benefits of remote learning when 57% of the households or roughly 23 million Filipino households, according to the World Bank (2020), did not have internet access?

In 2015, those aged 14 and below, who made up 28.56% of the population (N= 47,127 as of 2020 Census) of Barangay UP Campus (PhilAtlas, n.d.), were among those expected to be enrolled even during the pandemic. However, many of them were forced to stop studying despite the shift from in-person classes to blended and remote learning. This was because they had no gadgets, they had to help earn money, their homes were not conducive to learning as they were in crowded places, while some suffered from mental and health issues. This validates the observation of the UNICEF Philippines representative Oyunsaikhan Dendevnorov that “learning loss, mental distress, missed vaccinations, heightened risk of drop out, child labour and child marriage are associated consequences of school closures” (UNICEF, 2021, para. 6, lines 3-5).

As narrated above, the predicament of both women and children during the pandemic was evident globally and nationally, even down to the level of the barangay. This paper shall present how the women leaders and members of Lakas ng Nagkakaisang Kababaihan ng Barangay UP Campus or Lakas, Inc., an all-women people’s organization, responded to their issues on food insecurity worsened by job loss as well as the negative consequences of school closure that directly affected their children.

Statement of the Problem

This study focused on answering the following questions:

1. Why did some women in Pook Aguinaldo in Barangay UP Campus choose to organize themselves to address the issues surrounding food insecurity and remote education?
2. What processes took place in the formation of Lakas?
3. In what ways does the experience of Lakas affirm Empowerment Theory, Feminist Social Work, Structural Social Work and Community Organizing (CO)?

Research Objectives

The authors deemed it worthy to document the experience of Lakas as an all-women people’s organization (PO) that was born right when the COVID-19 protocols were reinforced at its strictest. The authors believe that studying the experience of Lakas would shed light on the application of Empowerment Theory, Feminist Social Work, Structural Social Work and Community Organizing. Overall, this study aims to:

1. Present how some women in Pook Aguinaldo in Barangay UP Campus addressed their problems regarding food and their children’s remote education by organizing themselves to become Lakas, Inc.
2. Discuss the processes which Lakas, Inc. went through from its establishment to its present circumstances.
3. Show how the actual experience of Lakas affirms Empowerment Theory, Feminist Social Work, Structural Social Work and Community Organizing (CO).

Significance of the Study

What is in the story of Lakas for the Social Work profession? One of the values of Social Work could inform the readers why the authors would like to showcase how Lakas women responded to food insecurity and remote education. Social Work upholds that *“Each person has the obligation, as a member of society, to seek ways of self-fulfillment that contribute to the common good”* (Mendoza, 2022, p. 115, para. 3, lines 1-3). It will be discussed below how the women came to their families’ rescue when their husbands could no longer bring food to the table during the height of COVID-19 pandemic. Later in this paper, it will be shown that the women formed Lakas, Inc. as their own way of improving their conditions. They proved that women understand their *“obligation to seek ways of self-fulfillment that contribute to the common good”* because they did not only act on the needs of their respective households but thought of the struggles of their community as a whole during the pandemic.

The story of Lakas women is here to remind social workers the *“need to shift emphasis from the one-on-one mode of helping people to more mass-oriented, community-based practice in order to reach a greater number of disadvantaged people”* (Mendoza, 2022, p. 489, par. 1, lines 6-10). Lakas as a people’s organization started with individual mothers who felt problems at the household level. The traditional Social Work methods are casework, group work and community organization (CO) (Mendoza, 2022, p. 230, par. 1, lines 3-5). During a pandemic, the case of a stay-at-home mother of five kids with a husband who suddenly became a victim of retrenchment due to COVID-19 is typically considered for casework by social workers. One most immediate casework intervention for the mother is to check whether she and her family is qualified for the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) of the Philippine government where she could receive cash and in-kind assistance amounting to 5,000-8,000 per month for two months (Aceron, J., 2020, par. 3., lines 1-2). While resource provision is necessary during times of crises, using one Social Work method and providing only a one-time financial assistance, might not be sufficient to solve the problem.. This is because a client that qualifies for SAP is a multi-problem client. The multi-problem client is usually in need of economic assistance, skills training, informal education, psychosocial services including counseling, nutrition and healthcare services. Therefore, it is best if a social worker applies a wholistic approach in problem solving, particularly by working as a Generalist Social Work Practitioner (GSWP). Ensuring that a family has food while under strict community quarantine due to COVID-19, by receiving SAP for instance, may be a social worker’s task during casework but ensuring that a whole community has available and accessible sustainable food, through a productive urban garden for instance, is a social worker’s task during community organization (CO). The GSWP does not stop at problem-solving in the individual and/or household level but even works at mobilizing and organizing community members who eventually realize that their household-level concerns are caused by unequal distribution of resources and power in the society. This paper appreciates *“total problem solving”* as one of the concepts underlying the GSWP. The *“generalist practitioner sees the client as part of the social system which causes/affects his/her problem and recognizes that he/she cannot be of real help if he/she ignores such system(s)”* (Mendoza, 2022, p. 217, par. 2, lines 1-6). Food insecurity and an education of questionable quality during COVID-19 pandemic are not individual/household problems but are community/societal problems, hence, a social worker must work as a GSWP, in other words, work at all levels - micro, mezzo and macro. In summary, Lakas, like any other people’s organizations, is one of the many client systems that social workers in the Philippines work with. More than a client system as an organization itself, Lakas is also composed of individual clients struggling during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The formation and experience of Lakas amidst the pandemic, though they lack a professional Social Worker that guides them all throughout and despite that what they only have is a full-time Community Organizer from Kaisa Ka Youth (more details are presented below), makes a great contribution to Community Organizing (CO) as one of the primary fields and settings of Social Work. On top of this study's affirmation of the Social Work values and the Generalist Social Work Practice (GSWP) as mentioned above, another purpose of writing the story of Lakas, Inc. is to document the experience of an all women-led people's organization to further contribute to the literature regarding organizing during the pandemic, the adverse effects and gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to explore what social workers and social development practitioners can do to help sustain POs such as Lakas, Inc.

Lastly, this study is intended to be disseminated to the public because the women-residents of Pook Aguinaldo, Barangay UP Campus believe that sharing their organization's story would allow them to somehow be heard especially by the UP Administration, the government, social development practitioners who can be potential partners and sponsors, and by their fellow budding POs. They believe that the story of Lakas, Inc. could be another organization's learning.

Review of Related Literature and Studies

Hunger and the Right to Food during COVID-19 Pandemic

Since 2020, millions of Filipinos had been forced to reduce their food consumption due to job loss and financial troubles (Simeon, 2021). The hunger rate reached an extraordinarily high of 21.2% during the pandemic but IBON Foundation reported that food insecurity was already being experienced by roughly 46 million Filipinos even before COVID-19 hit. (Simeon, 2021). Ironically, the UN claims that the right to food is vital for the realization of many other rights, such as the rights to health and life (ESCR-Net, n.d.) The World Health Organization (n.d.) presents that, when discussing the right to food, a country or state must take note of two concepts: (1) food security, which means the sustainability of food access for both present and future generations, and (2) food sovereignty, which means the right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture systems. Further, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) noted, during their 20th session in Geneva on the 26th of April until 14th of May 1999, that the right to adequate food includes the following interrelated and essential features which serve as guide for States in fulfilling their obligation to respect, fulfill and protect the people's right to food (UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights report, 1999, pages 3-4). A simple and straightforward description of the four essential features of the right to adequate food is presented on the International Network for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR-Net) website. The network wrote the features as follows:

- Adequacy. The food available for consumption must be appropriate in the prevailing social, economic, cultural, and environmental context (ESCR-Net, n.d. para. 4, line 1).
- Availability. Everyone should be able to obtain sufficient, quality food either through market systems or directly from land and other natural resources (ESCR-Net, n.d. para. 4, line 3).
- Accessibility. Access to food involves three key elements:

- non-discrimination, economic accessibility, and physical accessibility (ESCR-Net, n.d. para. 4, line 8).
- Sustainability. States must ensure, through the development of appropriate measures and regulation of private actors, that practices impacting on food, land or natural resources do not jeopardise the long-term availability and accessibility of food (ESCR-Net, n.d. para. 4, line 15).

This literature gives us an idea that the majority of households and communities in the country are most likely experiencing food insecurity. Assessing whether people are able to enjoy their right to food is accompanied by answering the questions below:

1. Is food adequate?
2. Is food available?
3. Is food accessible?
4. Is food sustainable?

Digital Divide and the Right to Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The term digital divide refers to the growing gap between the underprivileged members of the society who do not have access to computers or the internet and the wealthy, middle class populations living in urban and suburban areas who have access (Stanford University, n.d.). This digital divide became even more pronounced in the Philippines during the pandemic. Pre-pandemic, internet access was a luxury, while during the pandemic, it became vital. However, 40% of Filipinos found mobile broadband rates expensive, according to the USAID Better Access and Connectivity Project; and a wide gap was observed between internet users in NCR and in Mindanao, with 65% and 32%, respectively, being internet users out of the total surveyed respondents (Ibrahim, 2022). The digital divide depends on several factors like location, income, household size, age, gender, physical ability, and education but in the case of the Philippines, the biggest factor would be affordability and availability of internet access points (Ibrahim, 2022).

Since the digital divide is a problem, the right to education was barely fulfilled, especially during the pandemic. According to UNICEF, at least 29% of primary students were not reached despite plans to provide remote learning, due to a lack of the needed technology. In 2020, the schools in other countries were closed for only an average of 79 teaching days (UNICEF, 2021), but Philippine schools were closed for almost two years to date. Research shows that a positive school experience predicts a child's future social, emotional, and educational outcomes and that the number of years a child spends in school directly affects his or her future earnings (UNICEF, 2021). One of these studies is that of Badri, M., et al. entitled, "The Effects of Home and School on Children's Happiness: A Structural Equation Model" (2018). This study reiterated Al-Yasin's (2001) findings that "the lack of happiness and joyfulness has a significant influence on students' personality growth and might affect their intelligence, thinking skills, creativity, and educational achievements" (Badri, M., et al., p.1, para. 1, line 9). Further evidence that backs up UNICEF's statement that "the number of years a child spends in school directly affects his or her future earnings" is Patrino and Psacharopoulos' blog entitled "Strong Link Between Education and Earnings" published on World Bank Blogs in 2018. They said that "education is generally associated with higher earnings due to productivity" (Patrinos and Psacharopoulos, para. 8, line 2). However, due to the implementation of lockdowns due to COVID which led to school closures which, in turn, made the digital divide much more evident, the right of

children to education—attending physical classes, gaining positive school experiences, face-to-face learning with teachers and peers, and not falling behind—was being further violated.

Furthermore, the lockdown triggered a confusion among parents regarding their roles as teachers during the pandemic. “They [parents] have a hard time forcing their children to answer modules because the kid isn’t intimidated by their parents. The way a teacher encourages is very different from how a parent would,” teacher Johnnalie Consumo said in an interview with Time (De Guzman, 2021, para. 15, lines 1-3). Despite the Department of Education (DepEd) adopting a blend of remote-learning options, i.e., online platforms, educational TV and radio, and printed modules, social inequalities and the lack of resources at home to support these approaches posed extreme challenge to both students and teachers (De Guzman, 2021, para. 11, lines 1-4.).

In summary, related literature and studies inform us that indeed, food insecurity and education-related challenges were the biggest monsters that further “mutated” into worse forms during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Community Organizing during the COVID-19 pandemic

The case of George Floyd who was murdered by a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota on May 25, 2020, which was allegedly due to extreme racial discrimination, brought millions of activists to the streets (McClure, 2021, para. 1-3). Eventually, COVID-19 impeded the activists because they could not do in-person meetings, but they took advantage of digital organizing. Tenants United, a collective which is based in Chicago, had a similar experience. They were inspired to take on new ways to inspire change despite the coronavirus. They conducted digital organizing using Zoom. They realized that synchronous meetings were convenient. COVID-19 did not stop them from organizing to address the fact that many tenants suddenly found themselves unable to pay rent (McClure, 2021, para. 6, lines 1-3). Moreover, #LetUsBreathe Collective, one of the people-led organizations that emerged in Chicago during the height of the pandemic, repurposed one of its spaces, called the Breathing Room, to serve as a food-distribution hub and expanded its garden and farm on the site, one of their ways to address the struggles of their community members who could not afford to buy groceries and pay rent (McClure, 2021, para. 53, lines 1-5).

Like the United States’ experience of economic downturn during the pandemic, the Philippine government eventually became “strapped for cash” because the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) was not enough to cover 17.7 million Filipinos living in poverty as we all as the more than 4.5 million homeless individuals. But contrary to the popular notion that the urban poor families are “only waiting for *ayuda*”, many residents managed to create ways of mobilizing to respond creatively to the pandemic. A paper in Southeast Asian Community Responses by UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) Program on Alternative Development shows evidence that the urban poor are “not idle players” waiting for government support or subsidy (Luna, F. 2021, para. 7, lines 1-2). In fact, there are community-led efforts organized by civil society organizations and people’s organizations (PO) like Alyansa ng mga Samahan sa Sitio Mendez, Baesa Homeowners Association, Inc. (ASAMBA) which conducted their own relief operations within their community from their own funds, Kabalikat ng Kaunlaran sa Baseco which has an urban garden since 2010 that made the group able to distribute vegetables to families even during quarantine, Nagkakaisang Mamamayan ng Legarda

that used hydroponics for communal gardening which became their main source of food, and Save San Roque Alliance in Sitio San Roque, North Triangle, Quezon City that established its Eskwela Maralita project, a community learning center that had the intention to ease the challenges that Filipino parents encounter with modular lessons (Luna, F, 2021, para. 8-17).

Women Leaders in the time of COVID-19

Oxfam International (2023) reported in their website that there are five ways how women and girls have been the hardest hit by COVID-19. First, women are overrepresented in the sectors of the economy that have been hardest hit, such as the accommodation and food services. Second, women are excluded from quality healthcare and education. Third, women comprise 75% of all unpaid care work in the world. Fourth, women are typically the ones responsible for the purchase and cooking of food for their own households and yet food insecurity is higher for women than for men. Fifth, there is a 33% increase in intimate partner violence in some countries and in gender-based violence as a whole. Despite these, Oxfam International stands by the belief that women's rights organizations must be supported to advance women and girls' rights and that women should lead the way. (Oxfam International, 2023, para. 1-16). In the Philippines, women are hardest hit during calamities like the COVID-19 but according to UP CIDS, the community of ASAMBA (Alyansa ng mga Samahan sa Sitio Mendez, Baesa Homeowners Association, Inc.) saw that women spearheaded their social protection initiatives. Women were responsible for monitoring the observance of physical distancing in their community. Women watch village portals to control who goes in and out. It's the women who know how to deal with the authorities. "Women know how you have to maneuver around authorities because that's women's role in a very patriarchal way", according to Mary Racelis, a research scientist from the Institute of Philippine Culture (Luna, 2021, para. 44-49).

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Social Work

The main subject of this study, Lakas, Inc., is an all women-led organization. The birth of the organization came upon the women-members' realization of their rights that were being challenged during the COVID-19 pandemic. The women realized that they had been having difficulties on where and how to secure food to put on the family table. They had been having a hard time thinking how to make sure that their respective families survive the pandemic, especially when their husbands lost their jobs, and their children needed the necessary nutrition to get through the daily demands of remote education. These were the daily struggles that the women were faced with. At the end of the day, they had the right to feel secure. Feminist Social Work asserts that women are capable of making decisions for themselves in all aspects of their lives (Dominelli, 2002). This paper is anchored on Feminist Social Work which asserts that women are capable of looking for collective solutions to individual problems (Dominelli, 2002). How the Lakas women devised "collective solutions to individual problems" is presented in detail under the Discussion and Analysis of Results section.

Empowerment Theory

It is inevitable to touch on empowerment theory when discussing feminist Social Work. Empowerment has long been incorporated into most practice approaches (Lundy, 2011). In

feminist Social Work, empowerment is both a goal and a process and has an action component. The creation of solutions by the Lakas members exactly demonstrates how empowerment was both a goal and a process for them. This is discussed in detail below.

Structural Social Work

It was repeatedly mentioned above that Lakas, Inc. was a product of the struggles of, essentially, mothers in a community that was badly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic—particularly with regard to health, food security, livelihood, and education. The lead author believes that, in order to understand why the Lakas women resorted to creating solutions to address food insecurity and challenges to their children's education, Structural Social Work concepts and assumptions are to be borne in mind. Structural Social Work tells us that a person's life circumstances and problems are connected to his/her economic and social standing in society and that social work intervention at both the level of the individual and social structures is necessary (Lundy, 2011). The lead author, as a social worker, believed that the Lakas women's needs could only be met if the latter came to recognize the institutional formations and existing relationships that may be serving as barriers. Later in this paper, the experience of Lakas, Inc. is explained using Structural Social Work.

Community Organizing (CO)

Community Organizing or CO is one of the primary methods of social work that needs to be revitalized and re-thought especially that it has been suggested that the very survival of social work needs a reclaiming of community practice or CO (Lundy, 2011, p. 260, para. 2, lines 2-3). Community Organizing has the following characteristics.

1. It brings people together who directly or indirectly have common interests.
2. It utilizes a democratic process for decision making and participation.
3. It engages in an educational process that builds on existing knowledge and skills of members.
4. It brings about "change, to reduce or eliminate exploitation, oppression and alienation (Lamoureux, et. al., 1988 as cited in Lundy, 2011, p. 262, para. 1, lines 1-7).

This definition of CO by Lamoureux, et.al. is what informed the authors' narration and analysis of the organizing experience of Lakas. Below, the authors gave particular attention on the story of how some women in Pook Aguinaldo engaged their fellow women who have been systematically disadvantaged especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 shows that this study aims to present how some women in Pook Aguinaldo in Barangay UP Campus addressed their problems namely (i) the need to satisfy their right to food and (ii) the need to satisfy their children's right to education while at the height of COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 pandemic caused job losses especially among breadwinners as well as challenges that Filipino parents had to face regarding the abrupt shift from their children's face-to-face classes to remote learning e.g., modular and online education. In the Introduction above, it was established by the authors that most family breadwinners are husbands. Since the husbands were mostly the ones who lost jobs and livelihood during the implementation of community quarantine, the wives were left to think and act about the family's survival during

the pandemic.

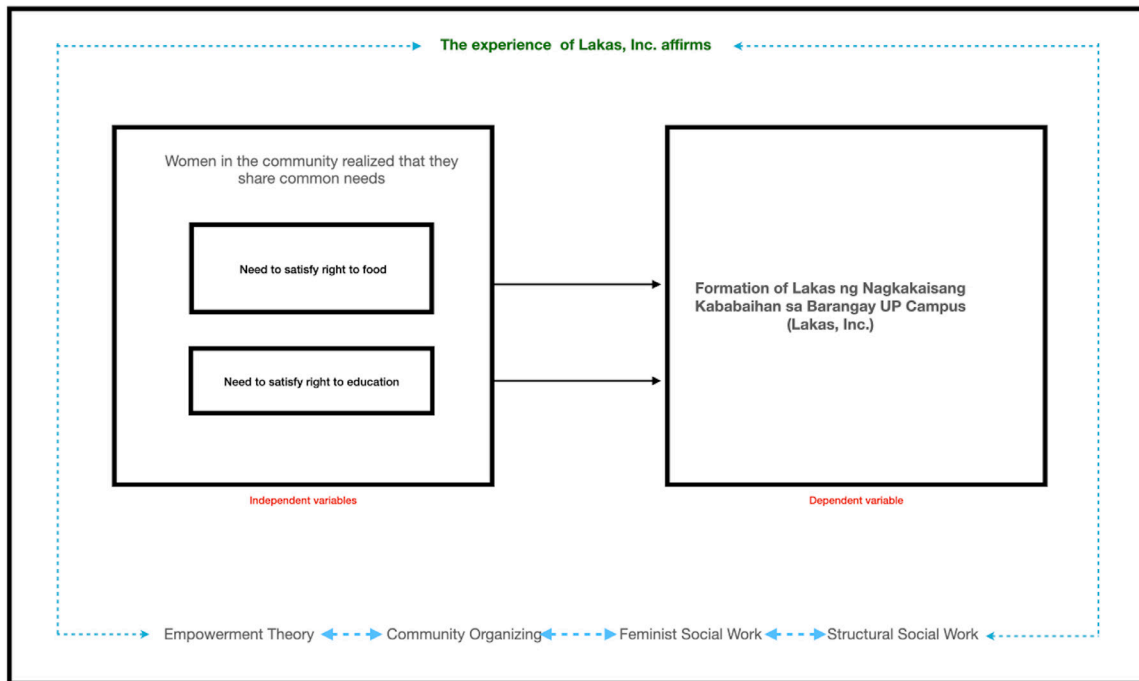


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Further, the figure above shows that it is still the mothers who problematize their children’s challenges regarding the shift in learning modality in their schools. These independent variables are being examined in this paper because women saw that they share common needs and problems which led them to organize as an all-women people’s organization named, Lakas, Inc. As illustrated above, this paper shows how the experience and practice of Lakas affirm the principles and assumptions of Empowerment Theory, Feminist Social Work, Structural Social Work and Community Organizing. *The four theoretical perspectives are connected by double headed arrows because the theories are not just affirmed by the story of Lakas, but the theories can also inform the analysis of the organizing story of Lakas, Inc.*

Methodology

Research Design

This research utilized case study as the primary research design to explore and analyze the experience of how the women-residents of Pook Aguineldo organized and mobilized themselves to collectively address the lack of food and the challenges around their children’s modular and online education. A case study refers to the collection and presentation of detailed information about a particular participant or small group, more commonly including the accounts of subjects themselves (Becker, B. et.al, 1994-2023, para. 2, lines 1-3). Case studies are considered as a design of inquiry that includes in-depth analysis of a case, usually a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals (Creswell, 2014). The case study as a research design is the more often selected strategy when how and when questions are asked.

Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in Pook Aguineldo, Barangay UP Campus, Quezon City, particularly with the members of an all-women people's organization named Lakas ng Nagkakaisang Kababaihan sa Barangay UP Campus also known as Lakas, Inc.

Data Collection

There are six types of data collected in case studies - documents, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation and artifacts (Becker, B. et.al., 1994-2023, para. 42, lines 1-7). The authors of this study collected two. First, the authors collected documents such as Accomplishment Report on the Barangay UP Campus Community Learning Hub, Kaisa Ka Youth Organization Briefer that contains: (1) initial information on how Kaisa Ka Youth organized Lakas, Inc.; (2) background on Lakas, Inc.'s first General Assembly in which the women identified their priority issues, and the challenges of remote education that were being faced by the children and their mothers; (3) the story behind the development of the Community Learning Hub and the *gulayan* (Filipino translation of the term 'urban garden') and (4) encoded narratives or *salaysay* of some Lakas members namely Nanay G, Nanay C, Nanay B and Nanay D. The *salaysay* was one of their exercises in the PO and these were submitted to their community organizer. The *salaysay* is entitled "*Ang Kwento ng Aking Buhay Nang Dumaan ang Pandemya*" (Story of My Life When the Pandemic Happened). The second data collection method was in-depth interviews. The lead author interviewed (1) the Community Organizer of Lakas named Precy Dagooc (co-author of this article) on February 15, 2022, and (2) two officers of Lakas on February 19, 2022. Only those who were available joined the in-depth group interview. During that time, most of the Lakas members were either scheduled to do *Bayanihan* clean-up at the Parish of the Holy Sacrifice in UP Diliman Campus or go to work as some of them belong to the service industries that had recently resumed the face-to-face work scheme.

Moreover, the accounts of the research participants regarding the *gulayan* (urban vegetable garden) and the Community Learning Hub were validated through the lead author's actual visit to the sites.

Profile of Participants

Shown below is the brief profile of the participants of this study:

1. Nanay A, aged 29, is a daughter of a UP employee who had been serving as a utility personnel for three decades up to the present. Nanay A was serving as the President of Lakas, Inc. as well as Vice President of the Volunteers Barangay Public Safety Outpost (VBPSO).
2. Nanay S, aged 33, was serving as the Treasurer for Lakas, Inc. and was working for Barangay UP Campus as the Area Coordinator for Pook Aguineldo.
3. Precy Dagooc, aged 33, has been serving as Lakas, Inc.'s Community Organizer (CO) since 2020. In addition, she used to be an organizer for UP Manila, DLSU, DLSU-CSB & St. Scholastica Friends of Hanjin Workers, Kaisa Ka, Kilusan Para sa Pambansang Demokrasya, Youth for Nationalism and Democracy (YND), Kaisa Ka Youth Philippines in UP Diliman, and Alternative Politics (a multisectoral electoral machinery of Kilusan) in UP Diliman and the entire district of Quezon City).

To protect their privacy, the authors used “Nanay A” and “Nanay S” to refer to the research participants. On the other hand, the community organizer, Ms. Precy Dagooc, consented to have her name spelled out in this paper, especially since that she also served as the co-author of this paper. Further, Ms. Dagooc was the one who shared the secondary data used for analysis.

Selection of Participants

Since the authors believe that this study is an illustrative case study, which means showing what a situation is like, in this case, the organizing story of Lakas, Inc., the authors used purposive selection of research participants. A story about Community Organizing would make sense if accounts from the organizer herself and the subjects of organizing were collected, analyzed and presented. Moreover, the individuals who participated during the in-depth interviews signified their interest and willingness to share the story of Lakas because for them having an article written about Lakas could help them get their message across to the UP Administration since their biggest challenge at the time was that the *gulayan* (urban vegetable garden), which they built to address hunger in the community, was built on a UP-owned land. Since it was located in a university property, Lakas could not develop nor expand the *gulayan* without securing the needed permits, which they could not do as the PO members are illegal residents at Pook Aguineldo. Having no permit also meant that Lakas could not install a water facility at the *gulayan*, not even nearby, thus posing a threat to the sustainability of the project. Ms. Precy Dagooc, Lakas’s community organizer, expressed that Lakas members would be very much willing to help in the completion of the study especially if it would mean getting their appeal heard by the University.

Research Instruments

Asking semi-structured/unstructured questions was the preferred strategy to make the participants feel free to respond as well as lead the discussion as they wanted. In addition, this paper aims to showcase the learnings from and the actual experience of women in collective action. Thus, it is only most appropriate that the research tool used is “characterized by flexibility and sharing of power between interviewer and interviewee” (Mukherji & Albon, 2015, p. 155, para. 2, line 1). In addition, to deepen the interview, the lead author used “following responses” as an interview technique. Nonetheless, below are some of the questions that were actually asked:

- a. How did Lakas start? When was it formed?
- b. Did the idea of forming Lakas spring from the women-residents themselves or spring from the suggestions of the community organizer or from the *samaaralan* sessions in which the women used to join?
- c. Who were the first members of the core team that spearheaded the official establishment of Lakas?
- d. What made the women gather together?
- e. What made the women realize that they need to form an organization?
- f. What are the processes that the women need to undertake to form Lakas?
- g. What did the women take to establish a *gulayan*?
- h. What did the women take to establish the Community Learning Hub?
- i. Does the organization have officers? How did the election and general assembly take place?

- j. Is Lakas recognized by the barangay and by the government of Quezon City?
- k. Who are Lakas's partners? Who has been helping Lakas?
- l. What are the next steps for Lakas?

Limitations of the Study

This paper utilized an illustrative case study of only one PO; hence, the authors do not claim that results are generalizable among people's organizations in the country which are newly formed during COVID-19 pandemic.

This study also had a relatively small number of participants during the data collection. The lead author did not conduct interviews regarding the life stories of individual members, instead, she focused the data collection on the story of Lakas, Inc. - how it started, how it was formed, its past and current undertakings and how the women feel about themselves, their organization, their tasks, their accomplishments and the future challenges that they have to face.

Discussion and Analysis of Results

Lakas, Inc.: Its Beginnings and Its Role in Addressing and Mitigating Hunger during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Barangay UP Campus was doing its best to provide food security among its constituents, particularly by ensuring that *ayuda* (the Spanish word for "assistance") is provided to all 14,000 households. All barangays, especially during the pandemic, played a vital role in the delivery of social services, most especially, in ensuring that their constituents would not die of hunger. However, providing *ayuda* was definitely not a sufficient measure to say that the government was fulfilling its obligation to protect Filipinos' right to adequate food. *Ayuda* was just a stop-gap measure to appease the hunger pangs of Filipinos during the pandemic. In this view, the national government down to the barangays was falling short based on the definitions of food security and sovereignty. First of all, the national government could only provide one-time financial assistance (*Rappler*, 2021) to local government units (LGUs) which then used this for cash or in-kind *ayuda* to their constituents. This was enforced by the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) through Circular No. 136 Series of 2021 also known as "Guidelines on the Release and Utilization of the Financial Assistance to Cities and Municipalities in the NCR and in the provinces of Bulacan, Cavite, Laguna and Rizal that were placed under Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ)." By implementing "one-time assistance," the DBM was contradicting the concept of food security which refers to sustainability of food access for both present and future generations. The one-time *ayuda* did not even last for two weeks upon receipt. Second, the Circular mentioned that an LGU was allowed to provide P4,000 per family. This guideline did not consider that family size varies and is especially large in low-income communities. This also meant that this DBM Circular itself contradicted the features of the right to adequate food, namely, adequacy, availability, accessibility, and sustainability. Food insecurity had already been an issue before the pandemic and COVID -19 only made it worse. Third, there is no food sovereignty when there is lack of land sovereignty. Land sovereignty is the right to have effective access to, use of, and control over land and the benefits of its use and occupation, where land is understood as resource, territory, and landscape (Borras Jr. & Franco, 2012). Most families in Pook Aguinaldo do not own the land they occupy in Barangay UP

Campus. So, even house repairs and renovations cannot be done without the approval of the UP Office of the Vice Chancellor for Community Affairs. A community garden may prove useful for the community members' daily survival, but land use becomes an issue since the land which they planned to till is owned by the University and they never know when they will be evicted from their residence. Fourth, food security, food sovereignty, and the features of the right to adequate food are all hard to fulfill since the Philippine government has yet to accept and adopt a Structural approach in addressing hunger problems and poverty at their roots.

The task of addressing hunger is too overwhelming for the barangays if not for NGOs and people's organizations sharing their resources. The Local Government Code of 1991 legalizes this collaboration between the LGU and NGOs. In the case of this paper, two people's organizations had been especially helpful to Barangay UP Campus during the pandemic. These were Youth for Nationalism and Democracy (YND) and Pagkakaisa ng Kababaihan para sa Kalayaan (Kaisa-Ka) Youth-Philippines. Both consider themselves as political youth and women centers that recognize the immediate, short-term, and long-term needs of the community.

YND community organizers pushed for the formation of the UP-Transport Group (TG) Alliance to collectively present their needs for food and financial aid to government offices, particularly the Office of the Vice President and other philanthropic and humanitarian groups. To advance their political and economic rights, the UP TG and Samahan ng mga Tsuper at Operator Tutol sa Phase-Out (STOP-WPL) wrote letters to the Quezon City LGU and succeeded in securing a meeting with Mayor Joy Belmonte to discuss their situation and needs. They also wrote letters to the Land Transportation, Franchising and Regulatory Board (LTFRB) and the UP Administration to secure QR codes and a new route in the campus. This initiative became successful and even the women in Pook Aguinaldo were provided with food aid, although very limited as they were unorganized.

As a result, Kaisa Ka Youth initiated a general assembly of the women of Pook Aguinaldo to form a local women's organization, which came to be called Lakas ng Nagkakaisang Kababaihan sa Barangay UP Campus (Lakas, Inc.).

Before the holding of the general assembly, preparatory work had already been laid out for the formation of Lakas, Inc. The idea of being organized and the women's initiative to provide food not just for their respective families but also for the whole community had come up during informal chit chats or *kumustahan* with each other. Nanays A and S had been neighbors for decades along with the other eventual members of Lakas, Inc. Even before the pandemic, every household was already growing vegetables in plastic containers as an attempt to survive to augment their food supply. However, during the pandemic, the homegrown vegetables became the main source of sustenance as many of the breadwinners, who were the husbands of several Lakas members, were affected by the stoppage of jeepney operations as the pandemic wore on. The day came when these informal conversations among the women in the community turned into planning about how to make the household-level backyard gardening much more sustainable and long-term for the whole Pook. Since the female community organizer (CO) of YND and Kaisa Ka Youth was their neighbor and since they had been in contact with Kaisa Ka Youth from the time the latter had conducted a workshop on September 23, 2019, entitled "Masin-zineang Usapan" that tackled young women's take on current issues, Kaisa Ka Youth had been extending aid to the women in Pook Aguinaldo.

A general assembly (GA) was then held in September 2020, giving birth to “Lakas, Inc. sa Barangay UP Campus” or Lakas, Inc. During the GA, the members identified the top problems in the community, among which were: 1) lack of food; 2) difficulty of children and parents to cope with the demands of blended learning; and 3) joblessness. Among the solutions they identified to address these problems were: 1) urban farming and application to the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE)’s Tulong Panghanapbuhay sa Ating Disadvantaged/Displaced Workers (TUPAD) program; 2) tutorials, community-based internet connectivity plan; and 3) livelihood projects.

As of this paper’s writing, Lakas had 37 members and they had elected their first set of officers – President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer, two (2) Press Relations Officers (PROs), and an Auditor. Aware of the protocols and guidelines of the COVID-19 Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) and Barangay UP Campus, Lakas initially held rotational meetings in a member’s house and maximized Facebook Messenger as their main communication platform. Eventually, they felt freer to use the Volunteer Barangay Public Safety Office (VBPSO) post or office hut, since the protocols began to loosen up and because several Lakas women were serving in the VBPSO, so the hut was practically theirs.

Lakas Women’s Capacity Building and Resource Generation Experience

Lakas women were clear with their goal to set up a community garden which would supply their daily food and help augment the family income during the pandemic. With the help of the community organizer, Ms. Precy Dagooc, Nanays S and A enrolled in the Training on Vegetable Seed Production conducted by the Department of Agriculture (DA) through the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI) and the Bureau of Plant Industry (BPI) on September 28-30, 2020. The activity was about seed production, handling, quality control, distribution, and plant propagation. After the successful training, and with the help of the community organizer, the Lakas women received their first net, shovel, rake, and other gardening start-up tools. Fortunately, a rice farmer volunteered to provide a portion of the land he was tilling for the women to establish a full-fledged urban farm. As of February 2022, Lakas had four rice paddies with a three-year contract with the DA and the DA-ATI. Eventually, male workers were encouraged to do the same and so Lakas at Ugnayan ng mga Manggagawa sa Pook Aguineldo was established—with both men and women planting vegetables. Below are photos of Lakas women during their first harvest of lettuce.



Photos from left to right: A pail of freshly harvested lettuce; Lakas women while harvesting; a tarpaulin that marks the *gulayan* in the area

Lakas, Inc.'s first harvest happened in February 2021. They had red sili, eggplant, tomatoes, green sili, alugbati, pechay, Chinese kangkong, okra, and lettuce. They had three rounds of harvest until the rainy season came in September 2021. Nanays A and S said that 10% of their harvest went to the households and families in their Pook while 90% was sold to generate income. Their harvest was also sold to UP professors who are residing in Hardin ng Rosas. Out of the households that benefitted from 10% of the harvest, 7% paid while 3% got the vegetables for free. This was because Lakas, Inc. had an understanding with the community that: (a) those who can pay should share and (b) households should only get what is enough for them so that there will be left for those who are in dire need. The objective was to ensure that no household would be left behind. Nanays A and S also shared that their income out of the *gulayan* was used to pay for the Community Learning Hub's utility bills. When asked how much they produced per harvest, they said that they were able to fill a large pail with red sili (chili), had one and a half sacks of pechay, had 40 kilos of okra, and for the rest of the vegetables, they lost count. They were even able to contribute to the community pantry.

Lakas Inc. was also able to reach the women of a nearby Pook, Pook Area-17, who were organized under the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). Lakas and Kaisa Ka Youth helped form the KAISA KA Area-17 chapter and tapped the DA-ATI to help establish their urban farming project. Later on, the Barangay UP Campus Chairperson, Ms. Zenaida Lectura, visited their garden and helped provide, through the help of the "Joy of Urban Farming Office," seedlings and potting soil mix. During that time, Chairperson Lectura, together with a DSWD representative and a DA-ATI Agriculturist, discussed the possibility of entering into a formal institutional partnership and to sign a Memorandum of Understanding.

During the height of the community pantry initiative, Lakas Inc. and Kaisa Ka Area 17 also set up and sustained community pantries in their respective Pooks. The community pantries operated from May to July 2021 and were able to provide food, groceries, and vegetables from their *gulayan* to not less than 1,000 households. The DA-ATI, along with the Jessie Robredo Foundation, also added tons of vegetables to the pantries set up by Lakas, Inc.

By June 2021, both organizations, Lakas Inc. and Lakas at Ugnayan ng mga Manggagawa sa Pook Aguinaldo, launched the formal partnership with the DA-ATI under the Plant, Plant, Plant Program. Kaisa Ka Youth also helped the organizations process and submit the documents required to apply for the DOLE registration. DOLE accreditation would help them directly access (without endorsement of the District Congressman) the Department's TUPAD and Integrated Livelihood Program (DILP) programs. Their application for TUPAD (Tulong Panghahanapbuhay sa Ating Disadvantaged/Displaced Workers) was endorsed by DOLE Quezon City Field Office. The women had successfully lodged their application in DOLE National Office in Intramuros and they were told to monitor the status of their application by giving them the office's telephone number. Lakas women persistently followed up on their application. However, they were told that DOLE National Office's TUPAD did not have adequate funds anymore and that the funds were lodged under the Congressmen. The women were told to try asking for help from Congressmen instead. Consequently, Lakas women went to the office of Congressman Jesus "Bong" Suntay of District 4 Quezon City. After several tries, the women were told that their application for TUPAD could no longer be accommodated since Congressman Suntay's funds were already allocated for other applicants. However, Lakas women learned from Cong. Suntay's Purok Coordinator that the real reason behind why their

request did not make it to Cong. Suntay's beneficiaries was that the Congressman's priority was the "people under his wings". The Community Organizer said,

"Tapos sumunod naman pumunta kami sa Purok Coordinator ni Cong. Suntay. Ang sabi niya uunahin daw muna niya ang mga tao ni Cong. Ganun din ang sinabi ng isa sa mga Secretary ni Cong. Suntay nung pumunta kami sa opisina nila. Bumalik kami sa DOLE sabi nila tiyempo po kasi kayo na mayroong fiasco sa District 3 TUPAD Distribution may balita noon na ginagamit ng mga politicians ang TUPAD for corruption, may mga hindi totoong benepisyaryo at may mga binibigyan na may mga trabaho naman." (Then we went to Cong. Suntay's Purok Coordinator. H/she said that the people under Cong. Suntay will be prioritized. The same was relayed by one of Cong. Suntay's secretaries. We went back to DOLE and they said that it was a bad timing for our application because there was a fiasco in the TUPAD distribution in District 3 (Quezon City) - there were people benefitting from the program but were supposedly not qualified since they had jobs.)

Despite their efforts to comply with the requirements, Lakas women experienced being disadvantaged and disenfranchised.

In October 2021, five Lakas members started training with the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) on Organic Agriculture Vegetable Production (OAVP). The on-farm training ran for a total of 15 days, with a teacher from TESDA conducting the training sessions right in the Lakas farm or *gulayan* thrice a week until November 2021.

Lakas women's Experience as Affirmation of Feminist Social Work

Women accounted for the 44% of the employment losses in the country during the second quarter of 2020 (Ibañez, 2021, para. 10, lines 1-3). Likewise, during the Enhanced Community Quarantine which took place during the second quarter of 2020, a few of the Lakas women lost their service jobs. This resulted in their greater involvement in caring for their households, which was exactly how Ibañez (2021) described the phenomenon, "the labor force exits are massive among women which is the result of women's greater involvement in caring for their household members which is also known as care burden" (para. 13, lines 1-3). For the Lakas women, their care burden was worsened by hunger, lack of income, their children's difficulty in coping with remote learning, and the unpredictability of life brought about by the constantly changing COVID-related protocols issued by the government.

The formation of Lakas, Inc. and the creation of the community *gulayan* were results of the women's initiative to address hunger experienced within their respective families. They were aware that their husbands who had lost their source of income due to the pandemic needed to be supported, and they knew that they needed to act for their families to survive through the health crisis.

Not only did the women in Pook Aguineldo realize their role in securing income and food for their families' survival, but they also understood that what their own families were experiencing during the pandemic was a reality being experienced in the community up to the national levels. Thus, their seeking the assistance of Kaisa Ka Youth to formalize and materialize

their plans as well as to organize themselves as a people's organization was a process undertaken by the women of Lakas to convert women's private troubles into public issues through feminist social action. This also tells us that the women of Lakas are trying to break the traditional social and cultural gender norms. In other words, through the conscientization work and support provided by their organizer, Kaisa Ka Youth, Lakas women learned that their work and responsibilities are not limited to the home and that they can offer long-term solutions to shared problems in their community.

The experiences of Lakas, Inc. can be cross analyzed through the principles of Feminist Social Work as well as the Empowerment Theory. As mentioned in the Theoretical Frameworks section of this paper, recognizing the diversity of women and valuing women's strengths are two feminist Social Work principles (Dominelli, 2002, p. 162-163). Lakas women know that the women in Pook Aguineldo, and even within their organization of 37 members, vary in terms of what each can contribute. During the interview with Nanays S and A, they shared that the *gulayan* was open to everyone in the Pook. But in order for the *gulayan* to be available and accessible to everyone, those mothers who have the capacity to pay are encouraged to do so, while those mothers who cannot pay still get their share, though only enough for their family's meal. Further, Lakas women value each other's strengths by identifying each member's interests, willingness, and openness to take on different roles in the organization, alongside their reproductive and productive roles. As of this writing, the youngest member is a 27-year-old mother while the oldest is 59 years old. They belong to different family life stages, thus, some of them are nurturing small children, while others are already in the "empty nest" stage with more time to participate and volunteer in community activities. Some women are willing and confident to be directly trained by service providers and partners. Others prefer informal peer-to-peer training and coaching. Some are now experts in seed production while others volunteer as tutors at the Community Learning Hub. Some Lakas women are now skilled in terms of fund-raising and partnership development. All these were made possible since the members collectively studied their situation and took note of what each woman could offer, complementing each other.

Lakas women, as well as their community organizer, uphold two more feminist Social Work principles, namely: (a) "considering women as active agents capable of making decisions for themselves in all aspects of their lives" (Dominelli, 2002, pp. 162-163) and (b) "democratized structures and processes" (Hyde, 2013, para.13, line 49). The experience of Lakas Inc. in its assertiveness and in its collaboration with DA-ATI, TESDA, the University of the Philippines-Diliman, the Jesse Robredo Foundation, Barangay UP Campus, and some fellow POs such as STOP-WPL and Lakas at Ugnay ng Manggagawa sa Pook Aguineldo is a fitting example of how networking and relationship building work as central components in feminist Social Work practice. Lakas women not only paid attention to processes but also to the product of their efforts in networking and relationship building. In addition, after their CO, Ms. Precy Dagooc, facilitated the participation of two Lakas officers in the training conducted by DA-ATI, Lakas, Inc. has since become independent in making decisions for itself as an organization. They are equipped in decision-making and knowledgeable on what to do, assessing what resources are available or not, and networking with stakeholders with whom they can partner, seek support from, and serve. When the women saw that their *gulayan* harvests were plentiful, they also recognized that they needed to share the bounty in the form of a community pantry.

With the continued guidance of their community organizer, Lakas, Inc. expressed that

they want to sustain their *gulayan*, which is why they secured a permit from the UP Office of the Vice Chancellor for Community Affairs as well as their three-year grant as a beneficiary of the Plant! Plant! Plant! Program of the Department of Agriculture (DA). These are the steps that they took to achieve their aim—a sustainable urban garden. To reiterate, sustainability is one of the four key features of the right to adequate food and one characteristic of “food security.” Lakas women became educated on why the pandemic had worsened their community’s food insecurity. They came to the realization that they needed to continue their *gulayan* even after the pandemic, and that this would only happen if they continued to nurture their PO and its initiatives. Thus, they are looking for more sustainable solutions, rather than relying on stop-gap measures. Nanays A and S shared that their PO has ongoing talks on putting up a store that sells rice, cooking oil and eggs, part of their organization’s sustainable development activity. This is how the Feminist Social Work principle of “looking for collective solutions to individual problems” (Dominelli, 2002, p. 163, para.1, line 1), is perfectly applied.

Lakas women’s Experience Affirms Empowerment Theory

The women of Lakas have grown in developing critical awareness of their household and community’s situations beginning from the onset of the pandemic, which perfectly demonstrates the Empowerment Theory. The women realized that they needed a set of skills that would complement their goal of setting up an urban garden to address food insecurity. Then gradually, this process helped them realize that to have a greater degree of control over their individual lives, a personal and social change must take place. This was perfectly shown when the Lakas women chose to enroll in the trainings available at DA-ATI and TESDA. As Nanays A and S shared, “*Kami lang po yata ang galing sa mahirap doon o hindi nakapagtapos. Yung mga kasama namin, may sinasabi (sa buhay). Pero o ‘di ba, nakagraduate kami mula sa training.*” (It seems that we were the only ones who were poor and had not completed a college degree. Our co-participants seemed to be professionals. But see, we graduated from the training.)” The experience of the Lakas women shows that empowerment involves both an individual and a collective process.

Table 1 summarizes how the PO affirms Empowerment:

Table 1: The Experience of Lakas vis-a-vis the Empowerment Principles According to Rose, S.M., 1990

Empowerment/Advocacy Principles (Rose, S. M., 1990)	Definition of Each Principle (Rose, S.M., 1990)	Experience of Lakas, Inc.
Contextualization	Refers to acknowledging the social being of the client system and being open to the idea that “clients know themselves better than we do”	It was narrated above that when the women realized that coming together to address their household and communal concerns had to be formalized, they took the initiative of asking for help from political organizations like Kaisa Ka Youth, Youth for National Democracy and even UP students. The women knew that their issues on hunger and around their children’s modular education during the COVID-19 pandemic were issues that they could not fight alone and that they had to be guided by helping

		<p>professionals i.e., community organizers, community-based social worker to ensure that their efforts are well-directed. On the other hand, when the CO was asked, she emphasized that the women were the ones who thought of the idea of the communal vegetable garden, Community Learning Hub, helping other communities through putting up a community pantry, applying for DOLE TUPAD and other initiatives. The CO added that her only input was to advise the women about the application processes in the government institutions and other more technical tasks. The CO shared that she is amazed of the women's persistence and self-efficacy. The women are well aware of their inner strengths, weaknesses, as well as the opportunities and threats external to them.</p>
<p>Empowerment</p>	<p>Refers to externalization and critical questioning about contextual experience to facilitate the client system's social development and produce their desired outcomes.</p>	<p>It was narrated above especially by Nanay S that the communal vegetable garden is their best project yet. The women saw the importance of having an available and accessible source of food and a functional learning hub that ensures that their children are not left behind in terms of education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, the women realized that the pandemic is far from being completely over. Hence, they desire for their organization to continue existing and flourishing because they know that there will be other emerging problems in both the household and community levels which can possibly be addressed more accurately if they continue to work together as a formal and recognized people's organization.</p>

Collectivity	Refers to bringing people together to “mutually externalize and reflect upon previous or present feeling”, the origin of these feelings, and their relation to existing social structures such as family and schooling; also refers to collective consciousness raising which means people can achieve individual and social transformation	Lakas women were clear about the reason why they formed Lakas ng Nagkakaisang Kababaihan. This is because they carried the responsibility of taking care of their families and community. When their husbands lost their jobs, they felt and realized that they needed to step in and step up. Nanays S and A said that they needed to “rescue” their families from being hungry, first and foremost. Up to now, Lakas women are participating in educational discussions e.g. samaaralan that are being conducted by their partner organizations such as Ateneo’s Legal Aid Mission, Youth for National Democracy, AlterPol (Alternative Politics), and Kaisa Ka Youth because according to them, through attending these venues, they realize more and more that their individual problems are due to much more deeper root causes such as inequalities brought by corruption, classism, neoliberalism, gender discrimination and a lot more. Lakas women, up to date, know that their garden and learning hub are not enough measures of their success as an organization. Their organization shall continue to flourish if collective consciousness raising becomes a natural part of their organizational life and when it becomes their automatic response to every problem that they face.
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Lakas Women Meet the Digital Divide Head On

Aside from the issue on food, a big chunk of Pook Aguineldo’s population, the children and youth together with their parents, have also been greatly challenged by the consequences of online and remote learning which created the digital divide at the local level.

When Lakas members identified the top three priority issues of Pook Aguineldo, following food insecurity on the list were the problems that came along with their children’s remote learning. Further, as mothers, the Lakas women resonated with all the other parents who fill in worksheets on their child’s behalf. Indeed, the Lakas mothers’ sentiments on this matter reflected both local and global news about Filipino students lagging behind, as discussed in the Related Literature and Studies above. In response, the Lakas women made a move to fulfill their children’s right to education by creating the Community Learning Hub.

Lakas Women and Their Transition from Internet Sharing to Community Learning Hubs

During the general assembly, one of the main issues identified was sustaining their children’s remote learning. As such, the Lakas leaders sought the advice of a staff member at the UP-Information Technology Development Center (UP ITDC) who was a resident of Hardin ng Bougainvillea, an area also within Pook Aguineldo. The UP ITDC staff member was able to map out a connectivity plan and help identify the needs and costs for the community to establish its

own public Wi-Fi. However, the women-leaders backed out from the idea of spending money for internet connectivity since many already had cellphones and tablets which were provided by the Department of Education and a cheaper Wi-Fi connection was available, costing only P7.00 per hour. Further, since many of the women were finding it difficult to teach their children at home while struggling to make ends meet, they decided to gather their children in one place and teach them simultaneously once a week.

Kaisa Ka Youth and Lakas, Inc. applied to be a beneficiary of the Office of the Vice President (OVP) Community Learning Hub Program. Their application was approved in April 2021 but they had to wait for the actual commencement of their services because there was a surge in COVID cases at that time. Eventually, Lakas' 17 volunteer tutors were trained for one month under the auspices of the OVP Community Learning Hub Bayanihan E-Skwela team.

On December 11, 2021, the Aguinaldo Community Learning Hub (CLH) was formally launched, and classes began two days after. The CLH was the result of the concerted efforts among volunteers from Lakas, Inc., Kaisa Ka Youth, YND, Barangay UP Campus under the leadership of Barangay Chairperson Zenaida Lectura, VBPSO, and JCI Capitol Quezon City Chapter.

The Aguinaldo CLH is located in the VBPSO office, which is a hut standing along the main street when entering the Hardin ng Rosas along C.P. Garcia. JCI Capitol provided the resources such as the Smart TV, learners' kits, a thermal scanner, an alcohol dispenser, and a mini library including reference materials. They also raised funds and shouldered the repair cost of the learning hub (at P55,000.00). The Office of the Vice President provided the Aguinaldo CLH with 10 personal computers, five tablets, one android phone, two pocket Wi-Fi devices, one voice amplifier, one Globe at Home WiFi device, and school supplies good for two months.

The CLH program would not be a success without the volunteer tutors, mostly mothers, who run the daily operations of the CLH. However, their biggest concern at the time of this writing was securing approval from the UP Administration on their request to install floor tiles for the CLH. They said that the equipment wiring, cables, and plugs were in danger of being damaged by rats and other factors if the CLH remained without concrete flooring. The Lakas women feared that their request might be denied because of the existing issue on land ownership and tenure. Nonetheless, they continued their efforts on networking and alliance building with Barangay UP Campus, JCI Capitol, Kaisa Ka Youth, and Youth for National Democracy, and were prepared to engage in social action in case UP did not heed their request.

The CLH caters to 30 out of a total of 82 Grade 1 to 6 pupils residing in Pook Aguinaldo, as of February 2022.



Photo: Pook Aguinaldo Community Learning Hub

Understanding Lakas Women Using Structural Social Work

The problems of the Lakas women surrounding education and food are best understood by studying the social structures that produce and maintain inequality and personal hardships. The Lakas women are in constant learning (through *samaaralan*, a local term for collective learning) with *Kaisa Ka Youth*, *Alternative Politics Movement*, and *Youth for National Democracy (YND)*. These are political organizations that aim to address social problems and human rights violations by unsubscribing to neoliberalism and by looking for pro-poor and pro-people solutions through community organizing and collective action. Thus, the Lakas women were made aware that food insecurity at home and the direct consequences of the digital divide on their children were worsened by COVID-19 which, in turn, “has pulled back the curtain to reveal the power of brutal neoliberalism – and its global financial markets – in all of its cruelty” (Giroux, 2020, para. 36). As Giroux mentioned in his article, “The current pandemic is more than a medical crisis, it is a political and ideological crisis.” He said that we were suffering more in this pandemic because neoliberal governments denied the significance of public health and public good while cutting the budgets of the institutions that were supposed to provide the services for free. Millions of Filipino workers easily lost jobs due to retrenchment because neoliberalism introduced labor that was cheap with no respect for the people’s right to job security. Family breadwinners in Pook Aguineldo, who mostly belonged to the service sector, could not put food on the table not only because they had lost their jobs but because our country was suffering from the effects of neoliberalism—among which are de-industrialization, privatization, job outsourcing, and on the like, which “have deprived many working people of their security and dignity, making the aggrieved vulnerable to demagoguery” (Giroux, 2020, para. 4). Long before the pandemic, the Philippines had been predominantly influenced by a neoliberal ideology whose prevailing message is that those who are motivated to work have high chances to be employed, in other words, unemployment and poverty are viewed as individual responsibility. This also affirms Lundy’s (2011) statement, “...government and public discussions more and more are based on the ideology of blaming the victims for their poverty and misfortune” (para. 3, lines 4-7).

The way we attribute our problems to individual fault because the neoliberal ideology is deep-seated in us. We therefore lose our belief in social solidarities to address our shared issues which we believe are only personal inadequacies. Person-blaming as part of neoliberal ideology is also expressed in how the Philippine government approached the virus crisis. For example, whenever the COVID cases were on a surge, protocols become stricter and quarantine measures were tightened because, allegedly, people were not taking social distancing seriously, were not practicing proper hand washing, and were violating the “no more than 10 people in one place” rule—in other words, because Filipinos are “pasaway” (hardheaded). With this notion of individualism during the pandemic, the poor Filipino family that went hungry after receiving *ayuda* for only three times in 20 months of lockdown was left on its own. In addition, since neoliberalism had ingrained a competitive attitude in us, our government pushed for remote education even though many Filipino families are financially incapable of acquiring devices and learning resources, as well as internet connection, to support their children through this “new normal” way of learning imposed by the DepEd. On top of this, there is a lack of mitigating and support services and a lack of proper assessment and contingency planning to cushion the impact of remote education. More gadgets are needed especially in urban poor families and communities. Parents feel that they are unprepared for the new responsibility and not as capable and competent of assisting their children answer their modules, unlike their children’s

schoolteachers. Parents were challenged by their new pandemic-induced role of supervising their children's remote education. As Structural Social Work suggests, the problems being addressed by the Lakas women, were not just the lack of food on the table and the lack of gadgets and internet access to support their children's remote education, but were problems deeply rooted by neoliberalism which limit human functioning and exacerbate human suffering.

To reiterate what has been presented in the Theoretical Framework section, Structural Social Work sees that a person's life circumstances and problems are connected to his/her economic and social standing in society and that social work intervention at both the level of the individual and social structures is necessary (Lundy, 2011, p. 89-90, para. 4, lines 4-6). A social worker who uses Structural Social Work in response to a client's needs considers not only the material and social conditions of the client but also the social relationships and institutional formations that may be serving as barriers to meeting the client's needs (Lundy, 2011, p. 90, para. 2, lines 1-5). Lakas, Inc. did not have a professional community-based Social Worker to guide them but they have an experienced Community Organizer, Ms. Precy Dagooc, who took the Social Work roles of being an educator, enabler, advocate, intercessor and mediator, which helped Lakas women understand that there are societal structures that impede the improvement of their wellbeing and that in order for them to address their problems, they have to do it collectively. As presented above, the lack of land tenure and ownership posed a big threat to the sustainability of Lakas, Inc.'s community garden and learning hub. As long-time tenants of UP-owned property, the Lakas members' relationship with the University must be studied, their rights and entitlements must be identified, and a dialogue, between and among all stakeholders (i.e., tenants, Barangay, LGU, and UP) on their rights as well as their responsibilities, must take place. In addition, any social worker who would be working with Lakas, Inc., Pook Aguinaldo, and other barangays with the same relationship with UP, shall still be faced with the longstanding question, "Is the land Quezon City-owned or University-owned? Whose rights should be protected? Upon whom will responsibility fall?"

The story of Lakas gives us this takeaway that any social worker who might respond to the case of the Lakas women and Pook Aguinaldo using Structural Social Work approach should give emphasis on advocacy and social change as well as take on two general rules as identified by Moreau (1970):

1. To explore the socio-political and economic context of individual difficulties and to help collective personal troubles; and
2. To enter into a helping process that facilitates critical thinking, consciousness-raising, and empowerment (Lundy, 2011, p. 89, para. 1, lines 7-10).

In order to stay true to analyzing and addressing problems using a transformative (also known as radical change) framework, social workers should always aim for changing the social structures especially when these restrain and curtail them and/or their clients. For instance, social workers must enjoin POs like Lakas, Inc. to demand more state-funded welfare programs and services. We will be successfully practicing Structural Social Work if we advocate for a more inclusive, rights-based version of government programs such as DOLE's TUPAD and the DA-ATI for POs like Lakas, Inc.

Lakas, as an organization, has decided to further strengthen its ranks and sustain its community-led efforts. It is with hope and a commitment that they would continue to foster

critical thinking, consciousness raising, and empowerment in their all-women PO.

Lakas, Inc. Affirms Community Organizing

The CO experience of Lakas can be best viewed and analyzed using the spiral model of community action by Margie Bruun-Meyer as cited in Lundy, 2011, p. 265.

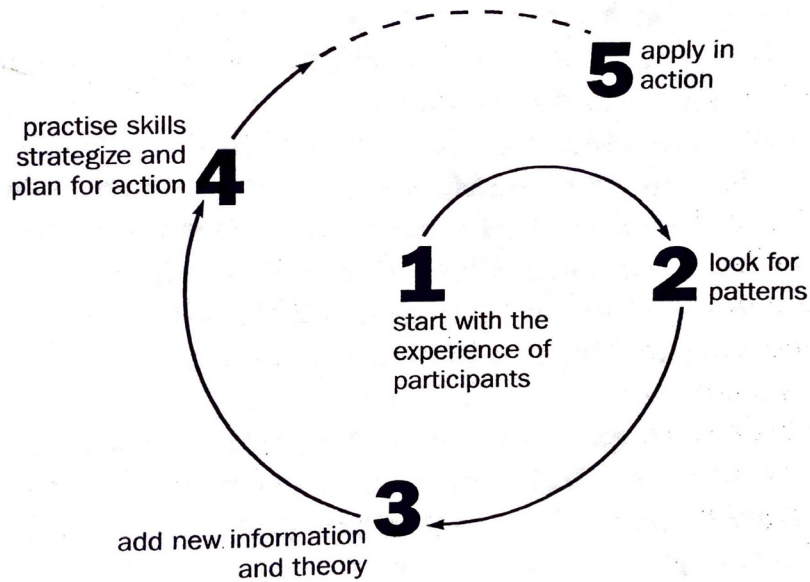


Figure 2: The Spiral Model of Community Action by Margie Bruun-Meyer/ (Art Work from Educating for a Change by Rick Arnold, Bev Burke, Carl James, D’Arcy Martin, and Barb Thomas (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1991). Cited in Lundy, 2011, p. 265)

This is an action and reflection model that guides the process of social action, a Community Organizing model. What the Lakas women did is a collective struggle toward social change. Below is a matrix that proves that the story of Lakas, Inc.’s formation is a story of community action:

Table 2: Making Sense Out of the Story of Lakas Using the Spiral Model of Community Action

Action-Reflection Steps	Lakas, Inc.’s Experience: A Summary
1. Start with the experience of participants	Lakas’s organizing story began when the women felt the effect of their husbands’ job loss and the challenges around their children’s modular education during COVID 19-pandemic. Women realized that they had to ‘come to their family’s rescue’. They realized that they needed to find ways of bringing food into their respective households if COVID-19 hindered their husbands from doing the same. In addition, as an implicit gender role expectation on them as mothers, Lakas women were having difficulty with helping their schoolchildren on their modules. They realized that if they could not be effective teachers to their children, in one-on-one mode, why not gather together and teach their children collectively in a community learning hub, wherein they could also invite volunteer teachers from outside of Pook Aguinaldo?

2. Look for patterns	Lakas women saw that the problems being experienced by one mother/wife is also what is being experienced by another mother/wife. Lakas realized that their problems on hunger and education cannot be resolved individually but collectively. Together, they attended educational sessions which helped improve their confidence, self-esteem, letter writing skills, facilitation and teaching skills, understanding on social issues, networking and advocacy. Nanays S and A, who attended the training of DA-ATI, realized that more people's organizations are out there, working collectively to address household and community issues. They used this knowledge to instill in their fellow Lakas women that they must form and sustain their own PO, which may continue on serving as their means and strategy in battling individual, familial and communal problems.
3. Add new information and theory	Lakas women, through attending educational sessions that were being conducted by their partner sociopolitical organizations, are continuously realizing that the 'personal is political', that individuals are not to be blamed solely for his/her own problems but that the problems are systemic. Lakas women also realized that women have the capacity to lead. They also realized that empowerment starts within them and that external change agents such community organizers serve as guides, but empowerment does not spring from people (external to their community) who help them.
4. Practice skills, strategize and plan for action	Lakas women saw that collective action produced the answer to their hunger which is the gulayan. Eventually, they also acted together to answer their problem on their children's education which resulted to the Community Learning Hub. They tried to enrich their CLH by applying to be a partner-beneficiary of the Office of Vice President Leni Robredo. Again collectively, they tried to supplement their gulayan by applying for DOLE-TUPAD. Despite this not materializing, Lakas embraces the importance of collective action in every endeavor. Lakas knows that collective action takes skills, will and perseverance. To date, they are looking for other activities that will promote their families' and community's wellbeing.
5. Apply in action	The women consistently and continuously applied all their learnings from their actual actions and experiences, from their sessions with their community organizer and from their educational sessions e.g., <i>samaaralan</i> in the development, management and sustenance of their organization.

Furthermore, the story of Lakas went through the phases of Community Organizing - (i) social preparation which includes identification of problems and making sense of the results of social investigation, (ii) leadership development and capacity building which includes identification of core members who will first be trained on certain skills and who will assume leadership and the responsibility of ensuring that the organization is slowly becoming a collective with a clear purpose, (iii) organizational development and management which includes coming up with organizational mechanisms, by-laws and officers and (iv) consolidation and expansion which includes resource mobilization, networking and advocacy. As narrated in detail above, although not perfectly, Lakas indeed underwent all the aforementioned CO steps.

A Summative Proof that Lakas Brings Life to the Combination of Feminist Social Work, Empowerment Theory, Structural Social Work and Community Organizing

Below is an illustration of the authors' claim that Lakas affirms the combination and collaboration of concepts and processes under Feminist Social Work, Empowerment Theory,

Structural Social Work and Community Organizing:

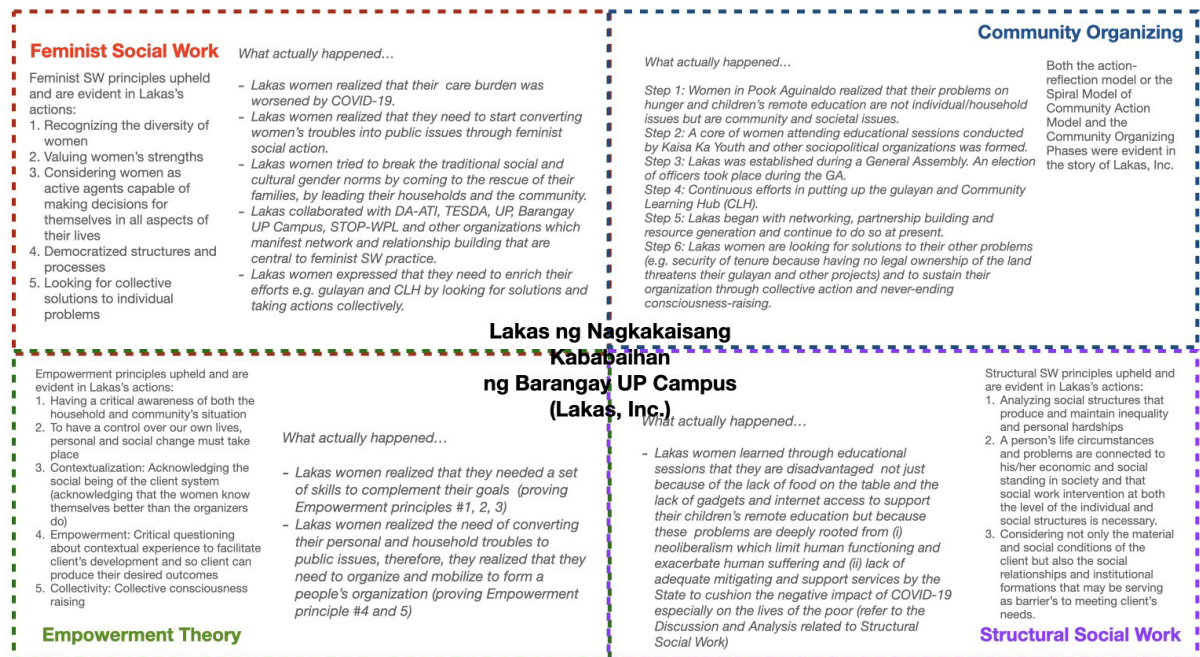


Figure 3. The Experience of Lakas, Inc. and its Affirmation of the Collaboration of Feminist Social Work, Empowerment Theory, Structural Social Work and Community Organizing

Conclusion

The story of Lakas shows that, during the world's worst crisis (to date), which is the COVID-19 pandemic, Filipinos have the willingness and capacity to go back to damayan (helping as a product of mutual sympathy and concern) and foster bayanihan (a spirit of civic unity and cooperation among Filipinos) because we realize that our problems are not personal but political. Second, Lakas's story proves that an individual who and whose family greatly suffers during a crisis can muster the initiative to look for ways to save herself and her family. This is proven by the principles and concepts of Feminist and Structural Social Work and Empowerment Theory and Community Organizing. Third, Lakas reminds us that Community Organizing is alive and is resorted to when people become aware that their concern is mutually felt and shared. Fourth, a community whose members study and analyze their problems together is capable of responding to their shared issues by tapping their potentials and utilizing their own resources. Again, this is proven by the principles and concepts of Feminist and Structural Social Work. Fifth, a future global crisis like COVID-19 could once again have disastrous social, economic, and political consequences beyond that of a public health calamity. With all these conclusions, a transformative approach (as seen from the discussions on how Lakas affirms the four theoretical perspectives) would best inform social work practice where practitioners recognize the importance of influencing people in viewing problems as not rooted from personal inadequacies but from social structures that exploit and dehumanize people. In so doing, we can in turn address these problems using the principles of Social Work such as social justice, social change, empowerment, and equality.

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