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

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Introduction

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

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

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

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

1. LGBT refers to a diverse and complex range of identities based on sexuality, gender identity, and gender expression. The term is used loosely in this paper to refer to all gender and sexuality non-conforming people, including but not limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons.

2. GALANG’s current organizing work involves only urban poor LBTs or lesbians, bisexual women, and trans men. LBT is distinct from LGBT in that the latter includes not only lesbians, bisexual women, and trans men, but also seeks to encompass a wider range of sexual identities including men who self-identify as gay, homosexual or bisexual; trans women or persons labeled as males at birth but self-identify as female; as well as persons who label themselves as transsexual, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual or celibate. GALANG’s leaders decided to focus on organizing poor LBTs for now despite shared issues and advocacies between LBTs and other sexual minorities—or for that matter, between rich and poor LBTs—to acknowledge and better address particular forms of oppression that target only LBTs living in poverty. Hence, GALANG tries to create and foster a separate safe space for economically disadvantaged lesbians, bisexual women, and trans men.
are more oppressed than gay men, and the organization espouses feminist values. GALANG has not always been focused on the label “feminist.”

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

Context

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

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

Protecting LGBT workers’ rights

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

The History of GALANG

GALANG started out in mid 2008 as a small group of lesbian friends who were either keenly observing or actively engaged in the LGBT activist community in the Philippines. Regular and casual conversations eventually turned into meetings about what else the group could do to concretely advance LGBT rights. As GALANG started out as a loose group of activists, leadership structure was not the group’s priority in the matter of hiring, treatment, promotion or dismissal in any office in Quezon City, and the anti-discrimination bill, claiming not only that the bill invited the wrath of God but also that it violated the equal protection clause of the Constitution (“House Human Rights Chair” 2006).

Indeed, religious texts have found their way into the popular anti-LGBT rhetoric surrounding formal proceedings of avowedly secular institutions. In 2009, the Philippine Commission on Elections, a constitutional body tasked to oversee both national and local elections, cited provisions from both the Bible and the Koran when it handed down a decision which sought to prevent an LGBT party from participating in the October 2009 elections on the grounds of immorality and being a threat to the country’s youth. While the party was eventually allowed by the Supreme Court to run for a congressional seat when it overturned the electoral body’s 2009 resolution, it was not the first time that the Commission ruled against representation of LGBTs in the country’s party-list system. In 2007, the same constitutional body had denied the accreditation of the LGBT party which they had largely been ignored by Philippine legislators for almost over a decade now and has once again failed to get enacted during the 14th Congress.

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

The History of GALANG

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The definition of the word “feminism” that is relevant for GALANG is the one put forward in Basin and Khan’s (1989) essay, “Some Questions on Feminism and Its Relevance in South Asia”. In a workshop attended by South Asian women, feminism was broadly defined as, “an awareness of women’s oppression and exploitation in society, at work and within the family, and conscious action by women and men to change this situation.” This definition points to a two-fold character of feminism—theory and praxis. When this definition is applied to...
GALANG: A Movement in the Making for the Rights of Poor LBTs in the Philippines


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

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

10. The smallest and most basic political unit in the barangay, the barangay often serves as the critical link between its residents and the national government. Quezon City, which has 2.28 million residents, is composed of 142 barangays.

The History of GALANG

GALANG's work, it is worth noting that while the organization has not always embraced the label "feminist," it can be considered as an inherently feminist human rights organization by virtue of its values and its gendered analysis of lesbians, bisexual women, and trans men as an oppressed class and its decision to focus on organizing and building the capacities of urban poor lesbians, bisexual women, and trans men in the organization's first five years.

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

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

GALANG Goals and Strategies

At the core of GALANG's organizing work is the identification and development of a cadre of local LBGT leaders in poor communities nationwide who have sufficient self-confidence and capacities as LBGT human rights advocates. It is hoped that by 2014, at least 15 LBGT leaders in each of the three sites are able to explain and relate LBT rights and the issue of discrimination, and have been able to mobilize at least 45 of their peers as advocates who are also able to understand their rights as LBGTs. By this time, at least one LBGT organization per site, each with a membership of at least 20 LBTs, will have been established. Toward this, GALANG's capacity building activities are focused on providing poor LBGTs with the skills to analyze and articulate the rights and issues of their constituency, organize and mobilize their peers to support advocacy for LBGT human rights, and influence policymakers to develop policies that advance these rights.

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

On October 12 and November 23, 2008, focus group discussions with mixed groups of LBGTs and gay men participants were conducted in each of the areas. One of the objectives of the discussions was to more clearly define the target population of GALANG's interventions. In these preliminary discussions, GALANG found that at the local level, the barangay—LBTs were more likely to collect dead bodies as women as they were less likely to find jobs and more likely to be victims of violence. It was also obvious that LBTs were far more non-conformist and fitter than gay men as the latter were quite participative and willing to share their stories while, in contrast, it required quite a bit more prodding for the women to open up. The discussions also revealed that the predominant stereotype of LBGTs in urban poor areas is that...
they are violent, volatile, and “useless” as they are commonly associated with street fights, fits of jealous rage, and drunken revelry. Gay men, on the other hand, were far more readily accepted by the rest of the community because they were perceived as fun and creative, and were seen as academic achievers and excellent community leaders. In one area, several elected local government officials were self-identified gay men who bore multiple university degrees and public service citations.

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

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

One of the most pervasive reasons that LBTs are working so hard for employment is not their lack of skills but the prejudice toward homosexuality. Many qualified LBTs have experienced being told by prospective employers at some point that they don’t hire lesbians on grounds of immorality. As a result, many of them have developed a phobia for job interviews and have not participated in occupational training. They are in the best position to know what they can— and what they cannot—do, and therefore are hindered in their ability to grasp in theory, but difficult to put into action, the basic principles of people empowerment. The necessity of people empowerment was easy enough for them to grasp in theory, but difficult to put into action. Through its capacity building trainings and understanding the importance of the positive images of LBTs, such as GALANG’s lesbian community comics, educational discussions, partnerships with government and non-government organizations, GALANG hopes to contribute to pushing the envelope for equality and diversity.

The GALANG Organizing Model

Grassroots leadership development forms the core of GALANG’s work because it believes in participatory methods that give poor LBTs a better chance to let not only have access to scarce resources but also to gain control over them. GALANG seeks to build the capacity of poor LBTs so that they can be their own advocates who can assert their rights and make state actors accountable to their immediate community—the barangay—and to the LGBT sector as a whole. Leadership formation and capacity building of grassroots women are crucial strategies in movement building as they facilitate the creation of a critical mass of people who can push for policies protecting LBT human rights. These are feminist strategies insofar as they are fair, egalitarian, non-hierarchical, open, non-opposing, and respectful of diversity. GALANG also promote a type of leadership that is built on transparency and accountability to the collective will and agenda of its constituency.

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

The focus groups were followed up with an orientation on sexuality and gender in each of the two areas. In Barangay Pansol, the LBTs expressed readiness to be organized—although on hindsight, they enthusiastically could have been diminished had they realized the implications of their commitment to organize around sexual identity and to lead campaigns to promote LGBT rights. Most of the participants likely figured the idea of having their own group, but they did not seem to realize that it would take a lot of work to make this idea a vibrant reality. GALANG helped them work out a plan of action, and encouraged them to form an ad hoc committee of leaders who would take a lead role in developing and mobilizing their peers for LGBT human rights. Seven LBTs volunteered to form the committee, consisting of training a leader-organizer who was crucial in developing and mobilizing their peers for LGBT human rights. Seven LBTs volunteered to form the committee, consisting of training a leader-organizer who was crucial in developing and mobilizing their peers for LGBT human rights. Seven LBTs volunteered to form the committee, called it Circle of Pre. Pre is short for compadre, a Spanish word that means “frien” or “godfather”. However, in the other area, GALANG did not sense that the LBTs were ready to be organized nor to commit to a plan of action. GALANG leaders were initially disappointed that there were a lot of poor LBTs who were not interested or ready to organize around LGBT human rights. In the end, because GALANG believes that the local women are in the best position to know what they can—and cannot—do, the organization respected their sentiments and truly encouraged the LBTs to identify point persons who could coordinate future activities.

On September 12-13, 2009, the ad hoc leaders and area coordinators underwent a joint leadership training. At around that time, it became even clearer that between the two communities, Barangay Pansol had the most potential. GALANG welcomed the chance to focus on helping LBT leaders for now as their situation seems more dire and urgent. The group is confident that initially being a femme or feminine lesbian who did not read-11

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

Campaigns and Alliance-Building

GALANG has recognized the need to continuously build networks with other change agents who share GALANG’s vision of a society free from prejudice. In the hope of helping to address the problem of unproductive sexual behavior, GALANG has been able to assist in improving the access of urban poor LBTs to health care. In this context, the GALANG campaign against homophobia has enjoyed the support of women, but also to strengthen alliances and partnerships with other change agents—Mama Cash, the Fund for Global Human Rights, and the Global Fund for Women, the deci- 12, 2009; and the International Dialogue in Buenos Aires, Argentina on January 14-17, 2010 where GALANG was upheld as a model of best practice by ARC International and Mulabi13. Its organizing model, the only best practice chosen among Southeast Asian countries, received very encour- aging feedback from LBT advocates from neighbor- ing countries in Asia as well as those from Eu- rope, Africa, and both South and North America. On September 4, 2010, GALANG launched the first issue of its groundbreaking community comic book series that promotes positive images of LBTs, a means of operationalizing The Yogya- karta Principles, a set of international equality and non-discrimination principles on the application of international law to human rights violations based on sexual orientation and identity. In the first Feminist Technology Exchange 12. Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health issues or TARSHI is an India-based NGO working on sexual rights.

13. ARC International is a Canada-based organization designed to make a contribution to the development of a strategic LGBT human rights agenda which Mulab, a vibrant feminist, NGO that provides primary health care to indigent women, has agreed to provide free medical consultations to GALANG’s local partners. The Center has provided GALANG’s LBT partners with materials on emergency contraception to address the problem of unwanted pregnancies among research participants. A referral system to access medical expertise in women’s health has also been established for GALANG’s local partners with Lahhain’s help. Accurate research-based evidence is necessary to push for public policies that can improve Filipo LBTs’ access to social services and legal redress. Because reliable data on poor lesbians, bisexual women, and trans men in the country is sorely lack- ing, GALANG carefully documents its interventions and conducts research activities to strengthen its advocacy for LBT human rights. For instance, through GALANG’s documentation of cases of rape and other forms of sexual abuse against poor LBTs, it has uncovered several cases of rape of butch lesbians, some resulting in unwanted preg- nancies, often committed by the victims’ own male friends or drinking buddies. There are also several cases of butch lesbians who had been arrested or illegally detained by the police for false charges of kidnaping their female partners. GALANG has started exposing a formal engagement with a femi- nist legal NGO working on women’s issues in order to assist lesbians who have been raped, abused or falsely accused of criminal conduct.

GALANG has also had the privilege of partici- pating in several prestigious feminist network activi- ties, such as the first Feminist Technology Exchange in the country, and consultations between the Phili- pine police and army brass with representatives of women’s groups, respectively organized by the Association of Progressive Communications’ Women’s Networking Support Programme and the Alternative Law Groups. In participating in these ac- tivities, GALANG not only hopes to raise awareness of violence against LBTs is also violence against women, but also to strengthen alliances and part- nerships with other change agents who share GA- LANG’s vision of a society free from prejudice. In the hope of helping to address the problem of unemployment, GALANG is documenting cases of urban poor LBTs who have been denied employ- ment on the basis of their perceived sexual deviance. GALANG hopes to put together a formal report compiling these narratives for publication in order to bring attention to the fact that even though the Bill of Rights legally guarantees equality and duc- tions to GALANG’s community partners. The Center has provided GALANG’s LBT partners with materials on emergency contraception to address the problem of unwanted pregnancies among research participants. A referral system to access medical expertise in women’s health has also been established for GALANG’s local partners with Lahhain’s help. Accurate research-based evidence is necessary to push for public policies that can improve Filipo LBTs’ access to social services and legal redress. Because reliable data on poor lesbians, bisexual women, and trans men in the country is sorely lack- ing, GALANG carefully documents its interventions and conducts research activities to strengthen its advocacy for LBT human rights. For instance, through GALANG’s documentation of cases of rape and other forms of sexual abuse against poor LBTs, it has uncovered several cases of rape of butch lesbians, some resulting in unwanted preg- nancies, often committed by the victims’ own male friends or drinking buddies. There are also several cases of butch lesbians who had been arrested or illegally detained by the police for false charges of kidnaping their female partners. GALANG has started exposing a formal engagement with a femi- nist legal NGO working on women’s issues in order to assist lesbians who have been raped, abused or falsely accused of criminal conduct.

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day-to-day operations are managed by an Execu-
tive Director who is also a member of the Board of 
Trustees. The area it serves is the Iloilo Conurbation, 
a large area of land where the province of Iloilo 
stands out in terms of economic and social osten-
sation, and where the community has achieved 
significant gains in organizing poor LBTs. The pro-
gramme of GALANG employs a strategy of setting 
up local LBT networks and mobilizing their peers 
into a support group of their own, these barangays 
are the twin phenomena of the culture of poverty. 
For instance, one of the ordinances punishes infra-
cctions with a fine of around US$7 while the other leaves it to 
organizing poor LBTs, the community has become 
to patiently explain the organization’s objectives for 
organizing gains 
Emerging Challenges
Emerging Challenges and Evaluating our Work

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

Finally, GALANG has contributed to raising 
awareness on the plight of Filipino LBTs in urban 
poor communities. The visible presence of 31 poor 
LBTs marching as one of the 2019 Manila 
Pride March had encouraged some fellow activists 
to look at discrimination and homophobia in a new 
light. GALANG’s conscious decision to focus on the 
intersections of class, poverty, sexual orientation, 
gender identity, and gender expression has contrib-
uted to popularizing the message that in order 
to advance LGBT rights in the country, there is a need 
to confront and address the fact that the Philippines 
is a developing country and that the majority of its 
people, including LBTs, live in dire poverty.

Emerging Challenges

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

The most significant threats to GALANG’s work 
are the twin phenomena of the culture of poverty 
and the layers of discrimination against Filipino 
LBTs. The extreme poverty in the area plus the 
phenomenal gap that exists in the country between 
rich and poor have fostered a profound sense of 
helplessness and fatalism. GALANG continues to 
battle with the colonial legacy of a feudal mindset, 
a mendicant mentality, and internalized homopho-
bia that runs so deep that most poor LBTs believe 
they must accept discrimination as a fact of life. 
While many of them have been quite open to new 
ideas and have expressed interest in organizing 
and mobilizing their peers into a support group 
of their own, these barangays—as is most of the 
country—are embedded in a deeply rooted culture 
of dependency where leaders are seen as saviors 
and custodians of valuable and scarce resources.

With this prevalent mindset, ciclo-out and service 
provision are widespread expectations, such that 
GALANG finds it challenging to demonstrate to lo-
cal partners why this is not empowering, and why it 
is unsustainable and undesirable in the long-term.

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

Evaluating our Work

Since GALANG began its work a little over two 
years ago, it has been consciously fine-tuning its 
strategies for grassroots community organizing 
of urban poor LBTs with an eye to developing a mod-
el, if not several models, that can be replicated for 
other poor LGBT communities in the Philippines— 
and possibly in other developing countries as well. 
As in all participatory development processes, 
there must be a continual cycle of action and re-
fection. GALANG continues to develop its model 
not only because it wants it to be beneficial for the 
entire LGBT sector, but also because it has no 
choice to develop it: since it is a work in progress— they are a means, not the end. For GALANG’s leaders, the moment 
that they think that their model is perfect is the mo-
tem that the organization sets itself up to fail. 
One way for the group to evaluate their work is by 
conducting regular “tactic” sessions wherein the

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

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

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

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

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

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

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References


Annex 1

Timeline of Events

2000
LGBT anti-discrimination bill was filed for the first time in the Philippine legislature; at present, it has yet to be passed into law

September 2, 2003
Quezon City Anti-Discrimination Ordinance covering workplace discrimination was passed

February 27, 2007
Philippine Commission on Elections denied accreditation to an LGBT party for lack of sufficient presence in the country’s regions

July 2008
GALANG founders decided to employ grassroots community organizing as their core strategy in working with LGBTs in poverty to contribute to building a critical mass of LGBT advocates in the Philippines

August 29, 2008
GALANG was officially registered as a non-profit corporation with the Philippine Securities and Exchange Commission

October 12, 2008 & November 23, 2008
Discussions with LGBTs in two urban poor areas in Quezon City revealed that lesbians are more prone to be victims of violence and workplace discrimination and are more likely to be poor and unemployed than gay male peers; knowing this, GALANG decided to focus on organizing urban poor lesbians, bisexual women, and trans men (LBTs) during its first five years

December 6, 2008
GALANG joined the annual Manila Pride March for the first time; it was also the first time that the march was disrupted by religious fundamentalists

January to April 2009
Meetings with key informants and educational discussions were conducted to prepare for grassroots engagement

June 28, 2009
GALANG joined the annual Baguio Pride March for the first time

July 2009
Discussions in the two areas were conducted; this time with only LGBT participants; the response of the participants to organizing was promising

July 26, 2009 & August 30, 2009
Results of the previous focus groups were validated during orientations on sexuality; three pressing LGBT problems in the area were identified: unemployment, sexual and physical violence, and unhealthy habits coupled with lack of access to health care; seven ad hoc LGBT community leaders in Pansol were named, while three coordinators were identified in the other area

September 12-13, 2009
Ad hoc LGBT leaders showed much enthusiasm during a joint leadership training while the response of the coordinators in the other area was not as promising; GALANG decided to focus on one area for now and to take a step back in the other community

October 2009
Ad hoc LGBT leaders selected their leader-organizer

November 2009
First batch of LGBTs went for medical check-up at Likhaan; experimental training of leader-organizer began

December 5, 2009
31 local LGBTs from GALANG’s organizing areas marched together for the first time during the annual Manila Pride March; it was their first time seeing religious fundamentalists carrying hate placards and shouting anti-LGBT rhetoric

January 14-17, 2010
GALANG was upheld as a model of best practice at the International Dialogue in Buenos Aires, Argentina entitled Rising Through the Challenge: Documenting and Analysing Best Practices for Advancing Human Rights based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity/Expression

February 1, 2010
GALANG established its first physical office with a modest conference area and library

March 7, 2010
Pansol LGBTs debuted as civic actors in their public plaza when they organized a film showing in celebration of International Women’s Day

May 14-29, 2010
Aspiring community organizers went for immersion in GALANG’s areas

June 2010
Two full-time community organizers were assigned to live on-site to undergo on-the-job training on LGBT community organizing and to build on the initial strides that have been made in the area

August 18-19, 2010
GALANG community organizers and a local LGBT leader participated in consultation dialogues with Philippine police and army brass, where they reiterated the need to sensitize law enforcers about the situation of sexual minorities; a core group of LGBT youth leaders in the area was formed at about the same time

September 4, 2010
GALANG’s lesbian comic book series, Tatsulok, was launched, giving poor Filipino LGBTs a heroine to call their own in Pamboy D’Tomboy (“Pamboy, The Tomboy”), the series’ lesbian protagonist

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