

## **Background and Introduction**

Thirty years ago this kind of approach and partnership among the advocates of gender and reproductive health with the ulama in the Province of Tawi-Tawi has been an uneasy path to move forward. The struggle has not been easy for both sides-advocates and the religious sector. There has been some efforts done by some NGOs and funding agencies in some parts of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), but because of the contentious debates on the interpretation and views on gender, reproductive health and women's empowerment, the advocacy became even more challenging.

But in recent years there has been a growing recognition of the vital role of some Ulama in helping understand and redefine the health-seeking behavior of the Muslims most especially the young adults. Because of the social legitimacy of the religious leaders in the community, they help shape social values and norms and therefore influence the attitudes of the people.

In 2006 the Neighbors Popdev Center Incorporated (NPDC) consulted some Ulama in the Province of Tawi-Tawi and engaged them in a series of dialogues - seeking their help as to how to advocate for gender-just core messages that will address the issues identified through the community needs assessment (CNA) done earlier by NPDC. Some of the salient points of the research (CNA) from the eight pilot barangays in the two municipalities of the Province of Tawi-Tawi; Bongao and Panglima Sugala were high MMR, prevalence of elopement cases in some of the pilot barangays, early marriages among the adolescents and their risky sexual behaviors, use of prohibited drugs, less livelihood opportunities and education, dynamite fishing to name a few. Some identified community-based religious leaders thereafter were presented with the Fatwa on FP and the booklet of Grand Mufti of Cairo Sheikh Tantawi on RH and Islam. It was noted during the RTD that some of them were not aware of the Fatwa on FP, some did not understand the different elements of RH, while others who had attended one or two seminars on FP said that they did not understand some sessions presented to them because of the language barrier since English was used.

That same year Neighbors and some of the gender and RH allies at the communities brainstormed together to develop a training design on the Inclusion of Gender, RH and PDS in the Khutba and Nasihat. The Community Needs Assessment was used as a guide to answer prevailing concerns of the communities. This activity was done to develop a healthy partnership between NPDC and other advocates with the religious sector. The goal is to actively promote gender just interpretations of the Holy texts and thereby correct the 'myths' and misconceptions on gender and RH concerns at the community level. After the formulation of the topics and gathering of materials to be used for the four (4) days training-workshop in Bongao, the NPDC dialogued with the different barangay leaders and their ustadz and imams and sought their advice regarding the training design. The NPDC found it very important for the future allies to know the sincerity of the partnership that we want to foster with them. This is why there should be transparency in dealing with them. NPDC's commitment to facilitate localization of some materials on RH and gender was also emphasized to them. Through this approach, we were able to foster a friendly engagement and avoided a hostile environment while discussing gender and RH even when there were disagreements on certain topics.

Dr. Jun Naraval, Founder of MR GAD Movement in Davao City discusses Men's Reproductive Health with the Sahaya sin Kawman group of religious leaders, tribal and community of elders and barangay elected officials in Bongao, Tawi-Tawi

## **Experiences in the Field**



Ustadz Abdullatif Ibrahim, Ustadz Abnel Aras and Ustadz Muksan Amilassan are some of the valuable partners since 2006 in helping foster an enabling environment and increasing social support for family planning, accessing gender-responsive information and reproductive health services for women, men and the adolescents, understanding HIV and AIDS, Code of Muslim Personal Laws (PD 1083) and VAW.

From the beginning, it was evident that some of the religious leaders that attended MR GAD (Men's Responsibilities in Gender And Development) Training needed more capacity building to work for RH and gender advocacy and the Islamic perspectives.

The Neighbors Popdev Center, Inc. has responded to this need by organizing trainings and workshops to build the capacity and leadership of the nineteen (19) identified religious leaders from the pilot areas to support couples and community members in making informed decisions on reproductive health issues such as safe motherhood, child spacing, sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDS, and to discourage harmful behaviors, especially gender-based violence. Sessions with two medical doctors Dr. Edward Chiu from the IPHO and DR. Jun Naraval, founder of MR GAD were invited to dialogue with them on the basic information of STIs, cycle of violence, and MCH. Both doctors presented statistics of MMR and IMR in the province of Tawi-Tawi and other ARMM areas, number of VAW cases reported in some parts of the country and the different symptoms, treatments of STIs. Tarbilang Foundation Incorporated was also invited to share the problems faced by women in accessing gender responsive information and services on RH and justice. Dr. Naraval encouraged the religious sector to promote/encourage increased attendance on MCH at the health centers by espousing the Islamic stand on RH.

"Ha way pa aku naka attend sin seminar sin NPDC, makulang in pang hati ku tungud FP, women's rights iban sin kaibanan. Ha waktu yadtu in panghati ku tuud ha FP ini haram siya. Biya da isab sin kaibanan ka guruhan ha tungud panghati nila ha issue sin FP. Lugay ku naka agad sin mga trainings, RTDs sin NPDC iban pag dihil nila sin mga materials biah sin amun kan Mufti Sheikh Tantawi ha Egypt pasalan sin RH in Islam, kiyahatihan ku na in agama Islam way nag beyta na haram in FP ini. (When I attended some of NPDC's trainings and RTDs on FP, women's rights and other activities I knew very little about the Islamic perspectives of such topics. Just like the other imams and ustadz in the province, we were told FP is haram or forbidden. But when I was given different localized reading materials developed and translated by NPDC like that of the Grand Mufti of Egypt Sheikh Tantawi's views on Rh and Islam, I realized that FP is not haram in Islam)", according to Ustadz Abnel Aras. Utuh Abs as we fondly call him is a promising 25 years old religious leader from Tubig Mampallam, Bongao, one of our pilot areas. From 2006 up to 2008 he has constantly delivered his khutba not only in Bongao but also in the island barangays as he joined NPDC as volunteer in visiting other island areas.

When asked if he found it difficult to propagate gender-responsive information and gender-just views on RH and women's issues, he said, "There are those who claim that the Khutba and Nasihat on family planning and reproductive health are all trashy talks because of the pictures of the condom and STDs. But this is the thinking of the traditionalist. We need to be engaged in this kind of dialogue so we can help others prepare for their married life and create awareness among the communities so they can

understand and learn how to be safe from contracting STDs. Yes, there are those who do not feel and think that I and some of my other companions are not propagating the real message of Islam pertaining to these issues. How can they claim that if they have not even read some of the materials given to us during the trainings and RTDs that were researched and prepared by respected scholars of the Islamic world?"

Ustadz Abnel Aras delivering his khutba on RH implications of early marriage and VAWUstadz Ibrahim is one of the trained religious leaders in the inclusion of gender, RH and PDS in the Khutba in 2006. After the orientation-training he was convinced to continue the advocacy. As part of his advocacy activity and mission, Ustadz Ibrahim discusses in his khutba the importance of birth spacing, maternal health issues and obligations of men toward the women. He said that "Early marriage is 'dangerous' for young girls and should be avoided. Their pregnancy may be difficult for them and may harm their health and that of their unborn child. The pregnant women should avoid heavy work. Their husbands should help them in the household chores. We should also encourage the couples to both visit health clinics before giving birth. Marriage is a partnership among the couples. Both should realize the good health and economic reasons for birth spacing. Islam forces no one to have a dozen children. Marriage in Islam is conditional. If you have the means you can get married. At a minimum, you must have a small house and enough money to support your wife and your children." he continued saying that, "Islam does not reject birth spacing! Everyone knows that birth spacing is a necessity now!"



Ustadz Ibrahim recognized the importance of women's health and how men from the religious sector can help encourage the community people to change their behavior and way of thinking to promote quality of life through family planning. "One of the best channels to spread this kind of message is through the religious leaders," said Ustadz Ibrahim. It is very important that we address RH/FP within the values, beliefs, and directives of Islam. Most importantly, we have to realize that our women are in pain every time they are in labor. Our girl-children should not be married off to anyone out of poverty or simply because it has been done from generation to generation. The religious leaders should do something immediately to address this situation! It is our duty to start spreading the message about the importance of being prepared for marriage not only financially but also emotionally, spiritually and physically. It's about time that we put an end to the suffering of our daughters and sisters in Islam!"

Ustadz Muksan Amilassan of Panglima Sugala became more sensitive to the issue on VAW after attending the training. He said that this kind of topic should be discussed during the khutba on a Friday especially in their area where there are cases of domestic violence happening. "In daindi kamu ini di hadja san mag kaiba in mga bibinsana sin mga kausugan nila. Masigpit da isab ha kaibanan kababaihan mag sumbung sin sila bibinasa. Na, kalumanan malaggu bukun hadja sin babai sa sampay in tag lahasya. Hangkansa importante tuud ha khutba sin mga ulama pag bissarahan ini ha supaya makaka sila pangannal bang unu in baita sin agama Islam ha tungud ini. (There are victims of domestic violence in our place but no one wants to complain about it. Women are shy to come out in the open and tell their stories to others. They fear the consequences of such action when they put

their relatives in shame and may cause further conflicts among families. That is why I see the khutba as one effective way to gradually impart to them what Islam says about this kind of problem.)". The topics usually presented during the khutba are prayers and some religious holidays. With the added materials and knowledge gained from the training he wants to be active in promoting peace at home by imparting the importance of good partnership among women and men.

## Result



Through the effective partnership of NPDC and the religious leaders of the 8 barangays at the two municipalities of the Province of Tawi-Tawi, a total of 133 khutba were delivered by our ulama partners in their respective areas from May 2006 up to December 2008. This happened after the orientation and training on CMPL, Fatwa on FP and the Inclusion of RH and gender in the Khutba. Among those who attended the khutba were women, men and adolescents especially during the congregational Friday prayers. Ustadz Abnel Aras shared with NPDC that he has been consulted to mediate on divorce settlement, property rights of women and VAW incidence in some of the pilot barangays. Ustadz Ibrahim and other religious leaders shared to us during our field visits that they were able to encourage a number of their jamaah to seek RH services at the BHS or the RHU regarding pregnancy and other illnesses. Surprisingly, some religious leaders accompanied some of their followers to the barangay hall to resolve VAW cases, elopement and counseled gender-responsive information on rights of women in Islam.

## Conclusion

Winning the support of religious leaders was not an easy task. But it was crucial to the success of the advocacy. They were quick to support this important initiative that would benefit their community. The 19 trained religious leader partners of NPDC accepted the use of modern methods for the purpose of spacing births, but most felt it was unacceptable to use them to limit the number of births. The IEC localized materials being used therefore focused on birth spacing and the importance of family planning for maintaining the health of mothers and children, and the well-being of the family as a whole.

With frequent and constant giving of khutbah and lectures at the mosques and the communities, Ustadz Ibrahim, Ustadz Abnel Aras, Ustadz Latif Ibrahim, Ustadz Nakir Mohammad, Ustadz Muksan Amilassan and Imam Jayton Tahil are seeing a favorable shift in the behavior and perception of some of their jamaah in accepting the importance of family planning. They also claim that most of the people who frequent the masjid seek their advice on marriage, economic rights, VAW and are now in favor of family planning and accessing RH services.