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Gendering Legitimacy: The Case of a Women-Led Community-Based Organization in Barangay Tatalon, Quezon City, Philippines

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Abstract

Women-led, urban poor community-based organizations (CBOs) are crucial in representing the claims and interests of urban poor communities. Yet little is known of the ways in which their leaders establish organizational legitimacy in conditions of structural disadvantage and deprivation. This article thus explores the intersections of power, organizational legitimation, and gender through the case of the Tatalon Chapter of the *Pinagkaisang Lakas ng Mamamayan* (People Power United), a women-led, urban poor CBO waging a housing campaign in Barangay Tatalon, Quezon City (QC), Philippines. Drawing from interview and ethnographic data, my findings show that power manifests in ways that increase the unpaid community work of women community leaders. But they also show how some community leaders adopt organizing strategies that are insensitive to the conditions of women leaders and members who are likewise multiply-burdened. I present these findings by describing leaders' strategies that each correspond to

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distinct aspects of a CBO's legitimacy: (a) their response to the QC Local Government's housing program (pragmatic legitimacy) and their efforts at addressing state-led red-tagging (regulative legitimacy), and (b) their informal practice of prioritizing active members in their organization's list of housing applicants (moral legitimacy). Whereas the latter describes dynamics that are internal to an organization, the former describes strategies born out of structural conditions, i.e., decentralized urban planning and democratic erosion.

Keywords: urban poor, women, community, organizing, legitimacy

Introduction

Women-led, urban poor community-based organizations (CBOs) occupy the margins of the Global South (Moser, 1989; Shatkin, 2007). This phenomenon reflects the division of labor within urban poor households. But it also reflects systemic issues of neglect and deprivation; in the absence of the state, these organizations address structural inequalities that have historically afflicted their communities (Patel & Mitlin, 2010).

In such a context, it is crucial that leaders of these CBOs build and maintain the legitimacy of their organization. By legitimacy, I am referring to a process of social construction through which organizations craft "a generalized perception or assumption that" their structures, practices, and goals "are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). That is, leaders of these CBOs must organize in a way that adheres to prevailing systems of culture, morality, interest, regulation, and meaning (Scott, 2014). For in the absence of legitimacy, they lose the support of their communities (Arcilla, 2020b). But in its presence, they obtain support for even the most radical of organizing strategies (Arcilla, 2022).

How then do leaders of women-led, urban poor CBOs establish legitimacy in conditions of structural disadvantage and deprivation? And, in so doing, how might they contribute to the production of intra-

organizational hierarchies? I explore these questions by locating manifestations of power in processes of organizational legitimation. My findings show that power manifests in ways that increase the unpaid community work of women community leaders. But they also show how some community leaders adopt organizing strategies that are insensitive to the conditions of women leaders and members who are likewise multiply-burdened.

I present these findings through the case of the Tatalon Chapter of the *Pinagkaisang Lakas ng Mamamayan* (People Power United; PLM-Tatalon), a women-led, urban poor CBO now waging an on-site/in-city housing campaign in Barangay Tatalon, Quezon City (QC), Philippines. I have selected their case to shed light on the unique challenges encountered by women-led, urban poor CBOs that are still in the process of amassing legitimacy. Emerging grassroots organizations like PLM-Tatalon can offer insights on how these CBOs can navigate their early years.

Review of Related Literature

Organizational Legitimacy

The concept of organizational legitimacy has gained much traction over the years (Deephouse et al., 2017). *Organizational legitimacy* refers to the ability of organizations to establish practices and goals that adhere to prevailing systems of culture, morality, interest, etc. (Suchman, 1995). When organizations "possess" legitimacy, they can garner the support of diverse actors, and thereby increase their access to resources, improve their performance, and, in so doing, achieve survival (Gnes & Vermeulen, 2018).

Scholarly works that adopt the prevailing "property" approach to the concept categorize legitimacy into discrete typologies. Examples of these typologies include *pragmatic legitimacy* which refers to an assessment that an organization's goals, practices, and structures align with the immediate self-interest of their members and constituents (Suchman, 1995); *regulative legitimacy* which refers to an organization's compliance

with the law (Scott, 2014); and *moral legitimacy* which refers to a judgment that an organization's activities align with social norms and values (Suchman, 1995; Scott, 2014).

But there are limitations to the legitimacy-as-property approach. Firstly, the approach theorizes legitimacy as a resource that can be quantified and categorized. The problem is that scholars of organizations might find themselves measuring legitimacy via an "infinite" number "of attributes or characteristics" (Suddaby et al., 2017, p. 458). Another critique is that the approach is structural-functionalist in its foundations. In a review of more than 1,299 publications, Deephouse and colleagues (2017, p. 4) discovered that, "a large number of papers simply quote Suchman's (1995, p. 574) definition verbatim before moving on to discuss whatever particular type of legitimacy was studied in the paper." Yet the definition that Suchman (1995)proposes is one that is structural-functionalist, in that it merely emphasizes an organization's degree of cultural fit.

This is attributable to the emphasis on bureaucratic organizations in contemporary organizational research (Comas, 2018). Can the concept be applied to organizations that organize in the absence of formal rules and well-defined goals? These organizations "tend to have broader, vaguer goals and objectives than, for example, for-profit organizations" (DiMaggio, 2006 and Alexander, 1998, as cited in Gnes & Vermeulen, 2018, p. 195). Examples of which include community-based associations that are more fluid in their structures and objectives.

An alternative to the legitimacy-as-property approach thus considers legitimacy as a "process" (Suddaby et al., 2017). The processual approach defines *legitimacy* as an activity that organizations perform to construct compelling theories of their existence that are congruent with prevailing systems of culture, morality, etc. While this definition maintains the importance of conformity, it emphasizes the multiplicity of ways by which organizations achieve this congruence. This entails interaction. Legitimacy, in this sense, is not static; organizations must constantly convince other actors of their legitimacy even as attempts in doing so lead to disagreement. Scholars that situate their research within this tradition therefore eschew the term legitimacy in place of more agentive terms such as "legitimation" and "legitimizing."

The issue, however, is that the processual approach to organizational legitimacy is lacking in its account of "gender" (Suddaby et al., 2017); scholarly works do not pay sufficient attention to the unique gendered dynamics that unfold when women-led CBOs strive to obtain legitimacy in conditions of systemic and persistent inequality. What does legitimation entail when it is a process led by women simultaneously occupying multiple roles at home and in their communities (Moser, 1989)? And what does it entail when these women are structurally disadvantaged? To address these questions, I will now proceed to show how we can think about the intersections of power, organization legitimacy, and gender.

Power, Gender, and Feminist Organizing

In the Philippines, women-led, grassroots organizations are crucial in addressing urban poverty (Shatkin, 2007). A survey by Shatkin (2007) revealed that 56.6% of leadership positions in CBOs located in QC and Manila were occupied by women. Central among the concerns of these organizations is the issue of housing (Laguilles, 2017; Laguilles-Timog, 2018). Organizations that function specifically around this issue are what Berner (1997, as cited in Shatkin, 2007) describes as "primary organizations." According to Shatkin (2007, p. 4), "These are organizations that emerge to deal specifically with the critical issues related to lack of legal land tenure."

An example of a women-led, primary organization is the San Roque Chapter of the *Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap* (KADAMAY). Despite the scarcity of resources, the organization has, over the years, organized self-help initiatives such as community gardens and community kitchens (Arcilla, 2022). These practices were emulated by members of the KADAMAY chapter in Bulacan as a strategy to garner support for the takeover "of more than 5,200 empty socialised housing units in seven off-city relocation sites" (Arcilla, 2022, p. 14).

Yet KADAMAY San Roque has not been spared of threats to their legitimacy. Their radicalism and the refusal of state agencies like the National Housing Authority (NHA) to engage in dialogues with them

all but reduced the support the organization had enjoyed in their community (Arcilla, 2020b). This is illustrative of the intricate relationship between organizational legitimacy and power; it underscores the struggles that occur when women-led CBOs organize to promote their community's empowerment.

How then does power manifest in processes of organizational legitimation? And in what ways might these processes be uniquely gendered? I advance two claims. First, I will show how state practices that are constitutive of legitimation increase the unpaid community work of women community leaders (Cookson, 2018). By the term *unpaid community work*, I am referring to the various forms of uncompensated and unrecognized labor that women leaders are compelled to perform to meet their community's needs and interests (Moser, 1989). I argue that certain state practices implemented by government officials can further increase the burdens and responsibilities of women leaders occupying "triple roles" (i.e., reproductive workers, income-earners, and community organizers) in their communities. To be clear, these practices vary in formality; while some are not stipulated in official bureaucratic guidelines (i.e., housing application requirements), others are explicitly deemed illegal (i.e., red-tagging). Yet they are both manifestations of the broader structural conditions of democratization and neoliberalism on the one hand (Shatkin, 2002; Shelby, 2021) and democratic erosion (Arugay & Baquisal, 2023) on the other.

And finally, I will show how power can be exercised within women-led, urban poor CBOs. This occurs when women community leaders adopt organizing strategies that fail to recognize the circumstances of their women members and coleaders who are likewise multiply-burdened. These strategies contradict principles of feminist organizing that emphasize the importance of decentralized approaches to leadership through which voice and power are distributed (Weil, 1986; Fakier & Cook, 2018).

I will then show how these manifestations of power threaten the pragmatic, regulative, and moral dimensions of a women-led, urban poor CBO's legitimacy.

Methodology

Ethnographic and interview data were gathered from September 2022 to February 2023. I was first involved in PLM-Tatalon's housing campaign as a member of the Save San Roque Alliance. After my first encounter with three members of the Executive Committee (ExeComm), I immediately informed them of my intent to conduct research about their organization, and I clarified that this will involve interviews and participant observation in various meetings and assemblies.

Data gathering for the ethnography began in September 2022; it involved ~90 hours of participant observation in various gatherings where leaders and members of PLM-Tatalon took part. In these gatherings, I was paying attention to the legitimation strategies of PLM-Tatalon's leaders.

For the interview data, I conducted 26 interviews with 24 respondents. Members of the ExeComm helped me recruit respondents through snowball and purposive sampling. The semistructured interviews were conducted in Filipino and lasted for around 25 minutes to 2 hours. Interview questions broadly covered my respondents' background, leaders' legitimation strategies, and members' assessment of PLM-Tatalon's housing campaign. Interviewees signed a consent form after I explained the objectives of the study as well as their rights as participants, and agreed to have their interviews recorded and transcribed on the condition that pseudonyms be used to protect their identities. Interviewees were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any point in time, and withhold information that they are not willing to disclose.

I then used thematic analysis to analyze my interviews and field notes. For this paper, I used data coded as "aspirations" (motives for joining, complaints regarding PLM-Tatalon's campaign), "leadership strategies," "LGU response" (local government unit's response to leader's organizing strategies, as well as leaders' complaints), and "(re)productive work" (care work and productive work). Initial findings for this study were then validated with community leaders.

There are, of course, limitations to this study. For instance, gatekeepers found difficulty in recruiting members from "inactive" chapters.

Nonetheless, I was able to interview respondents from seven of PLM-Tatalon's 17 chapters. Among my respondents, 16 were old members of the organization (i.e., joined before the year 2022). I also recognize the limitations that my positionality as a middle-class, cis-male researcher poses to my analysis. This affected my interactions with members and leaders; instead of using my nickname, many would refer to me as "Sir." Participating in PLM-Tatalon's campaign was thus a way for me to express solidarity.

Findings and Discussion

Background of PLM-Tatalon

Barangay Tatalon is a flood-prone village located in the 4th District of QC, and is home to a population of 55,504 (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2020). The most recent statistic I could find suggests that around 25% of Barangay Tatalon's population lives below the poverty line (Barangay Tatalon, 2013, as cited in Combinido, 2018). Yet one's residence is often used as an immediate indicator of one's social class—that is, whether or not one resides in a shanty house built on land they do not own. These shanty houses are located in informal settlements that abide by a system of tenancy observable in informal settlements elsewhere. An example of which is the MERALCO Line, a sizable plot of land now managed by the Manila Electric Company (MERALCO), the only electric power distributor in Metro Manila. The company employed guards to keep watch over the area, prohibiting residents from either repairing or constructing their homes unless they pay the guards a bribe and secure a permit from the barangay office which they can obtain immediately if they likewise pay a bribe.

The barangay also has a rich history of community organizing that can be traced back to the 1960s when residents organized the *Caballeros de Tatalon* to defend their community from demolitions instigated by the Araneta clan and a certain Tuason and Company, Inc. It was also around this time when the formation of the *Samahan ng mga Nanay* had taken place. And in recent years, national democratic mass organizations

(NDMOs) like *Bayan Muna* and the Gabriela Women's Party have found success in organizing local chapters that are part of the broader National Democratic Movement. But according to Juris, the founder of PLM-Tatalon, it was a community organizer affiliated with the Payatas (a village located in the 2nd District of QC) Chapter of PLM who invited her to establish a chapter of PLM in Tatalon, and she described how this transpired as such:

> PLM-Tatalon was established on August 12, 2018. I got hold of a leaflet on August 8 that said, "The urban poor who are squatters and have no homes, if you want a home, go to Payatas." There was a [cellphone] number, I called. Someone answered. They said, "If you're interested, go here on Sunday because there's an orientation." So, I went with my two children. That was the first orientation [for PLM-Payatas]. After the meeting, an organizer said, "When you get home, can you invite at least 50 people?" I agreed. They said, "When you invite [at least] 50 people, call us."

According to Juris, PLM-Tatalon's first chapter consisted of around 50 members, but by 2019, its chapters increased to six. "I convinced them," said Juris. "I said this is better because our homes will never be ours. They were interested because of KADAMAY. They occupied the houses in Bulacan in Pandi."

The occupation in Bulacan served as basis for PLM-Tatalon's first housing campaign, *Kampanyang 118* (Campaign 118). The number 118 corresponds to the hectares that span a vacant lot in Barangay Bagong Silangan (a village located in QC) allegedly owned by Banco De Oro, a commercial bank. The plan was to occupy the area in 2019 and demand that the QC LGU utilize it for public housing. Yet this plan did not materialize, for community organizers soon realized that the campaign did not emerge organically from the residents that had participated.

PLM-Tatalon then expanded to eight chapters in 2020. This took place amidst the lockdown that the Philippine Government imposed during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some members of PLM-Tatalon thus organized the *Kusinang Bayan* (Community Kitchens)

through the support of various donors. The *Kusinang Bayan* initiative occurred twice; first in March and then in May, with each iteration lasting for a week. However, on other days (and even before the pandemic), the initiative was implemented intermittently, for it depended on the availability of resources. Beneficiaries were served dishes such as *sopas*, as well as rice and viands that consisted of vegetables.

Prior to the 2022 Philippine General Election, PLM-Tatalon had already expanded to 17 chapters. Then in June 2022 onwards, the organization continued its expansion. Czarina, who was then the President of PLM-Tatalon, described what happened this way:

> [One of our members] went to [QC] City Hall. She saw people lining up. She inquired. Then she said to me, "Czarina, let's write letters!" So we wrote letters. A limited number knew about it [the system] here in Tatalon. It's like this: QC HCDRD [Housing Community Development and Resettlement Department] has a project in an area in QC District 4. That area will be demolished and the residents will be relocated. That's why they [the residents] were encouraged to write letters to Mayor. I told people that we will do this. The recruitment happened fast. It's because we used the housing issue.

Prospective members followed this procedure: they wrote letters expressing their interest in applying for housing. These letters were addressed to QC Mayor Joy Belmonte, and were submitted to the QC HCDRD office. Afterwards, they were given a stub containing a reference number and a link to an online registration form. Upon accomplishing the form, their application would be included in the QC HCDRD's database of housing applicants. However, they would only become members of PLM-Tatalon after submitting photocopies of their letters and stubs to the organization's leaders. Those who submitted were included in a list of housing applicants which leaders would present during dialogues with the QC HCDRD. Czarina explained:

> How will you become PLM? When the letter is returned to us, that is their commitment—that they are part of our struggle

> for decent, affordable, and pro-people [on-site] housing. If there's no more on-site, then it's in-city. If Mayor accepts your application, you might be thrown to [peri-urban areas like] Laguna and Bulacan.

PLM-Tatalon's housing campaign thus became less confrontational. In place of the occupation, leaders advocated for decent, affordable, and pro-people on-site housing and began engaging in dialogues with the QC HCDRD. And aside from the issue of housing, PLM-Tatalon mobilized around sector-wide campaigns that addressed issues concerning wages, inflation, and public transportation. Moreover, as part of the organization's efforts at recruitment and consciousness-raising, leaders of PLM-Tatalon, together with community organizers, organized educational discussions and film-showing activities, typically on Sundays. Featured films were short documentaries that promoted issues addressed by broader sector-wide campaigns.

Currently, each chapter in PLM-Tatalon is led by a president, a vice president, a treasurer, a secretary, and a public relations officer. Chapter officers are organized into an all-leaders committee. Yet the entire organization was led by an ExeComm that initially consisted of the five leadership positions in a chapter. Moreover, members who joined from 2022 onwards were designated as "new members" while those who had joined prior were designated as "old members." As of writing, PLM-Tatalon is composed of around 800 members, but only 400 people have included their names in the organization's list of housing applicants. One will immediately observe that most of PLM-Tatalon's members are women who either work, for instance, as housewives, vendors, and seamstresses, or stay at home to care for their grandchildren.

Unpaid Community Work

This section examines the unpaid community work that women community leaders perform in response to state practices that are constitutive of legitimacy-building. The first part illustrates the difficulties Czarina and Juris encountered to accomplish requirements that members of the QC HCDRD requested that their organization fulfill.

The second part illustrates PLM-Tatalon's response to the threat of red-tagging and the bureaucratic process Czarina and Juris endured to secure accreditation.

Meeting the Requirements

PLM-Tatalon's housing campaign from June 2022 onwards also consisted of two informal requirements that members of the QC HCDRD requested that the organization fulfill: (a) that leaders identify a vacant lot in Tatalon which the QC HCDRD could use to construct a high-rise condominium, and (b) that the lot must be owned by the NHA, the government agency responsible for public housing in the country. Two members of the QC HCDRD emphasized these requirements during a dialogue. One member clarified that, through an usufruct agreement, the QC LGU could acquire authority over NHA-owned land that PLM-Tatalon will identify.

It is important that we first situate this housing campaign within the broader political and economic milieu of democratization and neoliberalism. Shatkin (2002, p. 302) argues that these structural conditions could "deradicalize" urban poor CBOs because opportunities to negotiate with the state influence their leaders into cooperating with local authorities so that they could meet their members' "particularistic demands" for community improvement. Karaos (1998, p. 144) makes a similar claim, arguing that since the post-1986 period, many urban poor groups have begun engaging in efforts to "increase access to state resources." We can observe the legacy of this period in PLM-Tatalon's housing campaign, for it was largely an attempt by leaders to secure their organization's position in the QC HCDRD's housing project. Mitlin and Patel (2005) note that this phenomenon can be uniquely gendered, and they draw from the case of urban poor women's saving groups in India to argue that the strategy of negotiating with, rather than confronting, local authorities was one favored by urban poor women.

Taking the case of Baan Monkong program in Thailand, Shelby (2021) further notes that these structural conditions have likewise shifted the responsibility of addressing the needs of a community to residents and beneficiaries themselves. Thus, both requirements stipulated by members

of the QC HCDRD occupied Czarina and Juris's significant attention; often, it was just the two of them identifying lots. Their situation, however, reflects Moser's (1989) observation that, in Global South countries, low-income women can occupy "triple roles" in their communities. For one, both of them had families to attend to. Czarina devoted much effort caring for her neurodivergent son. "It's stressful at home," she said. "I can't rely on him to wash dishes. When he goes to the bathroom I have to clean. Imagine—you go home at 12 [midnight], sometimes at 11 [p.m.] and then you must clean. I also bring him to the hospital." Juris, on the other hand, had grandchildren to care for. "When their mothers are busy, I give them a bath and bring them to school," she said.

Both Czarina and Juris were also busy earning a living. Whereas Czarina sold beauty products and managed an *ukay-ukay* (secondhand clothing) store, Juris worked as a *manghihilot* (massage therapist). They were also preoccupied by their responsibilities as leaders of PLM-Tatalon. Czarina was busy planning self-help initiatives and presiding over meetings. And an activity that occupied Juris's time was going around her area to invite members to attend gatherings. She recalled, "I spend entire afternoons. When there's something we have to attend, for 1 day I go around."

The requirements that the QC HCDRD requested that PLM-Tatalon fulfill thus increased their burdens. According to Czarina, this entailed even more walking:

> We walk, we ask, and look. It's hard because it takes time—on a Sunday, even when it's hot, we walk. We don't have money [to commute]. It's as far as Sto. Domingo. You walk from Victory, then Banawe. It was more than 6 months. We walked the entire Tatalon. There's a program: we go to city hall or someplace else then go straight [there].

Juris added:

> In 1 month, at least twice. We come from city hall, then we commute to Sto. Domingo, then we walk. Sometimes we walk until night. We walk the entire Araneta then pass by Galilan.

> We go around there until night because we wait for the people we will talk to. Sometimes, my daughter tells me, "Where did you come from? Why come home just now?"

Walking for prolonged periods was an experience that poor mothers in Peru also underwent to meet the conditions of a Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) Program (Cookson, 2018). In Czarina's and Juris's case, they walked to meet two informal conditions that the QC HCDRD suggested; like women beneficiaries of Peru's CCT program, it was they who bore the consequences of the QC HCDRD's neglect and inattention. For more than 6 months, they spent some of their Sundays walking around Tatalon in search of vacant lots. This entailed unrecognized and unpaid physical labor. In fact, some of the areas they mentioned—Sto. Domingo, Victory, and Banawe—were some distance from one another. Walking from Sto. Domingo all the way to Banawe Street, for instance, would take approximately 30 minutes. And prior to their walk, Czarina and Juris also had to accomplish other tasks for PLM-Tatalon. So, for example, they would first go to the QC City Hall (which was around 30 minutes away from Tatalon via jeepney) to submit documents for PLM-Tatalon's accreditation, and then commute back to the barangay despite having no money.

This often became a whole-day affair. They walked until night, and then waited for people who might have information on lots they identified. To Czarina, this process was physically taxing:

> We got tired going around. I felt like, "What are we even doing? It's like nothing [is happening]. We talk to Mayor through Attorney who says we identify land, then he just leaves us hanging. They don't give updates unless you go to city hall yourself.

She expressed frustrations towards the QC HCDRD's response to a lot in Kanduli Street which she proposed. This lot was approximately 1,500 sq. m; 500 sq. m of which was allegedly owned by a bank, while the rest was owned by a certain family. Portions of the land were awarded to some residents in the 1970s through the Tatalon Estate Urban Bliss Project of the NHA. They now reside in houses located in the area's

peripheries because they cannot occupy portions of their lot that are within the family's compound. Word was that a legal dispute had ensued between the NHA and the family, and the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the NHA.

Then in a dialogue in September 2022, Czarina presented the area to two officials of the QC HCDRD, and requested that their group be given support to verify the lot's status. Instead, a QC HCDRD official suggested that PLM-Tatalon occupy the lot only if they would be given permission by the caretaker; the rationale was that existing occupants would be prioritized should it be utilized for housing. However, Mary, a former member of the ExeComm, saw this suggestion as a sign of the QC HCDRD's disinterest. "There's no hope," she said. "Because they said, 'We will only enter once you occupy Kanduli first.' That cannot be."

Then in October 2022, an official of the QC HCDRD sent his secretary to inspect the area. But the visit did not yield any result. Czarina recalled:

> He assigned his secretary [to go]. They were rushing. When we arrived, the secretary said [to the caretaker], "We will enter." I said, "Wait, I will call the other claimants." When we returned, she [the secretary] was heading back. [She said,] "We can't enter. We need permission." Then I found out she told the caretaker, "We will enter because we will build a condominium." I told that to an official of the QC HCDRD. I said, "Sir, your secretary scared the caretaker." He just laughed.

Another response of the QC HCDRD was to change the entire system upon which PLM-Tatalon's housing campaign was established. Czarina was informed of this change during a visit to an official. "He said, 'Oh no, Ma'am. I have something to tell you. All of the letters you gave to us, we're sorry. We changed our system,'" she recalled.

These responses are consistent with the experiences of women-led CBOs that organize around the issue of housing (Laguilles, 2017; Laguilles-Timog, 2018). Moreover, the two requirements suggested by the QC HCDRD and the housing application system which they implemented reinforced traditional gender roles. They were, in other words, manifestations of power that increased unpaid community work often

relegated to women (Shelby, 2021). For instance, Juris and Czarina spent much time preparing the list of housing applicants that they submitted during dialogues. "We do it one by one," said Juris. "Us two, we do it until night." And Czarina shared that they would extend until night because they had to explain the campaign to doubtful members. "They don't understand why they have to return [their letters] to PLM," she said. "We hold sessions to meet them. They just go to the office, sometimes they come in groups." Yet their efforts have led nowhere.

The QC HCDRD's neglect also affected PLM-Tatalon's pragmatic legitimacy. A consistent theme in the interviews was that respondents joined the organization to fulfill their aspirations for housing. Tristan, a member of Chapter 17, said, "I might receive housing. It's for my family. We are caretakers of my uncle's home. We can be evicted any time." Mina, a member of Chapter 1, also expressed fear of eviction. "MERALCO might evict us," she said. "We joined because we're hoping that we will be given our own house. It's for my children. If we get evicted, we have nowhere to go." And when Rose, a member of Chapter 9, shared her reasons for joining, she did so while pointing at her house. "I'm hoping to receive decent housing." She said. "Not like this. It's not safe because of floods. I want a house that is mine; not where I just share."

However, other members expressed sentiments that threatened PLM-Tatalon's pragmatic legitimacy. "It's been years and nothing's happening," said Julia, a member of Chapter 6 who joined PLM-Tatalon in 2018. "We keep on hoping. Like crazy women, us PLM members, we keep on attending until we get fed up." Wheng, a member of Chapter 1, expressed the same frustration. "That's what I also feel," she said, "because it's been so long." Nelly noticed that these frustrations were particularly salient among old members. "What I noticed is that for old members, they become inactive because they haven't seen any proof," she said. And Cristine, a member of Chapter 17, compared PLM-Tatalon to other CBOs in Tatalon that adopted a similar campaign. "There was someone who said it's not true because their mother died 8 years since it was started [housing]," she said. "That's a different group."

In response to these legitimacy threats, members were informed by leaders during gatherings that dialogues with the QC HCDRD were

ongoing. And Buwan, a leader of Chapter 3, reminded her members to just wait. "I tell them, 'In reality, there is no day, no month, and no year when we will receive housing. For me, all of you should just wait.'" However, telling someone to wait can be a manifestation of power because it reminds them of their subordination to institutions that control their access to resources (Cookson, 2018).

Red-Tagging and Accreditation

Then there was the matter of red-tagging, a strategy that government forces use to fabricate the involvement of civilians in the Communist insurgency and thereby justify the use of violence against them to suppress dissent. This practice has become increasingly prevalent since the beginning of the Duterte Administration in 2016, and it has been used to kill, harass, arrest, and silence those critical towards the government (Thongyoojroen, 2023). PLM-Payatas thus saw a drastic decrease in membership when a leader of PLM's CAMANAVA (Caloocan, Malabon, Navotas, Valenzuela) Chapter duped 20 of its members into signing, under police duress, a document declaring PLM-Payatas's affiliation with the New People's Army (NPA) and their status as NPA returnees (Umil, 2022). Juris recalled how this event caused fear in PLM-Tatalon. She recounted how a resident began spreading rumors that pictures of PLM-Tatalon's members had been posted at the police precinct afterwards. "That's why others got scared," she said. "They didn't leave, but they didn't attend meetings regularly or go to mobilizations." This incident reflects Arugay and Basquial's (2023, p. 338) observation that red-tagging has severely "constrained civic space in the Philippines."

Amid this context, there became a need for leaders to prove PLM-Tatalon's legality. While I observed how, during gatherings, Czarina and Nelly, a chapter leader, would emphasize their organization's status as a legal formation, it was still essential that they acquire the approval of powerful legal bodies. This, according to Scott (2014), was an important aspect of regulative legitimacy; by acquiring approval, PLM-Tatalon could demonstrate their adherence to the law. And so Juris and Czarina applied for PLM-Tatalon's accreditation to obtain the recognition of the QC LGU. Yet this process posed unique difficulties

for it was mired in bureaucracy. Juris and Czarina recalled travelling back and forth again and again from Tatalon's Barangay Hall to the QC City Hall just to accomplish and submit requirements. Juris described their experience as such:

> For a week, we travelled every day from barangay [hall] to city hall. We go back to the barangay if there's something we did not get signed. Then at 2:00 [p.m.] we go back to the city hall. If there's a paper that we forgot, someone stays there then one of us goes back. Once we went to the market at 10:00 at night to print a form. And when we go home, we can't sleep. The following day, go to city hall then they tell us to go back to the barangay.

They were told to furnish a list of PLM-Tatalon's Board Members because, according to Czarina, "They didn't recognize the ExeComm. They wanted a Board. Five names." Juris recalled how they "were like crazy people looking for people to sign." Czarina and Juris were also told to furnish a list of members and officers for all of PLM-Tatalon's chapters. Czarina then instructed officers from each chapter to produce the list. Afterwards, all the officers were requested to visit PLM-Tatalon's office to sign the list they prepared. This kept them busy until midnight because they also had to prepare numerous financial reports. "Almost every night we were in the office until midnight and we were fixing the financial reports since 2018," recalled Czarina. "And then in 2022 we [accounted for] May until December. So we made financial reports for how many months." This was meticulous work even for Juris. "I checked all my logbooks," she said. "The receipts for what we printed, and what we Xeroxed."

But before they could apply for accreditation at the QC City Hall, they first had to secure accreditation from the barangay hall which they attached to their application. This itself was already difficult according to Czarina:

> There was no supporting document that we've existed since 2018. But the secretary did not want [to help us]. They were so strict. [The secretary said], "This letter [was written] in 2018 but there are no supporting documents." [I said], "Okay, I will

> go back and look." I found an attendance sheet from December 2018, then we went back. I said, "Here's what you're looking for." [The secretary said], "Okay, wait, the barangay captain isn't here yet."
>
> They waited for 5 hours. Juris recalled:
>
> It took us until 2:00 [p.m.]. We were there by 9:00 [a.m.]. I said [out loud], "Czarina, ask how much should we pay!" The secretary looked at me and said, "Wait, I'll check if the captain is there." When she returned, the captain was already there.

These hurdles delayed their submission. Czarina and Juris failed to meet the deadline of both the first and second batches of applications because, as Czarina explained, "There was so much to fix." Extant scholarship suggests that these bureaucratic hurdles are experienced in particular by women of vulnerable populations who, for instance, participate in microcredit (Goetz & Gupta, 1996), CCT programs (Cookson, 2018), and service-provision (Carswell & Neve, 2020). Czarina and Juris's case thus illustrates how navigating bureaucracies can be a uniquely gendered activity, for it imposes unique demands on women who are already multiply-burdened.

In response as well to the issue of red-tagging, leaders of PLM-Tatalon organized a "paralegal training" session through the support of law students who volunteered to conduct the activity. The event took place on a Sunday, and its objective was to equip participants with the legal knowledge to, among other things, challenge accusations of red-tagging.

Yet preparing for the event took an entire week; this itself was a difficult endeavor. One of the first tasks leaders had to accomplish was to reserve a venue. Martha, a member of Chapter 17, recalled doing so with other leaders while balancing her responsibilities at home. "Reserving the venue was difficult," said Martha. "My children had classes, and my husband isn't home. It was just me. So I balanced it with my responsibilities at home and with supporting PLM. We looked for the venue at night, after preparing dinner."

Inviting members to attend was difficult too because leaders preferred to visit their members' homes; they observed how this approach was more effective. "What was difficult was inviting members," said Martha. "We went around to invite members. Probably for a week. Every other day from noon to sunset." Going around to invite members of her chapter took half a day for Buwan. Her efforts, however, went to no avail because the venue was packed when they arrived. "My members did not attend because [the venue] was full," she said. "It took me half a day. Luckily my members are cooperative."

Preparations on the day of the event were also difficult. Nelly described the morning preparation as such:

> On the day of the event, we cooked rice and prepared the sound system. Before 6:00 a.m., I was already awake. It was difficult because all the spoons and forks, we wrapped them with tissue paper. We prepared the water, the heater. The morning preparation was difficult.

On the evening prior to the event, Nelly and Martha, another interviewee, bought ingredients (e.g., 10 kilos of chicken) which they immediately handed to a chapter leader who volunteered to cook lunch. She recalled how the chapter leader woke up as early as 2:00 a.m. to prepare. "[The one who cooked] woke up at 2:00 a.m., she started preparing," she said. "Good thing some members helped her."

Attendees also had to find ways to fulfill their responsibilities at home in order to attend (Arcilla, 2020). "For that schedule," said Lisa, "I asked my kid to take care [of my baby]. I said, 'I have to go somewhere important.'" One *Nanay* (mother) who sat in front of me was even teased by other attendees for dozing off during a discussion. She immediately explained that she had to wake up at 4:00 a.m. to cook meals for her family before she headed to the venue.

These anecdotes describe the labor involved in processes of regulative legitimation, illustrating how the pressure to respond to threats of red-tagging increased the unpaid community work of women community leaders (and members). Yet not everyone found the event beneficial. Cristine complained that the training contributed nothing to her housing

application. "We were there for an entire day," she said. "I learned about lawyers. I said, 'Why aren't they mentioning what we are applying for?'" Her complaint indicates tensions between strategies that organizations use to build regulative legitimacy and the strategies they use to address the immediate concerns of their members (i.e., pragmatic legitimacy). These tensions reflect possible misalignments between an organization's activities and its members' priorities.

Intraorganizational Hierarchies

Yet power manifests even within women-led, urban poor CBOs themselves. This happens when they organize in ways that centralize decision-making processes and contradict principles of feminist organizing that seek to "deconstruct" hierarchies and distribute voice (Hartley et al., 2020).

In contrast, Czarina held much sway over PLM-Tatalon. A manifestation of this was the informal criteria she herself designed to differentially assign priority to members that applied for housing and, in so doing, entice involvement. To be clear, the criteria lacked the validation of PLM-Tatalon's leaders, for according to Tricia, a member of the ExeComm, no one expressed disagreement when Czarina proposed this during a meeting. "Czarina made it," she said. "We were just listening when she said active [members] get priority. If I disagree, she will answer back. Isn't that wrong? It should be equal." It also did not significantly meet its objective of enticing involvement. Martha, for instance, described how involvement in Chapter 17 had drastically declined (i.e., from 30 active members to five) despite her chapter expanding during the time when the criteria was first put in place.

Moreover, this criteria was informal because it lacked a system to surveil compliance. To be a member of PLM-Tatalon, however, meant that one must abide by requirements Czarina prescribed. Members had to attend mobilizations, participate in meetings, familiarize themselves with PLM-Tatalon's constitution and bylaws, attend educational discussions conducted by community organizers, and pay the monthly *butaw* (membership fee) of PhP20 to be prioritized in PLM-Tatalon's list of housing applicants. One's place in the list was

determined by the extent to which one complied. Nelly described this practice as follows:

> There's first priority, second priority, and third priority. First priority are those who always attend meetings and pay the *butaw*. Second priority are those who don't always come, and don't always pay their *butaw*. And third priority are those who are always absent.

Those who supported the criteria did so by emphasizing the value of hard work. "Yes, you are a member of PLM but [if] it's nothing to you, you won't get anything," said Ema, a member of Chapter 9. "Why will the blessing come to you if you don't work?" And Dodong, who was also a member of Chapter 17, made a similar comment. "I agree with that," he said. "Because, it's like you sowed [the seeds] but someone else will harvest its fruits. When you persevere, there is always a reward."

Some expressed disagreement because the criteria was insensitive to their circumstances as mothers. Among those who expressed disagreement was Carla, a member of Chapter 1. She expressed difficulty meeting the criteria because she had to balance her work as a laundrywoman and her responsibilities to her young children. She said:

> How about those like me? How about those with a lot of children and things to do? If the basis of being active is if you can attend all events, how about those who can't attend? Not everyone is free at that time. I'm number 1 there! If someone can care for my child, why not?

Tricia had similar sentiments. She was a member of the ExeComm, but she decided to become inactive because she found the criteria unfair. "I'm thinking about my children," she said. "I need to think about my family first. I can attend if my children have no school. I can attend on Saturdays but not on other days because I need to prioritize my family. That's why I am inactive."

While most defended the system on the basis of hard work, Carla and Tricia expressed disagreement because the criteria did not align with their values as mothers. To both of them, their families were of greater

priority. Their sentiments reflect tensions that arise when grassroots organizations try to build moral legitimacy (Chowdhury et al., 2021), for both Tricia and Carla articulated grievances that foregrounded the inequity of the criteria.

A consequence of this system was Tricia's decision to become inactive. Another consequence was that it produced a moral hierarchy of worth within PLM-Tatalon. Those who complied received first priority, etc. This hierarchy contradicts principles of inclusivity and egalitarianism (Weil, 1986; Hartley et al., 2020)

Conclusion

In this study, I examined the intersections of gender, legitimation, and power through the case of PLM-Tatalon. First, their case shows how state practices that are constitutive of legitimation increase the unpaid community work of women community leaders. I illustrated this finding through the informal requirements the QC HCDRD requested that Czarina and Juris fulfill, and I suggested that their inability to accomplish these requirements was indicative of a pattern of neglect that affected PLM-Tatalon's pragmatic legitimacy. I also illustrated this finding through the bureaucratic hurdles that Czarina and Juris endured to apply for accreditation, and the labor that leaders performed to organize a paralegal training; I suggested that these activities were attempts at improving PLM-Tatalon's regulative legitimacy. Lastly, I showed how women-led CBOs can themselves function around hierarchies. I presented this finding through a criteria that Czarina designed, and suggested that discussions about this criteria were indicative of tensions that arise when grassroots organizations build moral legitimacy.

The implications of these findings are twofold. Firstly, they foreground an approach to local housing that upholds the strategic gender needs of women in urban poor communities (Moser, 1993). Rather than increasing their burdens and reinforcing traditional gender roles, local housing policy should provide opportunities for change and empowerment. As Laguilles-Timog (2018) notes, a step towards this direction might involve prioritizing the vantage points of women for their unique perspectives that can

contribute to more equitable housing policy. And lastly, these findings show how principles of feminist organizing can positively contribute to legitimacy-building in the long run. Practices that abide by notions of egalitarianism and equality not only give voice to all. They provide avenues for members like Tricia and Carla to more effectively participate in decision-making processes—thereby enabling their organization to more authentically represent their concerns and interests.

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