



REVIEW

***Nanlalaban: Ten Women and Their Journeys from Victimhood to Empowerment.* Philippine Human Rights Information Center, 2025. 173 pp.**

Nanlalaban (Fighting Back) is a robust effort to document and spread awareness about the the women in the families left behind by Duterte's drug war. In ten testimonies collected, edited, and published by the Philippine Human Rights Information Center (PhilRights), the recollections of the women who bravely faced the aftermath of the extrajudicial killings (EJKs) of their loved ones—of their brothers, husbands, boyfriends, and a daughter—are made legible to endure, turned into compelling stories seeking permanence among the harrowing accounts of the Duterte years.

Sans an introduction or a synoptic chapter, PhilRights's exact aim for this publication can then be gleaned from its brief acknowledgements and foreword. It offers these stories "not only to inspire but to hold accountable those behind the killings under former President Duterte's so-called war on drugs." The women's courage is evident in their telling. The quest for justice starts with their undaunted selves. Nymia Pimentel-Simbulan, PhilRights's executive director, claims that these women, "no longer wanting to remain silent and marginalized, they now share their stories with us courageously. Their gradual awakening and transformation from victims to human rights defenders have emboldened them to claim and defend their rights."

While other discourse on this topic has been dominated by coverage recounting the details of individual deaths, this book leads the reader to confront the reality that did not just end when the victims were murdered. The narratives of these women regarding their personal experiences and journeys in recovering from the aftermath reveal different horrors of the drug war otherwise not commonly discussed. Their personal traumatic experiences have been seen as unavoidable to further the violent antidrug campaign initiated by former President Rodrigo Duterte.

Almost all testimonies in this book follow a similar sequence of events and defining circumstances, affirming much of the previous reports on the country's bloody antidrug campaign. EJKs as products of police operations are commonly justified through the *nanlaban* narrative. These killings were rationalized as necessary self-defense procedures of state agents against victims that allegedly resisted arrest. In most instances, *nanlaban* narratives involved the planting of evidence such as guns and sachets of shabu.

After each killing, emotional and financial struggles ensued. These unexpected deaths posed huge financial burden on the families. Thousands of pesos must be raised immediately to claim the body from the funeral home, for the autopsy, and for the funeral services. Since the victims were usually the breadwinners in these already struggling households, the brunt of raising this cost, be it begged for or borrowed, were solely carried by the women left behind. These women and their families were traumatized by the killings and were forced to deal with the stigma surrounding their loved ones' deaths. They endured being the subject of gossip in the community, their children getting bullied at school, and the deterioration of their mental health. As this pattern repeats itself throughout almost all testimonies written, as well as other documentations of EJKs, this sequence of events could somewhat be considered as the standard procedure for how EJKs were carried out during the early days of former President Duterte's term, beginning on June 30, 2016.

The book is successful in showing a more personal and gendered picture of the drug war, going past death tolls and numbers by spotlighting these women who had to live with not only the traumatic loss of their loved one, but also take up all remaining responsibilities in caring for their family. Their stories in this book draw attention to their suffering that to be seen in statistics. The dedication of this book entirely to the women's stories and struggles has the effect of questioning and emphasizing the severe imbalance of gender roles that exist. As these struggles can sometimes be treated as the invisible labor of women, *Nanlalaban* is a needed addition to the literature regarding EJKs. It spotlights the extremely high socioeconomic cost of the drug war, which has been mostly paid by the women involved.

The documentation of their experiences, with publications such as *Nanlalaban*, becomes crucial in exacting proper accountability from those responsible. With the amount that these women lost and endured, without seeing any proper reparations done until this day, this book can be seen as a way of empowering them in two different ways: first, it provides vital validation of the experiences of these women, a step closer to obtaining justice for what they went through. The second relates to the title of the book, *Nanlalaban*, a spin on *nanlaban* [fought back], the oft used word to justify the killings of those the state wanted to silence and erase through the drug war. While the latter use of the word *laban* [fight] is in the past tense, signalling that the fight is already done and final, the title of this book is in the active use of the word,

meaning that the resistance is still ongoing. As a word previously weaponized against these women to justify the killings of their loved ones, the release of this anthology is their way of fighting back against the tyranny they experience. By giving them a platform to speak out and share their sufferings, the book plays a huge role in giving them back their voices, which they may have felt they lost.

In comparison to more academic books written regarding the drug war, the main strength of *Nanlalaman* is its ability to humanize the victims of the drug war: who lives, who dies, and who tells their stories. The storytelling style that *Nanlalaman* employs—restraining any analysis—succinctly allows the focus of the reader to remain completely on each individual story.

Nanlalaman gives the audience the chance to hear from the victims themselves, more than statistics and journalistic accounts. Although this book is written from a third person point of view, with contributions from multiple writers under PhilRights, it maintains a straightforward style, rarely drawing away from the woman each chapter focuses on. This allows the audience to maintain an intimate look as to how they struggled to navigate through their experiences, becoming stories of redemption as they rise above their situations and become strong advocates for human rights in their own communities.

For the EJK victims, the reader is able to know about their lives outside of what is generally said by the media and public officials, and how they were portrayed by the Duterte administration and its supporters. In their day-to-day lives, the victims—deemed drug addicts and criminals—were fathers, partners, and brothers.

The systemic nature of these human rights violations has naturally created an environment of fear, in which individuals may feel as if it is them versus the state. In these situations, it could be considered extremely dangerous for these women to continue to try and seek justice and proper reparations as they have been wronged by the very bodies that are supposed to give them justice. The openness and willingness of these women to share their stories speak greatly of their bravery. Amidst the culture of silence and helplessness, nongovernmental organizations, such as PhilRights, play a huge role in protecting and empowering these victims. PhilRights provided these women with both immediate and long-term support that stressed the importance of human rights education. Through this, victims are able to understand how they have been wrongly treated in a system that seemingly continues to reward their perpetrators, giving them the guidance to be able to seek justice accordingly. A part of these empowerment efforts involve providing safe spaces and documenting the personal experiences of these women, resulting in documentation initiatives such as *Nanlalaman*. These keep injustices etched in public memory and as evidence that can be used to inform actions of accountability. However, with consideration to the role that PhilRights played, one thing that can be noted is that at the end of most chapters, there is an acknowledgement of the organization, mentioning how they helped each victim find their voice in their

journey of survival by supplying them with the platform and opportunity. While not completely out of place, it can be viewed as slightly off-putting; as it has the effect of attributing most of the credit to the organization rather than toward the strength of each individual.

In a broader context, these stories touch on themes concerning Filipino societal issues, specifically relating to the urban poor. Although not discussed comprehensively within the book, there is mention of the extremely disproportionate effects of the drug war on the poor as compared to the privileged, who remain largely unaffected throughout the campaign. In one of the reflections made by the victims, she says: “There’s no such thing as rule of law when you’re poor” (29), a sentiment which resonates with all women interviewed for the book.

In line with this, as the book is written in uncomplicated English, as well as presents translations for quotes in Filipino from the victims, its intended audience could be assumed as upper- and middle-class Filipino citizens, as it is the language commonly spoken among these demographics. Another factor that could help explain this intended audience is that they have also been the bracket shown in numerous public opinion polls to have the strongest support for the antidrug campaign (Dionisio 2020, xi). By supplying a complete depiction of how much the drug war changed people’s lives, this book has the power of confronting the upper- and middle-class demographics with an uncomfortable reality spoken by those who experienced the campaign’s consequences firsthand. Additionally, this decision to use English could have been for the purpose of reaching international audiences, such as those who support other human rights NGOs such as 11.11.11 and Brot für die Welt.

Nanlalaban honors the ten women who, despite being some of the most affected people of the drug war, chose to continue fighting for the justice they deserve. This book is unique because its writing style and focused content suggest that, more than anything, the book is also written for the very same women. By being able to see their journeys from victims to survivors, the book empowers them not only in a way that validates their own experiences despite the lack of any reparations, but also by making clear that their collective situation should not be normalized—something needs to be done about it.—
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REFERENCE

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