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“Leadership is not just a job or a title, it takes a lot of preparation and courage as it bears a lifetime responsibility, and that your heart and mind must be ready.” (Castro, 2018)

Felisa Ramasta Castro is a woman from Barangay San Roque, municipality of Salcedo in Eastern Samar province. She’s 53 years old, married with three children: the eldest is 25 years old, the second child is 22 years old, and the youngest is 18 years old. She’s currently the president of Kusog han Kababayen-an han Salcedo (KAKASA), a federation of rural women’s organizations composed of 36 rural women’s associations. Kusog han Kababayen-an han Salcedo literally means “The Strength of Women in Salcedo”.

The Typhoon Haiyan experience drastically changed people’s lives, including hers. Prior to her involvement with the local CSO, she was a community volunteer in her barangay, and also part of a women’s organization in San Roque. Her organization and its members were inactive—busy with their personal lives. “I was not very much involved with our community. I never saw myself engaging with barangay officials discussing about community concerns and issues.”

But then, her mindset changed when she saw how “backward” their community was. “My neighbors were into gambling and gossips... And there was a higher incidence of out-of-school youths.” When Typhoon Haiyan struck their communities, their situation got worsened. There were family displacements, houses were destroyed, and violence against women was very rampant. “We have conducted orientations on violence against women and children, but many are unaware of their rights.” Felisa realized how important the solidarity groups were, and their situation served as an eye-opener and she felt that she has to do something for a change.

As a PKKK member, Felisa got involved in the rehabilitation and recovery programs of ActionAid such as permanent shelter assistance and hog raising livelihood in 2015. In 2016, she’s also part of promoting women’s rights and building resilience in emergencies project in partnership with ActionAid Australia. The project focused on providing capacities in DRRM especially on re-assessing the contingency plans at the barangay level. She also added that women worked together in identifying the issues that were not included in the plans, and were able to provide proper interventions.

“It was difficult to encourage women at first, there were hindrances for them to participate in the orientation/trainings. Even though women wanted to attend meetings or trainings, their husbands do not allow them. There were times that our husbands allowed us to attend, but in exchange, we need to take photographs just to prove that we really attended a meeting or training. I also experienced this kind of treatment from my husband even though I am much aware of my rights. I just can’t imagine how worse for other women, who are not familiar with the concept of women’s rights, to experience this?”

“We are thankful for ActionAid for giving us an opportunity to lead in the shelter assistance. We also assisted the communities by gathering data for permanent shelter and house repair assistance. ActionAid also provided us livelihood projects such as hog raising in Barangay Burak, Barangay San Roque, and Barangay Asgad and a community store in Barangay Jagnaya in Salcedo, Eastern Samar. We are truly grateful of PKKK and ActionAid for providing us support by conducting activities in relation to disaster risk reduction.”

They reviewed their barangay contingency plans and assessed that there were gaps and issues unconsidered. They presented their revisions and consulted the barangay council to integrate the updated version into their BDRRM plan. After several engagements with the barangay council, their plans were adopted and women-led DRR committees were given leadership roles in the Barangay DRRM structure. “It was an empowering experience for us to be given an opportunity to update our contingency plan, we were able to contribute something to the community by identifying and addressing potential risks such as sinkhole occurrences. “We are now recognized by the local government units, and many international organizations were also approaching us to take part in their projects.”

As of the present, she is facilitating other women’s associations to replicate the best practices and get involved with their barangay DRRM councils, and to establish their own women-led DRR committees. “I hope that my children also become women’s rights advocates just like me, I want them to have awareness about their environment and their community.” She also emphasized the importance of having affiliations with women’s associations. “It is really important to be part of an organization, it is not just being active or involved in the community, but you also receive the blessing of sisterhood. When you need someone to talk to, your sisters will always listen and support you. They helped me widen my perspective about life. We will grow together, we will fight for our rights together – no one is left behind.”

For Felisa, her work doesn’t stop as a woman leader. “Leadership is not just a job or a title, it takes a lot of preparation and courage as it bears a lifetime responsibility, and that your heart and mind must be ready. Always remember to believe in yourself and you have to be fearless and ready for challenges.”