



ASWANG

A FILM BY
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PRIMER



Context

In February 2016, campaigning for presidency, Rodrigo Duterte promised to wipe out corruption, drugs, and crime in six months. He also promised that not hesitate to kill people in the process, claiming there could be no cleansing that is “bloodless.”

A year after his assumption to the office, he failed to deliver on his first promise, but has certainly lived up to the latter promise of killing under the guise of a “war on drugs”. And so killings began. By 2017, Philippine Supreme Court has established that by 2017, 20,232 had already been killed. Today, the number could easily be between 25,000 and 30,000.

Most victims of the extrajudicial killings come from urban poor communities, often small-time drug users or dealers. While most of these are men, women bear the aftermath of the killings—facing a new reality of vulnerability. Ostracized, isolated, and terrorized by local officials, they are left even more vulnerable to sexual exploitation, turning into a new underclass of the urban poor.

Understanding the War on Drugs Narrative

As in the global context, the goal of the war on drugs is to eliminate illegal drug use. But this approach has been ineffective for the last 50 years. In the Philippines, the focus of the drug war was largely punitive—criminalizing drug use and using inhumane and undignified measures against persons who use drugs (PWUDs), which only scared people but failed to solve the problem.

Studies show that this punitive approach has failed to reduce drug use or its dangers. Instead, it creates harmful stigma, falsely labeling drug users as criminals, even killers themselves, who don't deserve a second chance in life. This stigma not only harms the users but also their families¹, some of whom even prefer imprisonment or death over rehabilitation.

¹ "Defining and Implementing a Public Health Response to Drug Use and Misuse." AMERICAN PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION, 2013, www.apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policy-statements/policy-database/2014/07/08/08/04/defining-and-implementing-a-public-health-response-to-drug-use-and-misuse.

The war on drugs, with its violent and dismissive approach, overlooks the roots of drug use, which stems from real social issues: job shortage, poor healthcare, and social inequality. It dehumanizes drug users, turning the problem into a “war on the poor.” Under Duterte, drug users face violence, police abuse, and death, while being denied access to effective, evidence-based solutions.

The war on drugs is failing because it dismisses the people’s genuine concerns. Ultimately, it results in an irony where instead of keeping people safe from both drugs and perpetrators, it kills people who are themselves victims of drug-use.

Why is the issue of drugs a public health issue?

When we refer to public health, it is the science of preventing disease and injury and promoting and protecting the health of populations and communities. This includes substance abuse, which also deals with a person’s health. When instances of addiction or overdose occur, the solution should ideally address the user’s physical and mental health and well-being.

Harm Reduction

Harm Reduction reduces the harm associated with the use of psychoactive drugs by people unable and unwilling to stop through policies, programs, and practices. It's rooted heavily in the sense of social justice and anti-discrimination.

While there's a growing demand for an alternative to the war on drugs, the deeply embedded stigma on drugs and PWUDs makes it challenging to introduce harm reduction interventions on the ground, despite existing evidence on their effectiveness.

Currently, there's a slow but steady push from some civil society organizations, community groups, and academics to change the dominant punitive paradigm in favor of a public health and human rights-oriented approach to the issue of drugs and drug use.



The International Criminal Court Investigation on the Duterte's war on drugs

June 30, 2016: The Philippines joined the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), which aims to hold perpetrators of serious crimes accountable when national courts fail to do so, and contribute to the prevention of such crimes²

October, 2016: The ICC prosecutor Fatou Bensuada announced that her office has been monitoring the rising death toll from the Philippines' War on Drugs (WOD) under Duterte's government.³

2017: A formal communication filed to the ICC accusing the Duterte administration of "repeatedly, unchangingly, and continuously" and requesting a preliminary investigations.⁴

2018: ICC prosecutor Fatou Bensouda announced a preliminary investigation into the killings. Duterte's government also announced it would withdraw from the ICC.

March, 2019: The Philippines is no longer a member-state of the ICC.

December 15, 2020: ICC Prosecutor Bensouda found "reasonable basis to believe" that crimes against humanity occurred in the Philippines from July 1, 2016, to March 16, 2019 (while the Philippines was still a member-state of the ICC).

September 15, 2021: The ICC approved a formal investigation into alleged crimes against humanity committed by Duterte's administration, including the existence of, and killings associated with, the Davao Death Squad (DDS). Karim Khan succeeded Bensouda as the new ICC prosecutor, who temporarily suspended the ongoing investigation.

2022–Present: Upon the impression that the Duterte administration did not take progressive steps to investigate the extrajudicial killings in the Philippines, Prosecutor Khan requested the pre-trial chamber to resume its investigation.⁵ The newly-elected Marcos Jr., insists the country's justice system is functioning and has no intention of rejoining the ICC, though it will provide data related to the WOD cases.

November 13, 2024: Executive Secretary Lucas Besamin stated the government will not block Duterte's potential surrender to the ICC in connection with crimes against humanity.

2 <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/understanding-the-icc.pdf>

3 <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/timeline-international-criminal-court-philippines-rodrico-duterte-drug-war/>

4 *ibid.*

5 Leon, Dwight de. "House Forms "Quad Comm" to Probe Links between POGOs, EJKs, Drugs, Chinese Syndicates." *RAPPLER*, 7 Aug. 2024, www.rappler.com/philippines/house-representatives-forms-quad-committee-probe-links-pogos-ejks-drugs-chinese-syndicates/. Accessed 14 Nov. 2024.



Philippine Legislations Probe on the bloody War on Drugs

August 7, 2024: The House of Representatives forms a “mega-panel” to investigate links between Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators (POGOs), Chinese syndicates, illegal drugs, and extrajudicial killings.⁶

October 28, 2024: Senate Blue Ribbon Committee begins hearings on the drug war, led by Minority Leader Koko Pimentel, examining accusations against Duterte, Senator Bong Go, and Senator Ronald Dela Rosa for allegedly incentivizing killings of PWUDs.

⁶ Leon, Dwight de. “House Forms “Quad Comm” to Probe Links between POGOs, EJKs, Drugs, Chinese Syndicates.” RAPPLER, 7 Aug. 2024, www.rappler.com/philippines/house-representatives-forms-quad-committee-probe-links-pogos-ejks-drugs-chinese-syndicates/. Accessed 14 Nov. 2024.

This discussion examines the “Aswang” as a symbol of extrajudicial killings and Filipino culture, explores how superstitions reflect justice challenges, and how victims like Kian delos Santos shape views on the drug war. It also questions the role of the Commission on Human Rights and media, and how the film challenges perceptions of victims, law enforcers, and the justice system. You may use these questions to spark discussion with your peers or reflect on them privately as you contemplate the themes explored in the film.

Facts

- A total of 6,225 drug suspects had been killed in the government's war against illegal drugs as of the end of 2021, according to a report released by the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA).⁷ #RealNumbers reported 3,967 drug personalities who died in anti-drug operations and 16,355 Homicide Cases under Investigation as of July 1, 2016 to November 27, 2017.⁸ Human rights organizations cited a death toll of 27,000+ as of December 2018.⁹
- Between July 2016 and December 2019, at least 122 children, including a one-year-old, were killed during President Rodrigo Duterte's “war on drugs” in the Philippines, according to the report by the World Organization Against Torture.¹⁰

7 Sarao, Zacarian. “6,225 Drug Suspects Killed as of End of 2021 – PDEA.” INQUIRER.net, 1 Feb. 2022, newsinfo.inquirer.net/1548337/fwd-6225-drug-suspects-killed-by-end-of-2021-pdea.

8 “VERA File's statement on PCOO's #RealNumbers in Fighting Illegal Drugs.” VERAFiles.org, 15 Jul. 2019, <https://verafiles.org/articles/vera-files-statement-pcoos-realnumbers-fighting-illegal-drug>

9 “IN NUMBERS: The Philippines' 'War on Drugs.'” Rappler, www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/numbers-statistics-philippines-war-drugs.

10 “‘War on Drugs’ Blamed for Deaths of at Least 122 Children in Philippines.” The Guardian, 30 June 2020, www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/jun/30/war-on-drugs-blamed-for-deaths-of-at-least-122-children-in-philippines.

- Caloocan City Police Station was awarded Best City Police Station in the National Capital Region two days after the killing of Kian Loyd delos Santos and on the day Carl Angelo Arnaiz was killed by policemen.¹¹
- Since 2017, only the three policemen involved in Delos Santos' death have been sent to jail in what was the first and so far only conviction in Mr. Duterte's drug war.¹²
- The International Criminal Court (ICC) has formally authorized an official probe into alleged crimes against humanity in Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's "war on drugs", dealing a moral victory to human rights defenders and families of victims killed, including innocent children.¹³

11 News, AMITA LEGASPI, GMA. "Caloocan Police Awarded Best City Police Station Two Days after Kian Slay." GMA News Online, www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/624760/calooacan-police-awarded-best-city-police-station-two-days-after-kian-slay/story/. Accessed 6 Oct. 2021.

12 Krixia Subingsubing. "Give Drug War Victims Justice, ICC Pressed." INQUIRER.net, Aug. 2021, newsinfo.inquirer.net/1474532/give-drug-war-victims-justice-icc-pressed.

13 Regencia, Ted. "ICC Agrees to Open Investigation into Duterte's 'War on Drugs.'" www.aljazeera.com, www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/15/philippines-icc-agrees-to-probe-dutertes-war-on-drugs.

Discussion Questions

- What does the “Aswang” symbolize in the film, and how do its representations relate to the broader narrative of extrajudicial killings and Filipino culture?
- Do Filipino superstitions, such as placing a chick on a casket to seek justice, reflect deeper issues of limited access to justice in the Philippines?
- How do the stories of victims, such as Kian delos Santos and individuals who use drugs for survival, shape public perception of the drug war and its human cost?
- How effective were the Commission on Human Rights and media in addressing the plight of illegally detained individuals, and what more could have been done?
- What narrative is the film challenging or advocating, and how does it affect how audiences view the victims, law enforcers, and the justice system?

The Lore of ‘Aswang’ in the Philippines

The Aswang is a mythical creature from Philippine folklore, known for its ability to blend in with humans during the day and transform into supernatural predators at night. These beings are feared for their diet of human liver and blood, preying on adults, newborns, and unborn babies.

Types of Aswang

- Tiktik:¹⁴
 - Winged creature with a needle-like tongue.
 - Preys on pregnant women by drinking the blood of unborn children from rooftops.
- Mambabarang:¹⁵
 - A sorcerer-like Aswang with dark powers (barang).
 - Uses insects to infest and harm victims internally.
- Kiwig/Malakat:¹⁶
 - Shapeshifting Aswang from Aklan or Cebu.
 - Turns into animals like boars, dogs, or cats to hunt and bites victims' necks to drink blood.
- Immortality:
 - The Aswang's essence resides in a mystical black chick (itim na sisiw), passed to another human to continue the creature's lineage.

14 Calabia Samar, Edgar. *Mga Nilalang Na Kagila-Gilalas*. 2019. Adarna House, Inc., 2019.

15 Calabia Samar, Edgar. *Mga Nilalang Na Kagila-Gilalas*. 2019. Adarna House, Inc., 2019.

16 Calabia Samar, Edgar. *Mga Nilalang Na Kagila-Gilalas*. 2019. Adarna House, Inc., 2019.

Historical and Political Use

- Spanish Colonization:
 - The Spanish used the Aswang myth to control Filipinos under the encomienda system.
 - Filipinos living beyond the sound of church bells were labeled as outlaws or Aswang to suppress dissent.
- CIA Psychological Warfare:¹⁷
 - During the Huk Rebellion, the CIA exploited the Aswang myth to instill fear.
 - Captured Huk fighters were staged to appear as victims of Aswang attacks, with puncture wounds on their necks, to terrify rural communities and undermine the rebellion.



Cultural Significance

- The Aswang myth reflects the intersection of folklore, fear, and control in Philippine history.
- It serves as a symbol of supernatural terror, cultural identity, and the historical weaponization of fear by colonial and political powers.
- The enduring lore continues to shape how Filipinos perceive the supernatural and its influence on societal narratives.

Dissecting Aswang

1. Why does Jomari call the police “the enemy,” and what does this reveal about Filipinos’ fear and distrust of institutions meant to protect them?

2. Jomari and his friends are role-playing, they were pretending to be the police while pretend-killing another kid, and then they ran away switching from being the police to being chased by the police.

“This is the police!”

“Get down on the ground!”

“You’re dead!”

(Imitates gun shooting)

“Stay there! Quick! Shoot him!”

“Run! The police are here!”

“Police!”

“There’s a bald policeman!”

Share your thoughts on the prevailing culture of violence and its lasting effect on children.

3. It is said in the movie that, "The measure of a country is how it treats its prisoners," what does the overcrowding in Philippine prisons, worsened by the drug war, reveal about the country's human rights and justice system?

4. Does the drug war address the root causes of drug use, or does it further stigmatize those involved? Would treating drug use as a health and social issue be more effective

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Mom: *Ikaw- tao nga nasasaktan e, 'di ba. Umiiyak nga siya kasi may naramdaman siya.*

Ganon din siya. [If you can feel pain, then so can the dog.]

O ayon, kain na. Kain na anak, dali na. [Hurry and eat already.]

Jomari: *Sasalohin pa ng aso yan.* [The dog will take the food.]

Kaya nga sabi ko sa'yo hampasin mo sa ulo e. [That's why I told you to smack it on the head.]

Mom: *Ha? Tama ba 'yon?* [That's not right.]

Discuss how stories help counter the narrative of violence and how it humanizes the people that the general public perceives as "criminals," and "addicts."



To know more about
the film and the drug
war you may visit
these sites:

aswangmovie.com
stopthekillings.ph

Organize your own screening and
bring it to your communities! Send us an email!

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