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WOMEN IN ZERO WASTE

WOMEN'S MONTH ISSUE

ON THE COVER:

Merci Ferrer stands at a mountain of waste at a dumpsite in Dumaguete City, Philippines. © Greenpeace

ORIGINS

Women's Month Issue

ORIGINS is a magazine by Greenpeace Philippines that traces the roots of environmental action through the stories of communities leading the way.

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WOMEN IN ZERO WASTE



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FOREWORD

WOMEN AND PLASTIC

By Marian Ledesma

The plastic pollution crisis, a pervasive issue that seems to grow more insidious with each passing year, is in every corner of the world—from the highest peaks to the deepest trenches, in our air, water, and soil, and even inside you and me. Yet, its impacts—and the injustices it perpetuates—are not felt equally. Women, particularly in communities made vulnerable by inequities, bear a disproportionate burden under this plastic crisis.

Every day, women are navigating multiple layers of injustice and inequity due to long-standing broken systems built on oppression, discrimination, and exploitation. As a woman in my thirties, you do not get to be my age and have not experienced in one way or another some form of discrimination, inequality, or worse, harm. Just because you are a woman. Unfortunately in some parts of the world, such violations have come to be accepted as the way things are, no thanks to colonialism and greed that have dismantled women's power in indigenous cultures.

With all the injustices we face, it is sadly not a surprise that women are disproportionately impacted by the plastic crisis. Our bodies store more bioaccumulating toxic chemicals like phthalates used in plastic. These endocrine disruptors associated with diabetes and cardiovascular disease can be found in feminine care products. Cosmetics also pose a similar problem, with the presence of harmful chemicals and microplastics in these products. In informal waste management settings, women are delegated to lower tiers of the hierarchy, handling poorer quality waste and getting exposed to more toxic material. Even in everyday life, women are at a disadvantage. As women tend to shoulder the bulk of household responsibilities and caregiving tasks, our exposure to plastic products and harmful chemicals are much higher.



“The fight against plastic pollution requires justice for women and other marginalized groups.”

Nowadays, plastic is inescapable. Even when you're a zero waste campaigner like myself, plastic is somehow unavoidable—not for a lack of trying, but simply because the plastic industry and corporations have made it so. Their dependence on single-use plastics for packaging and products leaves us without a choice, exposing us to plastic and its toxicity even if we don't want it. The reality is that as plastic pollution infiltrates our lives, it affects our overall well-being. For women, it's just another thing that we're expected to accept as part of life.

But despite these deep-rooted injustices, the harms of plastic against women can be stopped. Transforming systems to curb environmental destruction and social inequities requires upstream intervention. Corporations must cut plastic production and invest in community-led reuse and refill systems. Governments must enable these solutions through ambitious reduction targets and corporate accountability. National laws and a strong Global Plastics Treaty offer a chance to tackle plastic pollution across its full lifecycle. And these policies, along with corporate action, must ensure a just, plastic-free future.

We must remember, however, that the fight against plastic pollution and any genuine solution requires justice for women and

other marginalized groups. It must incorporate their lived experiences. Their perspectives will be vital to not only understanding the many facets of this crisis, but also crafting meaningful solutions. With the inclusion of women and other affected groups, we take a crucial step towards justice and equity in the fight against plastic.

Today, there are many women leaders in communities all over the world who are rising up to change the systems that have been putting us down for so long.

This month's issue features different women in the zero waste movement in the Philippines. Their stories are unique and their challenges are diverse, but what they have in common are valuable contributions to the fight against plastic pollution. These women have struggled and have had their lows, but like women before us who have fought hard for gender justice and women's rights, they continue to get up and show up for their communities, their advocacies, and their vision of a better world for everyone.

The women in the zero waste movement have uplifted their communities and led the way for solutions. Their experiences give me hope that change is possible. Their stories show us what the strength, courage, and power of women can do. #

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Join thousands of individuals by adding your name to the growing demand for big corporations to stop producing single-use plastics and switch to sustainable alternatives like reuse and refill. A [#PlasticFreeFuture](#) is possible if we make reuse and refill a reality. Sign the petition today.

INVISIBLE NO MORE

Aloja Santos and her fight for waste workers' rights

By Eunille Santos

At 5:30 AM, 50-year-old Aloja Santos is already up. In her home in Looc, Dumaguete, she moves through her morning routine—preparing breakfast, getting her children ready for school, and setting up for the day's work. By 7:00 AM, she is on the streets, collecting waste from houses, navigating narrow alleys and wide roads.

It is a job that many overlook. Waste work often goes unnoticed, even though people rely on it to keep communities clean and healthy. Without waste workers like Aloja, cities would be overwhelmed by various kinds of waste.

The number of waste workers and waste pickers in the Philippines is estimated to exceed 100,000, though labor groups and non-government organizations believe the actual figure is much higher. Many work outside formal systems, collecting and sorting waste in open dumpsites, on city streets, or with pushcarts, making it difficult to track their numbers. Some are employed by barangays for waste collection, while others earn a living by recovering and selling materials from landfills.

Despite their essential role, waste workers in the Philippines lack formal recognition under labor laws. Most earn below the minimum wage, lack protective equipment, and receive no social benefits. Only 4,000 workers nationwide reportedly earn around PHP 250,000 annually in waste collection, recycling, and disposal.

“Minsan ilang buwan kaming walang sahod,” Aloja said. “May mga araw rin na pumapasok kami na walang sahod. Tuloy pa rin ang trabaho kasi paano na ang basura?”

Plastic and the weight of injustice

Waste workers are at the frontlines of plastic pollution, facing its impact daily. Each day, over 164 million sachets, 48 million shopping bags, and 45 million plastic labo bags are used in the country, adding to the growing burden of single-use plastic waste that they manage.





An elderly female waste picker carries a basket full of waste at a dumpsite in Dumaguete City, Philippines. © Greenpeace

“Mas marami ang nakikita naming plastic,” Aloja said. “Yung single-use, ‘yan ang pinaka-marami. Pero ‘yan din ang walang pakinabang.”

While other types of recyclables like metals, glass, and cartons can be resold for small profit, sachets are rarely recovered due to their small size and complex composition, making them difficult to recycle. “Yung iba sinusunog pa,” she said, noting that burning plastics releases toxic chemicals harmful to both human health and the environment.

Beyond pollution, plastic waste poses serious risks for waste workers. Unsegregated waste exposes them to sharp objects, hazardous chemicals, and rotting materials that may carry certain toxic compounds. Without proper protective gear, workers handle waste with bare hands, increasing their risk of cuts, infections, and other physical harm.

“Wala po kaming proper na proteksyon,” Aloja said. “Kung masugatan kami, sarili naming pera ang gagamitin para magpagamot.”

She recalled an instance when one of her colleagues stepped on broken glass hidden in a sack of waste, leaving a deep wound. Another was bitten by a dog while on duty. Some waste workers, carrying heavy loads on bicycles, have been hit by cars while making their rounds.

Despite these dangers, waste workers do not receive any hazard pay or sufficient protection and benefits. Barangay health centers offer only limited medical assistance. “Libre lang ‘yung unang anti-tetanus,” Aloja said, with follow-up doses needing to be paid for out-of-pocket. Any injury means additional financial strain.

Recognition and protection

Beyond health and safety risks, waste workers often face discrimination. Many are denied entry into establishments while collecting trash, with some business owners refusing to have them near their premises.

“May mga pagkakataon na pinapagalitan kami o sinasabihan na ‘Ang baho niyo,’” Aloja said. “Pwede bang mamaya na lang kayo kumuha ng basura?”

In wealthier areas, some residents treat them with suspicion or even accuse them of theft. Others dismiss their work altogether, seeing it as dirty rather than essential.

“Kapag sinabi mong waste worker, ang unang pumapasok talaga sa isip ng mga tao ay marumi,” Aloja said. “May diskriminasyon at panlalait sa aming trabaho. ‘Yung iba, sinasabihan pa kaming mukhang magnanakaw. Masakit ito para sa amin.”

Yet, waste workers are the backbone of waste management in the country. They help keep the vision of a zero-waste future alive. Despite their role, they still endure inconsistent pay and lack legal protection.

These challenges are not just individual struggles but a reflection of how waste workers remain excluded from policies meant to protect them. This is why waste worker groups have been pushing for the Magna Carta for Waste Workers—a proposed policy that seeks to ensure job stability, just compensation, hazard pay, health insurance, and the right to participate in policy making.

“Kami ang nasa frontlines, pero hindi kami sinasama sa usapan,” Aloja said. “Paano natin masosolusyonan ang problema sa basura kung hindi pinakikinggan ang mga nagtatrabaho dito?”

For Aloja, the Magna Carta for Waste Workers is more than just a legal proposal. It is about recognition—an acknowledgment that their work keeps the communities healthy, that their safety matters, and that their voices deserve to be heard.

Zero waste, women’s rights, and a just transition

Women waste workers are among the strongest advocates for recognition, understanding that gender inequities also exist in the waste management sector. With women making up a significant portion of the workforce, the need for protection is even more urgent.

Aloja, who leads both the Philippine National Waste Workers Association and the Looc Women’s Association in Dumaguete, sees how plastic pollution, weak labor protections, and gender disparities leave women waste workers more vulnerable. They often face discrimination, with society expecting them to do waste work voluntarily and without pay. Waste management is seen as an extension of household chores, yet when women enter the formal sector, they are overlooked, underpaid, and rarely protected by labor policies.

“Mas marami ang babae kaysa sa lalaking waste worker sa aming lugar. Pero kahit ganoon, sinasabihan pa rin kami na hindi raw kami bagay sa trabahong ganito, na hanggang bahay lang daw dapat kami,” Aloja said. “Pero syempre, hindi namin sila pinapakinggan. Gagawin namin lahat para mabuhay ang aming pamilya.”

At its core, the struggle of women waste workers is a fight for justice on multiple fronts—environmental, economic, and gender. Women bear the brunt of poor waste management. They are the ones sorting through the trash, more exposed to toxins, and navigating both paid and unpaid labor. But they are not just victims of the system—they are also leading the fight against it.



An elderly female waste picker rummages through the waste at a dumpsite in Dumaguete City, Philippines. © Greenpeace

Women waste workers are at the heart of the zero waste movement, advocating for plastic bans, better waste management policies, and a shift toward real sustainable solutions like reuse and refill systems.

Women, particularly in the Global South, have been stewards of waste management—at home, in communities, and in waste work itself. They ensure that communities are safe, materials are recovered, and resources are not wasted. Yet, their labor—both in households and the informal economy—remains invisible.

The same systems that deny women equal pay and labor protection also allow corporations to flood communities with plastic waste without accountability. The same economic structures that exploit women's unpaid and underpaid labor drive the overproduction of plastic, leaving the burden of waste management to some of the most marginalized communities in the world.

This is why the fight for zero-waste must be feminist—one that acknowledges the intersections of waste, labor, and gender justice. A just transition toward a zero waste future cannot happen without securing the rights and dignity of waste workers, especially women.

The zero waste and women's movements are deeply connected. Both fight against systems of exploitation, whether of labor, resources, or the environment. Both demand an economy that values people over profit, and sustainability over convenience. Both recognize that a truly just society cannot exist when only a few benefit while the majority—especially women and marginalized groups—carry the burden.

Aloja sees this connection clearly. For her, the fight for zero waste is not just about banning plastic. It is about dismantling the injustices that allow plastic pollution and labor exploitation to thrive.

“Kulang na kulang po talaga ang natatanggap namin, lalo na kaming mga



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kababaihan. Pero kahit walang sahod, tuloy pa rin kami. Kasi parang napamahal na [kami sa] trabaho namin.” Aloja said. “Iba kasi ang babae. Kahit mahirap, kahit walang katiyakan, hindi basta sumusuko. Kaya mahalaga na mabigyan kami ng tamang suporta at pagkilala. Hindi lang para sa amin, kundi para mabuwag ang hindi pantay na pagtrato sa aming trabaho.”

Just as the women's movement demands equal pay, fair labor conditions, and recognition for unpaid care work, the zero waste movement must demand fair wages, labor protection, and recognition for the workers who manage the world's waste.

A just transition to a zero-waste future must put women waste workers at the center, ensuring they are not just included in the conversation, but leading it.

“Bigyan nila kami ng halaga dahil kami po ay mahalaga,” Aloja said.

Until that recognition comes, Aloja will continue sorting through plastic, organizing fellow workers, and fighting for a just future, where the women at the frontlines are finally seen, heard, and valued. #

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'EH ANO KUNG SENIOR NA 'KO?'

Merci Ferrer's unwavering determination to build a better world

By James Relativo

Many think of environmentalism—just like many forms of activism—as a young person's game. But this driven woman is here to prove that fighting for the right to a safer, healthier, and plastic-free future should be everyone's concern.

This International Women's Month, Greenpeace Philippines interviewed Merci Ferrer. The 62-year-old stands as an integral figure in transforming parts of the province of Negros Oriental into formidable zero waste communities actively turning their back on single-use plastics.

"In 2018, we were faced by a waste crisis in Dumaguete City," said the co-convenor of War on Waste (WOW) Negros Oriental, a group which they founded in the same year. "There [was] a very high dump site. An open dump site at that time. So that was the right time to organize."

Merci ended up coordinating the Zero Waste Cities Project, an initiative which resulted in Apo Island of Dauin Municipality being hailed

as the first zero waste barangay in the Philippines.

As a result, the village adopted the waste management systems and practices introduced by WOW Negros Oriental in 2020. These practices later trickled down to the neighboring areas in Dumaguete City and the island province of Siquijor.

"A lot of people saw the sincerity of individuals. And mind you, we are all women who started the work. We always say that this is doable and practical. And when talking to people, especially women in the community, they get it right away," she said.

"In Dumaguete, what we did was we started with three barangays. These are all coastal communities because we want to tell the community... that if we manage our waste here in the coastal communities, the leakage of plastic will be less, especially single-use plastic. So, when they see models like the three barangays, they say, '*Oh, kaya din namin yan.*'"

Motherhood: A pivotal part of the journey

Merci admits that sustainability wasn't always a priority for her. In fact, it only managed to play a big role in her life well into adulthood.

"[My] work on zero waste and environmental sustainability really... started when I became a mom," she shared. "I have two children and it's but practical and [seemed like] the right thing to do to be economical in managing your discards when you have kids."

As someone who breastfed for years, she realized that simple practices, such as eliminating the need to buy and dispose of formula milk and plastic bottles, are actually zero waste.

Later, she joined organizations like Healthcare Without Harm International, Mother Earth Foundation, and Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA)—further cementing her belief and passion for zero waste and genuine sustainability.

The kind of work in these formations brought her to do zero waste work in hospitals for 12 years, leading her to get rid of toxic wastes in said setting while managing their discards. This later on brought her to communities.

"I moved here in Negros Oriental in 2016 and I don't have any other wish but to continue the work that I am doing," she explained.

One would think that Merci's years of experience merit her much respect and reverence, but in many spaces, older individuals—especially women—are often overlooked, dismissed, or seen as less capable, regardless of their expertise. This stereotype has been a persistent barrier to people contributing meaningfully as they grow older.



Gender, age, and plastics: An intersection of oppressions

Academics and political activists have long described the Philippines as a patriarchal society—one that upholds "men's power, authority, and dominance over women." Sadly, having macho-feudal leaders in power only hinders the progress of women empowerment and gender equity.

This oppression intersects with ageism, a challenge that society often places unfairly on women. It mainly refers to the prejudice, discrimination, and stereotypes towards others or oneself based on age. A 2021 survey earlier revealed that Filipino women refuse to reveal their age when asked about the matter, while two out of three have felt judged for it. For some, this could potentially result in what psychology describes as "learned helplessness."

Learned helplessness is a behavior exhibited by people who have unlearned what it is to have control. Said phenomenon results in the acceptance of "powerlessness" due to repeated aversive stimuli. Fortunately, plenty of women are determined to reclaim their stolen agency.

"I don't accept things like that *na, 'matanda na ako.'* My personality is always like, if I'm with senior citizens *na kababaihan*, I will always encourage them," she shared. "First, I'll give them examples of what I'm doing."



Because at my age, and I'm still young, although I'm already a senior citizen, I don't stop doing things and exploring other things to do."

"So, I always start with, 'You know what, at our age, we can always do a lot of other things'... Getting old is not a problem. The way we look at things or treat things is what we need to look into."

On top of the woes already brought about by sexism and ageism, Merci believes that plastic pollution has made the burden of being a Filipino woman even heavier. This comes as conservative values have long classified supposedly gender-neutral responsibilities such as cleaning and housekeeping as "*pambabae*."

"They always say, '*Sus, daghang basura!*' When I say that, they [mean], 'Oh my gosh, it's a lot of waste,'" she said in a mix of Cebuano and English. "It's a lot of waste that is being managed by women."

Plastic pollution from single-use plastic has long been a problem in the Philippines, with over 164 million single-use plastic sachets being disposed of on a daily basis. This is

excluding over 48 million shopping bags and 45 million pieces of plastic labo bags being used in the country every day.

"They question, 'Why is it that all and most, like, the goods in the sari-sari store, for example, are packaged in nasty plastic?' So women really feel the burden because they're going to manage it as mothers or as aunties or as waste workers. I think it's like a multi-layered thing when we talk of plastic pollution," she added.

Apo Island's six waste workers are currently all women, all of whom manage both their respective households and the Materials Recovery Facility waste that could get contaminated. With the hazards inherent in their work, it makes them and their family members susceptible to illnesses—people whom they have to take care of in the unfortunate event that happens. This, she says, impacts their well-being.

All genders, backgrounds vs. plastic pollution

While Merci believes in the "innate" attribute of women to volunteer and care, she is quick to admit that progressive women can't win the fight against plastics alone. This is amid the seemingly infinite economic backing of corporations and the fact that people of influence peddle false solutions to the crisis.

"The biggest challenge for me are the local officials. For example, in Dumaguete or in other communities, they will always tell you... 'No, what you're proposing is not feasible.' Their behavior is to look into the quick fix solution," the WOW leader said.

"For example, an incinerator in the community or a pyrolysis [facility] to get rid of all this waste. So the challenge that I am encountering is the myopic view... sorry, a lot of them are from men... [that] the practical solution to a problem like waste is a quick fix," Merci added.

Scientists have long fought against the use of smokeless incinerators to burn waste like plastics as it emits cancerous dioxins, one of

the most toxic substances known to science. Pyrolysis is another form of toxic waste-burning, one that could cost the Philippines over P56 billion per year in energy rates and subsidies for its widespread use according to a study by GAIA Asia Pacific.

WOW called on those who continuously doubt the role of women for positive social change to link arms and see for themselves what could be achieved with more warm bodies committed to creating a healthier, waste-free future.

"If you have doubts about the work that we're doing and the people who are doing it, maybe our women, join us," she added. "The best way really is to invite them. Get them on board... Go to Apo Island. Go to Siquijor. Meet the women and others that are working there. That's the best way to encourage them."

"And I think the pessimists or those who choose to just look at women na... *walang nagagawa*... *Baka* this will really change their thinking. Because our women, we women, are really powerful. And we really can impact change." #

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Unregulated overproduction of single-use plastics like sachets is harming our biodiversity.



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SMALL STORES, BIG CHANGES

Sari-sari stores and the women leading a zero waste future

By Eunille Santos

For generations, the sari-sari store has been a symbol of resilience and survival. Now, three women are proving it can also be a symbol of sustainability.

In every Filipino neighborhood, a sari-sari store stands as a cultural symbol—where people stop for a handful of sugar, a stick of coffee, or a bar of soap. But it is more than just a community shop with everyday essentials. It is a place built on familiarity, where community members gather and cultivate relationships. At the counter, more often than not, stands a woman, tending to both her store and her family.

For Mercedes Yebes, Lucresia Corpuz, and Rosemary Ezeo, their sari-sari stores are more than just businesses. Variably, these stores are all at once a way to provide for their families, a source of independence, a place of fulfillment and belongingness, and now, a space for change.

At 66 years old, Mercedes has run her store in San Juan City, Metro Manila for 17 years.

What began as a simple way to keep herself occupied after her children moved out became a source of stability.

“Para malibang lang,” she said. “Mag-isa na lang kasi ako. Pero at least dito, lagi akong may kausap, may ginagawa.”

Her store became her way of sustaining herself. Without it, she would have had to rely on others for financial support.

“Kahit mag-isa ako, kaya kong buhayin ang sarili ko.”

Lucresia, 73, started selling more than two decades ago, shifting from a small canteen to a sari-sari store.

“Bata pa ako, masipag na ako magtinda,” she said. “Hanggang ngayon, ako pa rin nag-aasikaso rito.”

The store helped her raise her nephews and send them to school. Even now, it gives her a sense of purpose and independence.

“Kahit matanda na ko, gusto ko pa rin makatulong sa sarili kong paraan.”

Rosemary, 64, opened her store more recently, partly out of boredom and partly to stay engaged with her community.

“Walang ginagawa, may puhunan, nagtayo ng tindahan,” she said. “Libangan din kumbaga. Marami akong nakakausap.”

More than just a pastime, though, the store became her way of supporting herself and staying connected with her neighbors. It gave her a sense of belonging, a daily routine, and a small but steady income.

Across the Philippines, 1.3 million sari-sari stores serve as economic lifelines, with 70% of manufactured goods transacted in these stores. Yet, beyond their role in the economy, sari-sari stores are also deeply woven into Filipino culture, offering familiarity, flexibility, and trust—something big supermarket chains cannot replicate.

But as single-use plastic waste floods the country, these small stores, long defined by the *tingi* system, are now at the crossroads of crisis and change.

More than just a store

For years, the *tingi* system—where goods are sold in small volumes—has defined sari-sari stores. It allows families to buy only what they need for the day, stretching tight budgets as best they can.

Tingi was also sustainable back then. Long before plastic sachets lined store shelves, Filipino consumers brought their own reusable containers to buy vinegar, cooking oil, and other essentials. It was a system built on resourcefulness—minimizing waste while keeping necessities accessible.

That changed when corporations repackaged *tingi* into a sachet economy, flooding small stores with single-use plastics branded as



Rosemary Ezeo with the Kuha sa Tingi dispensers.
© Albert Lozada / Greenpeace

the “affordable” choice. Instead of refilling what they already had, consumers were left with plastic packaging that could only be thrown away. With every tiny packet torn open and discarded, plastic waste piles up—clogging drains, washing into rivers, and harming the people and the environment.

Mercedes has seen it firsthand.

“Kapag umuulan, baha agad. ‘Yung plastik bumabara sa kanal, tapos kami rin ang maglilinis,” she said.

The problem is everywhere, yet sari-sari stores have little control over what they sell. Large corporations dominating the consumer goods market push plastic-packaged products as the default choice, limiting what small store owners can stock. Sachets and disposable packaging are promoted as “budget-friendly” and “convenient,” while alternatives remain scarce.

“Wala naman kaming ibang choice,” Rosemary said. “Halos lahat ng nabibili namin, puro naka-plastik.”

For decades, sari-sari store owners had no choice but to follow the system, selling what was available. Sachets were what suppliers provided, what customers were used to, what kept sales going.

Then came *‘Kuha sa Tingi’*—a program introducing refillable systems to sari-sari stores, allowing customers to bring their own reusable containers to refill their daily essentials instead of buying single-use plastic sachets.

At first, the idea seemed unfamiliar. Would customers be willing to change their habits? Would it affect sales?

For Lucrecia, it was worth trying.



Lucrecia Corpuz in front of her sari-sari store.
© Albert Lozada / Greenpeace

“Mas mura, mas tipid, at hindi makalat,” she said. “Kapag naubos ‘yung laman ng bote nila, bumabalik sila para mag-refill.”

For Mercedes, the decision came from something simpler. She was tired of seeing plastic waste pile up outside her door.

“Sinubukan ko at nagustuhan ng mga suki ko,” she said. “Mas malinis pa ang paligid.”

Rosemary, who had always been mindful of waste, found herself explaining the benefits to her customers.

“Mas mura siya kaysa sa sachet, kaya madali kong napaliwanag sa mga suki ko,” she said.

Slowly, habits changed. Customers started bringing reusable containers, choosing refills over sachets.

At first, not everyone was convinced. Some customers still preferred the convenience of sachets, and some store owners dropped refilling when initial support ended. But Lucrecia kept going.

“Yung iba, huminto na. Pero ako, tinuloy ko kasi maraming bumibili pa rin,” she said. “Nakakatipid ang mga tao, at mas kumikita rin ako. Nakakatulong pa ko sa kapaligiran.”

For these women, it was about offering a better choice—not just for their customers, but for their communities.

The women kept it running

Women have always been at the forefront of keeping homes, communities, and businesses running.

They are mostly the ones who sweep the storefronts, segregate the waste, and clean up after floods. Yet they are rarely given credit for the role their significant role in managing waste.

“Kami rin naman ang pinakaapektado,” Mercedes said. “Kapag bumaha, sino ba ang unang maglilinis? Kami ring mga babae.”

But beyond cleaning up the mess, they are also leading the solutions.



Mercedes Yebes in front of her sari-sari store.
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By choosing to sell refills instead of sachets, these women sari-sari store owners are proving to big businesses that sustainability and economic viability can coexist.

“Bilang tindera, may responsibilidad din tayo na turuan ang suki natin,” said Rosemary. “Kaya lagi kong sinasabi: subukan niyo ‘tong refill. Mas mura na, nakakatulong pa sa kalikasan.”

Meanwhile, corporations continue to flood stores with plastic, making the transition difficult for small business owners. But despite the odds, these women are showing that there is a way forward even when the system makes it hard to break free.

And they are not waiting for big companies to take action. They are already making change happen, one refill at a time.

A future beyond plastic

For Mercedes, Lucrecia, and Rosemary, their sari-sari stores are more than just businesses. They are a lifeline, a space of community, a future they are building with their own hands. And now, they are proving that sari-sari stores can also be part of a just transition toward sustainability.

“Pangarap ko talaga, lumaki ang tindahan ko, maging mini-grocery,” Mercedes said. “At sana, darating ang araw na lahat ng paninda dito, puro refill na lang. Wala nang plastik.”

Sari-sari stores have always been symbols of Filipino resilience, family, and perseverance. Now, they are becoming symbols of sustainability.

And if these women have proven anything, it’s this: change may start small, but its impact can shape generations. #

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REUSE AND REFILL for a Plastic-Free Future

Did you know that 97% of Filipinos support switching from single-use plastics to reuse and refill?

Find out how reuse and refill are not just effective solutions to the plastic crisis, but are also sound business models that benefit suppliers, retailers, consumers, and local government units—while helping protect the environment and communities.



DOWNLOAD HERE
act.gp/reuserefill

THE GOOD 'BREWHA'

Mika Leetong infuses plastic reduction into young minds

By James Relative

It's not unusual for older generations to dismiss advocacy-driven businesses as mere "idealism." But sometimes, youthful rebellion to outdated ideas proves fruitful—winning over even the most senior hearts and minds in the process.

It was 2021 when pre-med student Mika Leetong started Brew&Co.Mnl, then an online business selling syrups and sauces. The goal? To let customers recreate their favorite café experience from their own homes. However, this would radically change as she went the coffee shop route.

Mika took the bold leap of giving away free mason jars for take out orders in a bid to reduce single-use plastic consumption. Nevermind that glass jars cost more than plastic and paper cups (a misnomer as it's coated with plastic laminate). She was all in on reuse and refill.

"I saw how the Philippines is always flooded. And then with the pandemic, *parang* that was the time *na* we were all struggling. So *parang* all of these things [were] piling up in my head *na* why would I contribute to that?" the 21-year-old coffeepreneur explained about her reuse-refill model.

Around 14,640 metric tons of plastic waste are generated in the Philippines on a daily basis, according to data from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). That's equivalent to the weight of 29 individual Airbus A380s—the largest passenger aircraft in the world.

A 2024 survey earlier revealed that 93% of Filipinos agree to the need of cutting down plastic production. A separate Social



Mika Leetong in her cafe, Brew&Co.Mnl, where a refill model is implemented for beverage products.
© Brew&Co.Mnl

Weather Stations study likewise showed that 56% of Pinoys are in favor of regulating single-use plastic cups typically used for beverages like iced coffee.

"I wanted a business that wasn't just a business. I wanted it to mean more than, you know, just profiting, earning money. I said I wanted something different. I wanted my customers to feel that saving the environment doesn't need to be expensive."

Brew&Co.Mnl's pricing doesn't veer away from what other coffee shops are offering. But at P120 to P200, their customers are given a cup of joe that comes with a mason jar—one they could personalize with decorative stickers.

The physics major from De La Salle University would then take things a bit further. She began giving away P10 discounts on coffee orders every time a customer brings back their jar for a refill. And yes, they could avail of these cheaper prices over and over again.

Breaking away from old ideas

But how does this young student turn in a profit with such an unorthodox business model? This question has hounded Mika for quite some time, resulting in her butting heads with parents. Growing up in a Filipino-Chinese household, Mika wasn't the first entrepreneur in the family.

"My dad is a businessman *talaga*... Every cent counts. *Sabi ng dad ko*, 'You think it's P1.00 lang. Pero kapag marami na 'yan, malaki 'yan. And why would you start something like that [discounts over free jars]? *Kaya nga walang gumagawa niyan eh. Kasi hindi 'yan nag-earn.*' That's exactly what he said," she explained.

"That's how business works,' *sabi niya. Kapag trendy, doon ka. Gano'n.* But that's the thing. *Kung 'yun 'yung ginagawa ng iba*, why would they buy from you if you're not different? There's a demand for it."

While Mika honors discounts on top of free takeaway glass jars, she's able to earn and offset costs as reusing them takes away the need to buy new ones for every order sold. Customers could also directly buy upgraded mason jars at different price ranges: P130 (plain leakproof), P150 (leakproof with stickers), and P170 (personalized design). All come with free metal straws.

She was able to make her folks realize that it was a viable business option as customers came in droves to buy mason jars during her first bazaar. She sold every stock.

"*Sabi ko*, [dad] *bantay ka dito ah.* You look at this [line], okay? I was really scared. *That time, naubusan kami ng stocks...* My dad suddenly became delivery boy... And then my dad was like, '*Bakit ganoon, [bumebenta]?*'" she recounted. "They finally get it. *Hindi na nila pinag-iinitan 'yung mason jar.* And then my mom, she'll be like, 'No, we can't remove the mason jar.'"

"Earning money was a bonus for me at that time... Yes, our profit margins aren't the same as everyone else. Of course, that's plastic versus jars, right? It's really not gonna be the same. But we are earning knowing that it's for a good cause."

What some could easily perceive as a model that "throws away money" ironically became her "unique selling point." This would evolve into seven branches: Quezon City, Valenzuela, Las Piñas, Bacoor, Angono, Cabanatuan and Zamboanga.

© Albert Lozada / Greenpeace



‘Babae na nga, bata pa’

But it wasn’t always smooth sailing for this coffeepreneur. She was actually treated differently for being a young woman trying to break into the business. But that didn’t stop her. Had Mika let the discrimination get into her head, she said that Brew&Co.Mnl probably wouldn’t exist today.

“[When] I started, I was 18 years old and I was talking to a supplier, and then they just wouldn’t mind you. *Parang* it signifies that you’re not worthy of their time. There are other clients that are better... or like ‘You’re wasting your time,’” she shared.

“I felt like I knew what I wanted. So I was just very persistent. I actually love being underestimated. It allows me to go out of my mold, I would say. So yeah, it pushes me.”

Republic Act 9710, or the Magna Carta of Women, prohibits gender-based discrimination compounded by or intersecting with other grounds such as age, especially if it infringes upon human rights and other fundamental political, economic, social, cultural, and civil freedoms.

Inspiring the next generation of ‘Brewhas’

A content creator herself, Mika’s coffee business has since earned quite the following on social media, garnering over 1.2 million likes on TikTok. Most of the platform’s users are said to be netizens aged 34 and below.

With this in mind, it’s not hard to imagine how the young entrepreneur was able to

inspire other young women to follow in her footsteps. Just last year, she introduced three new franchisees of her business in Zamboanga City, with the branch’s youngest co-owner only at 14.

“It feels empowering because never did I think that my love for coffee would come out this way,” she said when asked about the three young ladies. “Like, I’m so grateful and in awe *na ‘yung dati ginagawa ko lang* in my room, packing orders. It was just coffee, a passion project, a drink. It’s suddenly more than coffee,” she said.

“It’s opportunities... So, it’s just really nice and I hope to be able to inspire more, help more... young women realize what they want. [I want to] help them, you know, not really mold them, but inspire them to really believe in themselves.”

The proud business owner said that she requires all of her franchisees to adhere to the same plastic-free guidelines implemented in her original Quezon City store as it incentivizes sustainable consumption for their customers.

Asked what it means to be a “Brewha,” Mika said that she’s glad that the supposedly derogatory term is slowly being reclaimed by women like her into an empowering title.

“Witch ang bruha sa Tagalog. But then... ang galing how something, you know, not so nice can be this beautiful for me. You have power over your own narrative. No one can take that away from you,” she explained.

“There are so many people in this world. So I feel like in everything that I do—in everything that you do—make sure that you make an impact that helps and cares all the time. It’s having a heart that will always be in a place of care.” #

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THE DOCTOR IS ‘GREEN’

Dr. Michelle Reyes and her prescription for sustainable healthcare

By Eunille Santos



Hospitals are places of healing. They are where doctors save lives and where patients find hope. But behind the sterile walls, there is something few people see—the waste generated in the name of healthcare.

From plastics in IV bags and syringes to disposable gloves and packaging, hospitals generate massive amounts of waste every day. While some of it is unavoidable for infection control, much of it is excessive, contributing to the worsening plastic crisis.

For Dr. Michelle Reyes, 29, this contradiction is impossible to ignore. As a Family Medicine Resident and the Sustainability Officer for Health Care Without Harm Southeast Asia, she straddles two worlds: one that focuses on patient care and another that envisions a long-term “planet care.”

“How can we as physicians treat our patients in hospitals and let them go back to the very environment that made them sick in the first place,” she said.

Her work is about more than just managing waste. It’s about rethinking healthcare itself, not just what happens inside hospitals but how the system affects the world outside them.

From personal loss to public health

Michelle knew from a young age that she wanted to be a doctor. Or at least, that’s what her parents told her. She had confidently declared it as a child. But the real turning point came much later.

“I think, as an adult, the moment I realized I wanted to become a medical practitioner was witnessing my relatives’ deaths and feeling helpless,” she said.

That helplessness turned into a drive to act and change the circumstances that made healthcare inaccessible or ineffective. But unlike many aspiring doctors, she didn’t just want to practice medicine, she wanted to change public health itself.

Her first foray into health advocacy was about tobacco control. She joined a campaign pushing for graphic health warnings on cigarette packs, hoping it would discourage her father from smoking. This personal mission exposed her to how policies and advocacy could shape public health outcomes—something she would carry with her into medical school.

In her student years, she was always drawn to activism and advocacy groups, particularly in public health and environmental issues. One of these was the Asian Medical Students' Association, where she was involved in their public health committee and nature and environment committee.

At the time, the conversation around sustainability in healthcare was still in its infancy. Early efforts were limited to social media campaigns and educational talks, with no concrete actions yet. But this changed when she attended an event hosted by Health Care Without Harm, where hospitals shared their practices on waste reduction.

That was when she saw the bigger picture.

Diagnosing the plastic problem

Hospitals are among the biggest generators of waste, yet few in the medical community talk about it. Michelle wants to change that and push for more sustainable solutions.

“Health Care Without Harm’s audits show that around 40-70% of waste generated in hospitals is plastic,” she said. “And we recently conducted a baseline audit where gloves are among the top waste items that we can minimize and reduce.”

Plastics are everywhere in healthcare. They are in medical devices, first-aid products, IV fluids, and packaging. Even the indoor environment of hospitals exposes healthcare workers to harmful chemicals from plastic-based materials.

“Patients can be exposed to plastic-related chemicals in IV fluids and creams, where phthalates may have been added to stabilize ingredients or increase skin absorption,” she explained. “Meanwhile, healthcare workers can also be exposed to hazardous chemicals from plastic products used in hospital interiors.”



But if hospitals are meant to heal, why do their practices sometimes harm both people and the environment?

One major reason is the industry's reliance on single-use plastics for safety and convenience. But Michelle believes it's time for hospitals to challenge this norm.

“We need to prevent unnecessary plastic use as much as we can,” she said. “And if we need to use it—especially single-use plastic—we have to justify it.”

This means rethinking policies, pushing for innovation, and championing solutions that already exist.

Women's genuine care

In healthcare, women are everywhere—as nurses, midwives, caregivers, and doctors. In fact, 60% of the global health workforce is made up of women. Yet, when it comes to leadership roles, they are often overlooked.

Michelle has experienced this firsthand.

“There were many times when I was passed over for an amazing opportunity to lead in favor of my male counterpart,” she said. “Despite having the passion and equal credentials, I realized that women always had to put in double the effort to be recognized.”

Instead of letting these challenges discourage her, she found her own way to lead through learning, advocacy, and mentorship.

“I always ensure to champion women in these spaces and, in my own ways, mentor my colleagues who express interest in our advocacies,” she said.

She believes that beyond campaigns, the movement for sustainable healthcare must also fight for women’s leadership.

“This month is Women’s Month, and beyond our campaigns, I think we should also fight for the right of women to be in leadership roles and recognize their credibility in leading sustainability efforts.”

From healthcare to planet care

For Michelle, the responsibility doesn’t just fall on hospitals alone. It extends to policymakers and the global healthcare industry.

“The health sector is one of the largest emitters of greenhouse gases, contributing 5.2% of global emissions. We need policies that protect both the environment and women’s health,” she said.

The Global Plastics Treaty, for example, needs to take the healthcare sector into account. Policies should protect women workers from plastic-related health risks while ensuring sustainability is embedded in healthcare practices.

But even while waiting for policies to change, healthcare workers can already take action.

“In medicine, there are many specializations where we can integrate environmental advocacy,” Michelle said. “I am grateful that the Philippine Academy of Family Physicians has given us that avenue through special interest groups, and we are already starting to talk about it.”

She encourages medical professionals to join networks like the RISE Alliance and the Global Green and Healthy Hospitals, where they can collaborate and learn from others in the field.

“These complex environmental issues need many actors working together, and the voice of the health sector—especially women—is really important,” she said.

Her message to women in healthcare?

“Find your space, find your passion, and find a community that shares your advocacy.”

Because in the fight for healthcare without harm, women aren’t just participants—they are leaders healing the world with genuine care. #



STRONG PLASTICS TREATY NOW!

Help build a **#PlasticFreeFuture** for women, children, and communities around the globe by urging world leaders and the Philippine government to support a strong Global Plastics Treaty!



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