“When you're building a system, it's local”: Dr. Bernie Madrid of the Child Protection Network Foundation on cultivating government partnerships, school-based violence prevention programming, and providing services to children survivors.

Alec Saelens
September 11, 2024

Alec Saelens: Could you introduce yourself, and tell me more about your professional background and the nature of the work that you're doing today, particularly with the Child Protection Network and the Network of Women and Children Protection Units?

Dr. Bernie Madrid: I'm Dr. Bernadette (Bernie) Madrid, and I'm the executive director of the Child Protection Network Foundation, as well as the head of the Child Protection Unit at the Philippine General Hospital. I am a pediatrician, and our work, both at the hospital and at the network, is providing multidisciplinary services to abused children and their families. We initially started with the Child Protection Unit at the Philippine General Hospital. But now, with our network, we have expanded to fulfill our vision so that every province in the Philippines will have at least one Women and Children Protection Unit. We currently have 143 Women and Children Protection Units in 67 out of 82 provinces in the country. When I say multidisciplinary, doctors and social workers are the main core, but it also includes police officers, mental health providers, and

nurses. While our main core work is providing response services to children, we have expanded over the years into prevention.

We have done research with different academic institutions, both in the Philippines and in the United Kingdom, like Oxford, Cambridge, and Edinburgh. Our research has been on showing that you can prevent sexual abuse with our Safe Schools for Teens research, and that you could prevent physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect with our Parenting for Lifelong Health research. We want to reach as many children as possible in our work, and we also would like to institutionalize what we're doing so that it's integrated into our child protection system here in the Philippines, and it doesn't just disappear. That means working in terms of policies and laws and working with different parts of the government like justice, education, health, and social welfare.

Alec Saelens: Who are the main audiences that you're serving with the work you're doing, and how do you attempt to reach those audiences and those different stakeholders?

Dr. Bernie Madrid: The services are for children, but to be able to establish the Women and Children Protection Units, we have to lobby with local executives like governors, mayors, and senators. We work with them to advocate because to set up a unit in a hospital, you need manpower. You need a budget. To have that, you need political commitment as well as the commitment of the professionals who are working in the hospital. Our target is a very broad spectrum of society because we work with the government, we work with NGOs, and we work with the academe. We work with almost all sectors that deal with children.

Alec Saelens: Is there anything distinctive about the approach that you're taking, something that is unique to the context of the Philippines?

Dr. Bernie Madrid: I don't know that it is unique, but our organization is a hybrid, so we're part academe, we're part NGO, and we're part government. Because our organization has that kind of personality, we are able to work very closely with the people we have targeted. It's a very close partnership between NGO and government, because you need the government to institutionalize, there's no question. But governments change.

The Secretary of Health may only be there for two years or one year. They're there to serve the president. The president is only there for six years. There's no re-election in the Philippines; you only serve one term. Every time there's a new head, whether it's a secretary or a governor, they have new priorities. To be able to stay and persist in the work that we do so our vision is

accomplished, we need to sustain our presence in all the different administrations. In essence, we have become the institutional memory and, in a way, we always make sure that the present government does not deviate from the vision, and that our goal is achieved. I think that is one of the best things we have accomplished in the past 27 years: institutionalizing what we do.

Alec Saelens: Can you elaborate on what you mean by institutionalizing? You've got these protection units, which I imagine is one piece of the infrastructure, but can you go deeper into what you mean by being the institutional memory for governments that fluctuate over time?

Dr. Bernie Madrid: I mean shaping the response to abused children, and ensuring that they receive medical, psychosocial, and legal services in a standardized manner, delivered by multidisciplinary teams. These teams are hired to do that. It takes a lot of work because we're a developing country. We're not a rich country. There's always a lack in terms of resources, manpower, and budget. You just add on work to what somebody's already doing, or hitch onto some other program; that's the usual protocol for a program, so that's how it started. Everyone's sharing resources, but that's not enough for these children. They need specialized service, that's just for abused children, and it needs to be standardized so everyone, everywhere will receive the same standard care. That's another great challenge.

Alec Saelens: Can you share an example that clearly illustrates the impact of your work? How do you know that it's working?

Dr. Bernie Madrid: We have a study that's been published about the follow-up of our child sexual abuse patients over four to 10 years after treatment at one of our units. We assessed the medical, psychosocial, and legal outcomes and were able to demonstrate that receiving this care decreases the probability of being re-abused again. Without any intervention, the re-abuse rate is very high. Our treatment also decreases the severity of the mental health outcomes in terms of having multiple sexual partners, for example, or having suicidal thoughts, needing medication,, or dropping out of school. This study is good evidence that this kind of care is needed. Of course, it's not randomized controlled, so it's not an RCT [randomized controlled trial]. It's very difficult to do an RCT here because who would the control group be, and how would we go about it?

Alec Saelens: Is there anything that you have tried or done that did not work out? If so, could you talk about why it did not work out and what you learned? What was the takeaway?

Dr. Bernie Madrid: There are still many things that are not as we would like them to be. For example, we know that we need mental health support, but there are so few psychologists and psychiatrists in the Philippines. That's why what we have now is just a core service. When we say we established a Women and Children Protection Unit, it is phased, such that if you're level one, it's just a doctor and social worker. If you're level two, then you have a police officer, and a higher level two would include a mental health service provider. Until now, only around 30% would have a mental health provider. The police that we train do not stay forever, as they get assigned elsewhere, so we're continuously training police officers. Overall, we still need to do a better job when it comes to the monitoring and evaluation of these Women and Children Protection Units.

We're working on it. We have developed a Women and Children Protection Management Information system that is being used by all the different units, which is part of the standardization of care. We want the government, the Department of Health, to be the one to monitor these Women and Children Protection Units. We're still working out a system of good monitoring and evaluation of all the units, and we're still very much a work in progress.

We're also still figuring out the best care for boys who have been sexually abused because the data of the National Baseline Survey on Violence against Children gathered in 2015 show that more boys are sexually abused than girls but they do not seek help. They disclose at roughly the same rate as girls, but they do not approach authorities, nor do they report to authorities or seek care as much as the girls. Not that the girls are all seeking help, either. It's a very low rate, even for girls, but it's so much lower for boys. Most of the patients in the Women and Children Protection Units, around 90%, are girls. But that's not what the baseline survey showed. It should be at least equal, 50% boys and 50% girls.

Alec Saelens: Leaving aside funding, which is a recurring issue everywhere, are there any other issues, particularly in terms of societal perceptions and stigmatization around the issue, that make your work difficult?

Dr. Bernie Madrid: There are many. For example, we know from our national baseline survey that most of the perpetrators are right there in the home. Incest is a very big problem. If the perpetrator is the breadwinner of the family, then you know that it's very difficult for the case to go forward because the pressure on that young child not to testify is so high. The whole family may be putting pressure on the young child not to testify. The stigma is still very high, too, and the shame is still there. Victim blaming is still very common. Maybe it has decreased a little bit, although we haven't done any studies about whether there's an actual decrease in victim

blaming, but it certainly exists. Right now, with new forms of child sexual abuse, like online child sexual abuse and exploitation, the Philippines is up there in terms of the scale of harm.

One scale of harm study, done by the International Justice Mission in the Philippines, shows that in 2022, approximately 500,000 children suffered serious online child sexual abuse and exploitation. We're certainly not seeing 500,000 patients. The way that parents, who are sending their children online, often rationalize that, is, "The perpetrator is on the other side of the internet. They're not right there in their home." They rationalize that what they're doing to their children is not harmful. Many parents think they own their children, and that because they gave life to those children, feed them, and give them shelter, the children owe them for that. So many norms still need to be changed.

Alec Saelens: In terms of shifting cultural norms, what strategies or solutions have been most effective?

Dr. Bernie Madrid: People always think that the fastest way is the law. We have a new law, just barely a year old: Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation. Yes, laws do reflect culture, but their effect in changing culture may take generations. It's not that easy to change norms. We worked with the government, of course, in passing these laws, but we have not yet done our work in terms of really going into the community. That's not the scope of the work that we do. Yes, we are into parenting, but we're not into community education yet. Some of the Women and Children Protection Units have worked with the community, but we have not had any systematic way of doing it, nor do we have studies to show how effective we are in that.

Alec Saelens: You mentioned that you were working on a school-focused program as well?

Dr. Bernie Madrid: Yes. Right now we are testing out these safe schools for teens in our city, so it's citywide. We have done the Violence Against Children Survey [VACS] in Valenzuela City, and now we're doing the interventions to see how we could reduce the prevalence of child sexual abuse and other forms of abuse. The Safe School for Teens has components in terms of how to respond to those who have already been abused, and there's also a component on how to prevent dating violence. That means going into the school curriculum in a way that's also changing norms, which you won't see until they're adults, of course, but it does work. Our results show that it at least prevents dating violence.

The curriculum for grade seven and grade eight looks at questions like: How do you deal with relationships? How do you regulate your emotions using mindfulness? How do you respond to peer pressure? It's in their values class and in their health class.

Alec Saelens: Can you tell me more about how you developed that curriculum? Did it have to be set up and developed with the Ministry of Education, and therefore the government?

Dr. Bernie Madrid: The concept that we worked on is addressing the fact that when we talk about prevention, most children don't know what a good relationship is, especially if they don't have good role models. That needs to be taught in school. One thing that leads to dating violence is that they don't know how to deal with pressure: peer pressure, or pressure from someone that they care about, maybe their date, for example. The program is teaching them how to deal with these difficult situations because it's like problem-solving. We know that the development of children's and teens' brains, the executive function, and the frontal lobe of the brain, is not yet well-developed. The executive function regulates emotions and makes good decisions, but their brains are not mature. How do you help them with that?

That's where mindfulness comes in, and understanding how to use mindfulness because it has been shown by previous research that it does improve emotion regulation, and it helps with good cognition, so teens make better decisions. We felt that including that in the curriculum in the theory of change that we were thinking about could reduce child sex dating violence. They have to be specific because it will not have any effect on incest. We're talking exclusively about dating violence.

Alec Saelens: Could you talk a bit about how you approach partnerships? There are many different stakeholders involved. What are the strategies you use to bring people around the table, create coalitions, and get everyone on board?

Dr. Bernie Madrid: It requires leadership, number one, and it requires respect. People have to respect you, to know that you respect them, and to know that what you achieve will be achieved together. You have to respect people's egos and their work. For example, your standing in the community doesn't matter. We have to explain to people that just because you know something doesn't mean people will follow you. The messenger is just as important as the message. If people do not respect you and your work, they're not going to listen to you.

In the Philippines, relationships matter a lot. In all that you do, you need to build a personal relationship. People in the Philippines do not work well with strangers. You have to get to know

them, and they've got to get to know you. It depends on who you're approaching. For example, if we're approaching a governor, then we have to be introduced by someone whom the governor knows well and trusts. We cannot just go in there and say, "Oh, hi, I am Dr. Madrid from the Child Protection Network." Maybe he will listen to you, maybe not. You first need to build that trust, and that can be done quickly by someone who knows and trusts the other party.

Or you can do it in another way, like working together on a project that he values, for example. You have to study who it is that you're working for. In the Philippines, of course, there are many existing coalitions already. When you talk about inter-agency work, for example, the Department of Justice has a committee for the Special Protection of Children, and the Child Protection Network is one of two NGOs that sit on that committee. That's a very important committee. The reason why we sit there is because the University of the Philippines is very well known and respected, so it's a natural fit for them to consult our university. It wouldn't just be any university coming there and saying, "Oh, I want to be the one to represent the NGO." They have to know you. In the Philippines, that's the most important thing, it is whom you know.

Alec Saelens: In terms of moving things forward from just an idea to something that is implemented on the ground, do you have any other perspectives on what to emphasize to different stakeholders?

Dr. Bernie Madrid: Right now we are lucky because we've been here for 27 years. We basically know everyone who works in this field, and they know us. It’s easier to approach people now because often, they approach us first. As time goes on and you build a good track record, people will know that you do good work, that you are honest, that you have integrity, that they can trust you, and that you won't let them down. That's a big thing. Then they're very much willing to work with you. You have to be passionate about what you do because you won't be able to give the time, effort, and dedication necessary if you don't have the passion. People sense the passion, they sense the commitment, and that attracts a lot of people.

Success breeds success. If people see you're successful, and that if they work with you, they're also successful, and you acknowledge the work that they do so that they're part of the success. Then, you get more people to work with you.

Alec Saelens: What's a piece of guidance you would give someone who is beginning to do this work, or wants to move it to the next step?

Dr. Bernie Madrid: If you're going to go into this work, you have to know that it's going to be a long, hard road, that nothing gets solved quickly, that it'll take years, and that you have to be persistent. It's difficult if your mindset is only to be in this field for five years, and that's it. I doubt that you'll be very successful. You have to be here for the long run in this kind of work because when you are in a developing country and want to change the way people think and get the government to invest in that, you have to build stone by stone.

My example is always that if you are in a developed country, when you want to have rice, you just go to the grocery and buy the rice. However, if you are in a developing country, you may get sidetracked first by finding land where you can plant rice, and maybe to get that, you need land reform. So you're going to say, "How in the world does that have anything to do with child abuse?" But that's how it is. The systems are not there, so you have to build the system. That takes really long, hard work, and it may take years and years. You have to be prepared to do that.

Alec Saelens: In addition to that piece of guidance, what do you think is most needed to support the various different actors, stakeholders, and partners doing this work? What do you think is needed to help them advance the work in this space?

Dr. Bernie Madrid: We appreciate the research that has been done in developed countries, the methodologies that have been shared with us, but my thought there is that ultimately, the work is local. It's not global. While there are, of course, similarities when you're talking about child abuse, when you're building a system, it's local. It has nothing to do with what's happening around the world, but it does help to give it attention and importance, and to push governments to realize that they should do something. For example, if there's a bilateral agreement between governments, and part of the agreement is to do something about child abuse, that helps push the government to act. You will need people working on the ground to make that happen, but it helps. As the government comes and goes, the commitment made by one person in government is often not honored by the person who succeeds them.

Alec Saelens: Are there any other insights you want to share, or a piece of work that you're doing that you're really proud of, that you'd like to highlight?

Dr. Bernie Madrid: For me, institutionalizing the Women and Children Protection Unit as the main response to child abuse in our country is one of our biggest accomplishments, and that includes bringing the Women and Children Protection Unit into the medical and residency training programs. We hope that we'll also be followed in social work, undergraduate social

work, and colleges, as well as in law, because the only way to change norms is through education, and through the workforce.

Alec Saelens: This has been very rich. Thank you so much for your time.

Alec Saelens is a former journalist who supports SJN and its partners track solutions journalism's impact on society and the industry. In his former role, he researched and consulted on the connection between solutions journalism and revenue. He is co-founder of The Bristol Cable, the UK's pioneering local media cooperative. Before SJN, he was a researcher and coach for the Membership Puzzle Project and an analyst for NewsGuard.

***This conversation has been edited and condensed.*