

Sexual harassment has no place during ECQ, punishable under Safe Spaces Act and other existing laws

Women face fear, uncertainty, heavier domestic care, limited movements, and economic constraints during the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) to prevent the spread of COVID-19, but instead of easing their burden, perpetrators of sexual harassment double their suffering. With the extension of the ECQ in Luzon and other local government units in Visayas and Mindanao, the Philippine Commission on Women (PCW) calls on everyone to contribute in ending this perennial problem.

The PCW condemns all forms of sexual harassment, more especially during this global health crisis. Whatever the circumstances, sexual harassment is utterly inhumane, a violation of human rights, and is punishable under our laws. One of which is the Safe Spaces Act (Republic Act No. 11313), which penalizes gender-based sexual harassment in public spaces, workplace, educational and training institutions as well as in the online realm.

Since the enhanced community quarantine took effect in March, we have received reports of different incidents of alleged violation of this law, which we reiterate is already in effect, together with its Implementing Rules and Regulations.

One of which is when a journalist made unwanted sexual remarks to a woman whose comment on his online post did not fit well with him. The said journalist said that the woman only needs sex to calm down; further suggesting that the woman's husband should lend her to him so that she would shut up. Said statement, whether given in reaction to a negative comment or not, is downright misogynistic and sexist as it reduces a woman to a mere sexual object of men. Behind such kind of remark is the toxic macho culture of using forced sex and violence to impose a man's power over a woman, whether to silence her, force her to submit to his whims or as a form of revenge against men in her clan.

As many people spend more time online during the community quarantine, let us all be reminded that the freedom that the digital era affords us is but a double-edged sword. While we are free to express ourselves, let us practice this within the parameters of truth, justice, and respect for our fellow human beings.

Online comments are penalized under the Safe Spaces Act, which punishes acts that use information and communications technology in terrorizing and intimidating victims through physical, psychological, and emotional threats, unwanted sexual misogynistic, transphobic, homophobic and sexist remarks and comments online whether publicly or through direct and private messages. Perpetrators can face imprisonment or be made to pay 100 to 500,000 pesos as fine.

There are also allegations of harassment of women by authorities in checkpoint operations. In one incident, a woman was allegedly asked to enter the checkpoint tent and remove her facemask. The officer also asked for personal details like age and relationship status, and slipped his telephone number into the woman's ID.

While checkpoint operations are part of enforcing the community quarantine, we believe this should be within the bounds of mutual respect for the rights of the enforcers and the citizens. Thus, "relentless requests for personal details", which is also penalized under the Safe Spaces Act, is never acceptable.

There were also incidents of inhumane punishments for curfew violators, like ordering them to dance and kiss on live streaming video. While there is a need to enforce public

order, publicly humiliating persons, especially when there are minors involved, and forcing them to do degrading acts should never be an option.

Thus, we appeal to both the citizens and the officials who enforce necessary and legal measures during this period of ECQ to uphold women's rights at all times. We are already facing enormous challenges with this pandemic; let us not add further to the burden by helping keep all places – public spaces and the virtual world – safe from sexual harassment and discrimination.

VAWC Hotlines during Community Quarantine

Violence against Women and their Children (VAWC) chooses no time or place. During the enhanced community quarantine, let us remain vigilant to VAWC that happens in the confines of the homes in our communities. If you are, or if you personally know someone being abused during this time of health emergency, don't hesitate to seek help to stop the abuse.

Here is a handy reference that you can use during this time of community quarantine:

LEGAL ASSISTANCE

Public Attorney's Office (PAO)

Hotline: (02) 8929-9436 local 106, 107, or 159 (local "0" for operator)

(+62) 9393233665

Email address: pao_executive@yahoo.com

REFERRAL SERVICES

Inter-Agency Council on Violence Against Women and their Children

Mobile numbers: 09178671907 | 09178748961

Email address: iacvawc@pcw.gov.ph

DILG DIRECTORY OF BARANGAY OFFICIALS

VAW Hotlines

[VAW Service Providers in Region 7](#)

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