

The Society of Oblates of Notre Dame;
Executive Director, OND-HESED Foundation;
Founder, Apostles of the Sea, General Santos City

SR. SUSAN O. BOLANIO, OND

An Unflinching Community Organizer

**WOMEN CAPACITATING
MORE WOMEN TO EARN
AND MAKE DECISIONS**



“Any misfortune that befalls the fisher-husband will always burden the wife, so I link women to support agencies and teach them self-help initiatives. Women ... free yourselves. Earn your own incomes and develop your capacities so that you can participate in decision-making.”

In 2011, news about detained and dead fishers from Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Malaysia, Russia, and Taiwan erupted in the papers and television. At that time, Sr. Susan O. Bolanio was already with HESED FOUNDATION OBLATES OF NOTRE DAME (OND-HESED Foundation) and has organized the Apostles of the Sea, a church-based organization that is dedicated to alleviating the struggles of fisherfolks in the Philippines.

When this and similar cases of human trafficking intensified, Sr. Bolanio's organization received women and listened to their stories about their husbands being caught in Indonesian waters and held captive by authorities for lack of proper documentation. This pushed the organization to work for the return of captive fishers and consequently initiated measures to empower fishers' wives. With Sr. Bolanio's leadership, the organization assisted 483 repatriates since its establishment.

Sr. Bolanio recognizes that wives of fishers experience the greater burden when misfortunes happen to their husbands. Aside from being left behind to take care of the children, women have to find means to compensate for the loss of their husbands' livelihood which they previously depended on. Sr. Bolanio finds it necessary that women should have their own source of income to defray household expenses. She acknowledges that if women earn their own incomes, they get to have a voice when participating in the decision making at the community and at home. The wives then become more confident in addressing family concerns such as food, health, education, and upbringing of children.

The Self-Help Groups (SHeGs) that Sr Bolanio organized facilitated constant discussions about the well-being of fisherfolks and address issues such as forced labor and human trafficking. These groups also help promote the welfare and basic rights of fishers aboard commercial fishing vessels as stipulated in the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) Department Order 156-16. The SHeGs, together with OND HESED, assist affected women through direct communication with their captive husbands and facilitate transmission of necessary documents for their husbands' immediate repatriation.

In addition, SHeGs promote discussions on marine conservation and other environmental concerns. The group teams up with national agencies like BFAR to provide information about mangrove restoration and other means of conserving the marine environment. They also collaborate with the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) to provide advice to women on how they can launch their own enterprise. By helping women get access to information and opportunities, a Sr. Bolanio helps increase women's confidence



Sr. Susan Bolanio, OND and the Oblates of Notre Dame HESED Foundation assisted repatriated fishers through provision of livelihood trainings.



thereby increasing their chances to achieve a better life for their selves, family and community.

Through OND-HESED, Sr. Bolanio will continue to advocate the implementation of DOLE DO 156-16 in order to ensure better working conditions for fishers and subsequently protect their families. Currently, there are 25 SHeGs in General Santos. Sr. Bolanio hopes that in the future they can establish more SHeGs in the city to continue providing fishers' wives with literacy and entrepreneurial programs and ultimately empower these women.