

“Women should earn their own incomes. We must strive to become business owners, not just salesladies. In the community, let us report illegal fishing practices. We should not be afraid.”

**WOMEN WHO SAVE
THE OCEANS, SAVE THE
FUTURE**

**GENDER
CHAMPION**



Former Bantay Dagat, Fish Vendor
and Member, Alliance of Tuna Handliners
Brgy. Ladol, Alabel, Sarangani Province

MS. HILDEGRACIA O. DE LA CRUZ

A Fearless Fisheries Steward

It's just six o'clock in the morning and people already flock the area. Hilde is there in the crowd wearing her ten-peso apron that she got from the local *ukay-ukay*. With her are a set of knives that have been carefully sharpened in the *bairan*, a chopping board, and a plastic fan to keep her cool throughout the day. She vends fish in one of the makeshift stalls along the beach of Brgy. Ladol.

Hilde and her husband raised their family with incomes derived from fishing until her husband met two accidents at sea that almost cost him his life. He decided to go to Manila to work in a construction firm. It was then that Hilde realized that it is essential for wives to have their own incomes to support their families especially in situations such as hers. Hilde remained in Alabel and continued to sell fish for Nelson, a supplier who provides 12 boxes of fish for Hilde to sell within three days, after which, she is paid 500 pesos.

Hilde is a member of the Alliance for Tuna Handliners (ATH). Once, male-dominated, ATH now includes wives of tuna fishers who usually sell the fish caught by their husbands. At ATH, women members are given the opportunity to highlight their concerns. Hilde is one dedicated member who ensures that concerns raised are provided with concrete actions. She hopes that in the future, she would be able to come up with a project where her fellow women fishers can have their own income and

not just rely on their husbands, nor remain as fish vendors but become entrepreneurs. However, the women in ATH do not have the appropriate skill to write the project proposal which government agencies require from applicants for funding assistance. Nevertheless, Hilde remains patient and continues to have conversations with government agencies in hopes that in the future, they will have better sources of income to sustain their family's needs.

Aside from being active in ATH, Hilde gives importance to the protection of the oceans. She is a former *Bantay Dagat* volunteer in Alabel and earned an extra 200 pesos monthly. As a *bantay dagat* volunteer, she performed reporting, monitoring, and recording of illegal fishers in their area. She says that since women do not usually go out to sea, they should allot time to monitor how coastal resources are being used. Women should be alert in reporting to authorities if they see any malpractice by people that could ruin the oceans. On various occasions, Hilde received threats from illegal fishers after she was suspected to be the one who reported them to authorities. Despite these, she keeps her head high and fearlessly responds, “*Wala ako nahadlok nga magreport sa mga awtoridad sa mga kaso sa illegal nga mananagat, panpanguha, ug pagpamutol sa mga bakhaw.*” (I am not afraid to report to the proper authorities of any illegal fishing or unsustainable



Ms. Hildegracia dela Cruz together with Bantay Dagat volunteers in Alabel, Sarangani during the 13th Kasadyaan Festival

use of mangroves.) She believes that if you take care of your environment, it will also provide what you need.

The passion that drives her to save the oceans keeps her going despite not being compensated enough and having very little to work with. At eight o'clock in the evening, Hilde is just getting ready to go home, 500 pesos richer after three days of selling fish. The amount is small but what makes Hilde the richest one is that she dreams bigger than life, she dreams for bigger things for her fellow women and for her environment.