Gender and Equity in Post-Haiyan Disaster Resettlement Communities in the Philippines: Reflections from Fieldwork in Leyte

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Abstract

Disasters impact genders differently but the most vulnerable are women, girls, and gender diverse individuals. Vulnerabilities continue post-disaster in resettlement communities and the issue of equity remains paramount for affected individuals, families, and households. I reflected on my field notes while conducting a summer field course in 2015 in Leyte and research in 2017-2018 post-Haiyan, the strongest typhoon to hit landfall in the Philippines and perhaps in the world in 2013. I focused on urban resettlement communities, gender and community life, and equity in post-disaster habitats.

Introduction

On December 17, 2021 super typhoon Rai, locally known as Odette, battered Visayas and Mindanao in the Philippines leaving death and destruction in its path. Eight years earlier on November 8, 2013 super typhoon Haiyan, known by locals as Yolanda, had made landfall in Leyte, impacting communities in the Visayas. It was one of the strongest typhoons ever recorded globally and it caused over 6,000 deaths and 11 million homeless in the Philippines (Howes 2021). The frequency of super typhoons in the western Pacific is a fact of life due to global climate change (Berardelli 2019). The aftermath of Rai, with its images of Southern Leyte posted all over social media, brought back memories of Yolanda, making it seem like only yesterday that the region had been devasted. Such events raise the key question addressed in this paper: What lessons can be learned from resettled post-disaster communities then and now?

Typhoon Haiyan flattened my home city of Tacloban, and since then, I consider myself to be an accidental sociologist of disaster. That is, as a transnational Filipino scholar based in Canada, the meteorological events in my home country have motivated me to expand the scope of my research program on gender and migration to include post-disaster communities in the islands of the Asia-Pacific region. Not only are islands highly significant in the discourse of the Anthropocene, but they are also the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change globally (Salem 2020; Veron et al 2019). The impetus for this paper is to encourage students in Canada and elsewhere to recognize that the realities of island communities in the Asia-Pacific will soon be a shared reality for many communities around the world, albeit on different scales and in various forms.

In 2015, two years after the Haiyan typhoon, I was leading a group of students on a field trip to the impacted area. The field trip aimed to learn from the people about local-global connections from diverse disciplinary angles. My students were studying the use of 'life texts' in sociological research, trying to understand how realities are shaped by interconnected forces. Thanks to the local importance accorded to hospitality, Filipinos are at ease in free conversation with newcomers, and as we walked around, students engaged in 'free talk' with them. Though welcoming, these so-called 'free talks' were often accompanied by teary eyes as people remembered the loss of friends, family, and entire barangays; the mass graves adorned with kalachuchi (plumeria) that remind us of the early morning deluge that caused so much destruction. At the time, I did not write notes as people shared their stories; the focus of our research was not to examine the impacts of typhoon Haiyan, but to teach students about the methodology of 'free talking'. Significantly, however, even though growing up in the Philippines makes typhoons an expected part of reality from June to September each year, among the people I talked with during that summer field course, the catastrophic effects of storm surges were not fully understood. Throughout this paper, I share moments of these free conversations which took place as we passed by piles of debris on streets and coastlines nearly two years after the Haiyan storm surge.

In addition to these informal accounts, this paper is informed by semi-structured research conducted in 2017-2018 when I returned to the Philippines for a study on post-Haiyan reconstruction and development. This trip was developed using methods approved for human subject participants involving focus group discussions and interviews. Each participant signed a consent form and I consulted with barangay leaders, selected residents in the area, and key government officers. The views of the ordinary people, like those who shared rich narratives during the free conversation with my students two years earlier, were now mediated by the interview structure approved for standard ethical practice for Western social science research. In what follows, I reflect on these field experiences about post-Haiyan resettlement communities using the following themes: urban resettlement; gender and community life; and equity in post-disaster habitats.

Urban Resettlement

Super typhoon Haiyan obliterated about 90 percent of the infrastructure in Tacloban City (Athawes 2018). Poor residents from coastal barangays were eventually relocated and resettled in Tacloban North, situated on the margins of the city which included some agricultural land. As a result, resettlement provided housing to survivors but also displaced farmers in the area (Johnson and Mortensen 2019). Relocation sites are away from coastlines to avert the impact of storm surges (Luchi and Mutter 2020). During my field course in 2015, some privately funded resettlement housing projects like the GMA Kapuso Village were constructed and already occupied. However, government-funded resettlement housing was only made available much later; in fact, it needed the "pounding" order of newly elected President Rodrigo Duterte to government executives to make the permanent transfer of over 8000 families immediate. That was in 2017 (Gabieta 2017). Moreover, of the 14,433 target housing units in Tacloban, only 124 units were constructed in the 16 months after Haiyan (Arroyo and Astrand 2019). The funds were presumably generated from an unprecedented amount of international humanitarian assistance, and yet the total value of this aid (likely in the billions) remains unaccounted for (Magtulis 2015). I visited some of the temporary shelters and permanent housing areas in Tacloban City during this time of transition from the previous Aquino administration to Duterte's popular "can do" popular leadership (see Fig. 1 and Fig.2).

In contrast to the natural materials used in constructing temporary resettlement housing units (Fig. 1), concrete materials define the construction of permanent small rowhouses like the GMA Kapuso Village (Fig. 2), which were built using community participation to instill ownership and a sense of attachment. In free conversations with residents waiting for water to fill up, they expressed gratitude for securing housing for their families after the destruction of Haiyan. Alongside this compliment however, was dissatisfaction with the quality of the water supply and access to basic services. Public transportation around 20-30 kilometers from the city was also noted to be scarce and expensive.

Tacloban City is the major commercial, financial, government and education centre in the province of Leyte and Region 8 (Eastern Visayas) that connects the three islands of Leyte, Samar, and Biliran. People converge in the city, as private and public administrative agencies deliver health services and social welfare among other provisions. With a population of 251,881 or 5.5 percent of the total population in the region (PhilAtlas) according to the 2020 census, Tacloban City is also a destination for 'informal settlers' or 'squatters' as described in the local lingo. These people build their dwellings from light materials or scrap found along the shorelines. As of 2018, there were 4.5 million Filipinos "living in informal settlements" in the country (Chandran 2018). After super typhoon Haiyan, over 40,000 households in Tacloban were displaced. Importantly, they have not been allowed to return to their original informal settlement areas which are now under a "no-build zone" mandate (Mathiesen 2016). Housing made of concrete is considered by locals as more durable and able to withstand some typhoon winds. It provides much safer shelters than those made of light materials, which explains the people's sense of gratitude. Nevertheless, while I do not question humanitarian efforts and government resettlement planning,

Fig.1: Temporary resettlement housing units
Photo credit: Glenda Tibe Bonifacio, Tacloban City,

Fig.2: GMA Kapuso Village,
Photo credits: Glenda Bonifacio, Leyte, Philippines@2015

I am concerned that such rowhouse-designed housing is not intrinsic to the culture and ways of living of local communities.

With over 7,000 islands in the Philippines, cultural diversity enriches our understanding of placemaking and the built environment. Capitalist ventures, urbanization, and modernization after Spanish and American colonization facilitated urban housing design, including post-disaster

resettlement. Colonization has contributed in multiple ways to how our cities are designed (Salomon 2019). One key legacy of colonialism is the "plaza complex" which has defined power relations between the centre and the periphery, mediating and controlling the dominant spaces for religion, politics, and the economy (Alarcon 2001). From this perspective, Tacloban City is viewed as the 'central plaza' where matters of importance in urban life converge. One impact of disasters is that it reinforces this centre-periphery opposition; displacement caused by disasters reproduces the core as a magnet for employment, social support, and economic opportunity. Therefore, regardless of the distance from the permanent relocation sites, survivors continue to seek out whatever provides them income and support. Typically, this eventually forces many to return to their original (pre-disaster) informal settlements (Matheisen 2016) rather than continuing to live in more secure but distant rowhouses.

I had the privilege of seeing the interior of rowhouses for Haiyan survivors in Tacloban and the surrounding areas in Leyte. These are literally square units with mini sinks and a small toilet-cum-shower for several members of a household. The years of delay in the construction of such simple basic units, which lack any architectural design features, suggests that corruption has played a role in their realization (Reyes 2019). Meanwhile, the displaced population remains vulnerable to the dangers associated with the precarity of temporary shelters.

A walk-through of the debris still visible two years after Haiyan raised many questions concerning the importance of post-disaster urban resettlement. If an average of 20 typhoons a year has ravaged the Philippine islands since time immemorial, lessons could have been learned that would proactively engage vulnerable populations and communities, building their resilience and encouraging sustainable types of dwelling, that could perhaps be rebuilt in the same area. While I admit that urban planning is not my specialization, the social markers of difference clearly manifest in how row housing is being used as the prototype of post-disaster resettlement. In other words, rowhouses, such as the ones we visited, construct the peripheral domains of the "plaza complex" now occupied by transient survivors who must negotiate the challenges of reconnecting back to the city centre.

Gender and Community Life

Gender is an organizing principle in different cultures and communities (Newman and Grauerholtz 2002). *Pagkalalaki* (masculinity) or *pagkababayi* (femininity) is demonstrated in tasks more than roles among Leyteños today. With relatively no traditionally restrictive cultural scripts, men and women tend to have egalitarian relations. The Philippines is the only Asian country with a top ranking on the Gender Gap Index across the four indicators of economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment (World Economic Forum 2021). However, disasters affect men, women, and gender diverse individuals differently. Studies in different contexts provide evidence of more vulnerabilities and risks faced by women, girls, and non-binary individuals (Enarson and Chakrabarti 2009; Kinnvall and Rydgstrom 2019).

Based on field notes in post-disaster resettlement communities in Leyte, gender does matter in households and community life. Who does what and when forms part of gendered processes sometimes unique in their own circumstances. An increasing number of female-headed households post-disaster due to death, migration, separation, and abandonment make tasks less gender-specific. In the absence of divorce in the Catholic Philippines, many opt for de-facto separation and women with children manage as sole breadwinners.

I remember the story of Juana in one of the free talks who supports a family of four (including her aging mother) by selling home-made delicacies known as *kakanin* to other families in the rowhouses. On weekends, Juana gets *labada* (clothes for laundry) for a family in the city, handwashing from 9 am until mid-day. She wakes up early morning to wait for a public transport to the bus terminal and then gets another public ride at the corner of the subdivision where the *labada* awaits. She walks for another ten minutes from the corner to arrive at her 'workplace'. Sometimes she rides a pedicab on her way back after a tiring day. At times, Juana rides a pedicab from the rowhouse to the highway to wait for public transport to the city. Drivers of pedicabs and public transport are male; *labanderas* (laundrywomen) are female.

Another walk-through moment in the row housing neighborhood shows women around children playing. They collectively watch over the youngsters having fun, and a woman comes out from the rowhouse with *bananacue* (sweet fried banana on skewers) or *camotecue* (sweet fried sweet potato on skewers) to sell to other mothers and kids. Cash transactions occur, if available, but usually food is consumed with promised payment. *Tapod* (trust) is collectively expressed by women with other women in looking after children not their own. Women form altruistic bonds for the safety of children living in rowhouses. Community welfare, in general, seems to be shared by anyone, regardless of gender and gender identity. In later fieldwork, focus group participants representing barangay leaders were women and men.

From an observational standpoint, resettlement communities that lack social infrastructure develop their own ways of supporting one another. The shared experience of displacement and economic marginalization, for example, enable them to forge deep cultural connections of *kapwa* (fellow being) that enrich community life for Haiyan survivors. Similar aspects of community resilience after disasters are observed in other socio-cultural contexts, for example in Puerto Rico after hurricane Maria (Roque, Pijawka and Wutich 2020). Indeed, post-disaster communities are in dire need of all forms of assistance to rebuild and for social protection. However, the particular ways that culture and humaneness are expressed through difficult periods are not well recognized among survivors. These communities in Leyte, while marginalized and peripheral, find multitude and unique forms of rebuilding their lives.

Equity in Post-disaster Habitats

Homes are built and rebuilt after each calamity. The scale of super typhoon Haiyan, however, rendered millions homeless and displaced. International humanitarian assistance was

unprecedented in the Philippines post-Haiyan, with the outpouring of both private and bilateral aid. Based on my field notes, private humanitarian assistance directly impacted survivors when needed most through NGOs such as the Tzu Chi Foundation, Habitat for Humanity, and Save the Children. Bilateral aid, as a matter of practice, went to the national government. In this section, I highlight the issue of equity in post-disaster habitats as it relates intricately to local culture and practices.

Disasters reveal systemic inequalities in affected communities. Women, girls, and non-binary individuals, known as *bayot* (male effeminate) or *palakin-on* (manly female in local Waray dialect), have higher vulnerabilities and are more at risk to the impact of disasters. According to the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD), of the over 6,300 people who died from super typhoon Haiyan, 64 percent were women, and a significant number of "claims of lifetime loss and damages for women" occurred in Leyte. Some of the noted impacts on women include economic loss and psychological trauma in a context where no counselling services or support are available. *Bayot* are an accepted gender identity that occupy niches in the beauty, hospitality, and entertainment industries in the country. In free talk conversations in 2015, *bayot* were positively spoken of as being included. Local people claimed "*waray labot it katawhan kay parehas man la*" (gender identity does not matter, we are equal). In other words, the trauma and suffering caused by disasters are experienced by anyone. And this claim is based on testimony from survivors at ground zero.

Despite the impacts of disaster being a great equalizer, the construction and allocation of post-disaster habitats reveal layers of inequities based on gender. Males with an income tend to be identified as the heads of households in barangay and government records. Death, migration, or abandonment of family post-disaster could have deleterious effects on the welfare of children left behind. Identifying the need for housing through documentary evidence adds to the burden on surviving women. Others simply rebuilt shanty homes in the "no-build" zones in coastal areas while waiting to be permanently transferred into housing units in relocation areas (Luchi and Maly 2017). A walk through the streets in rowhouses amid spontaneous conversations suggests anecdotally that the *kapit* or *palakasan* (social or political connections) system plays a key role in awarding units; evidenced by the presence of residents unknown to locals in the barangay pre-Haiyan.

Equity is both a goal and a process designed to provide fair or equal access to opportunities for marginalized populations, even in a post-disaster context. Equity, understood as a principle, should guide the allocation of infrastructure support. However, post-Haiyan this is a challenge as such equity seems to be lacking even under normal conditions. Not only is Region 8 one of the poorest areas in the country with one in every four families being poor (Philippine Statistics Authority 2020), but Leyte, together with Eastern Samar and Western Samar, were also among the 20 poorest provinces in the Philippines in 2019. The *palakasan* system, also referred to as the *padrino* system, a Spanish derivative of "patron-client" relations (Heywood 2018, 347), reproduces patronage at the most crucial point for survival. Securing permanent habitats post-Haiyan is an ongoing challenge for survivors. In a country where only a third of Filipinos own a dwelling (Ordinario 2017), disasters exacerbate the scarcity of areas for social housing. The subsequent re-zoning of 'no build zones' into 'no dwelling zones' has allowed the development of commercial areas along shorelines in Tacloban City (Samson-Espiritu 2014) instead of the creation of sustainable habitats for local people. Access to land ownership is a historical issue, and with the creation of the Department of Human Settlements and Urban Development in 2019, alleviating the plight of the urban poor is a renewed objective of the Philippine government. However, given the increasing frequency and severity of typhoons, the limited resources available will soon outstrip demand.

Since typhoon Haiyan hit in 2013, two more of the world's super typhoons have occurred in the Philippines: Meranti (2016) and Goni (2020) (Madarang 2020). The warming of the Pacific Ocean due to climate change increases the likelihood and the risks of such storms. The impacts of these weather events exacerbate the vulnerabilities of millions who live in the path of super typhoons.

During one last walk through the rowhouses in Leyte, it seemed like only yesterday that Haiyan struck. The remaining debris is a constant reminder to survivors to prepare again. They say "*mag-andam otro*" (prepare again) for another typhoon may make landfall anytime.

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Keywords

Haiyan, Tacloban, Post-disaster, resettlement