

## *Gender and Migration in Leyte Islands: Post-Haiyan Continuities and Transformations*

Summary of Presentation:

### **Introduction**

Disasters change lives, if not everything. The multi-faceted impact of disasters is life-changing; some examples include the destruction of properties, the trauma of death, the movement to other areas of displacement, and the economic loss in communities. Recovery, rehabilitation, and reconstruction take time and occur in different phases for individuals, families, and communities. In this context, I refer to disasters as the outcome of the intersections of vulnerabilities, systemic failures of governance and effective response, and natural forces like typhoons (cf. Mizutori 2020). The frequency of disasters demonstrates the challenge to recognize the lessons in the past, understand the present amidst global climate change, and embrace a future of uncertainties and possibilities by the actions we commit today.

### **Geography as Destiny?**

According to John Luke Gallup, Alejandro Gaviria, and Eduardo Lora (2003) in their book, *Is Geography Destiny? Lessons from Latin America*, geography is an important factor connected to development and that a “better understanding of geography, public policy can help control of channel its influence towards the goals of economic and social development”. I pose the same question to the Philippines, one of the most at-risk countries in the world for natural hazards with an annual average of 20 typhoons (Bankoff 2003). It ranked third in the 2018 World Risk Index of “most disaster-prone countries (UNFPA Philippines). Statista (2021) released the risk index points for the Philippines at 10 for earthquakes and 9.5 for tropical cyclones in 2021. Seven of the 11 super typhoons or strongest landfalls in recorded history occurred in the Philippines (de la Cruz Santos 2021). The Philippines is part of the Asia-Pacific region considered the most vulnerable region to the impact of climate change. Asia-Pacific is strategically located at the crossroads of pivotal historical and contemporary economic and political development that impact other regions, if not, globally.

In the Philippines, the island of Leyte is one of the three groups of islands that comprise the Eastern Visayas region considered one of the most vulnerable to typhoons. Leyte is the fifth-largest island in the archipelago connected to a unitary republican state where decentralization of local governance took effect only in the 1990s. Leyte is remembered as an important place in World War II associated with the famous “I shall return” pledge of Gen. Douglas MacArthur of the US forces (Cannon 2016) and annually celebrates October 20 as the “Leyte Landing”. According to retired Lt. Commander Thomas J. Cutler (1994), the Battle of Leyte Gulf “was the biggest and most multifaceted naval battle in history”. The Battle of Leyte Gulf resulted in massive US casualties with 16,043 soldiers and 7,270 sailors killed; Japan was noted to have suffered 419, 912 deaths and injuries (Madarang 2019). In the article “The Landing at Leyte: After Fifty Years”, Daniel Boone

Schirmer notes the significance of Leyte as an “important link in the global victory over the fascist axis” (1994, 1). Gen. MacArthur’s return and recapture of the Philippines from Japanese control was “one of the greatest symbolic and strategic victories of the Pacific War” (Collins 2020) that, arguably, remains obscured in the West.

Sixty-nine years after the Leyte Gulf landing, another event made landfall in Leyte – super typhoon Haiyan or locally known as Yolanda in November 2013. Haiyan was the strongest typhoon in Philippine history and “one of the strongest storm ever to make landfall” in the world (Bankoff and Borrinaga 2016, 51). Comparative records indicate that Haiyan was the “deadliest Philippine typhoon recorded in modern history, killing at least 63000 people” and the “strongest typhoon ever recorded in terms of one-minute sustained wind speed” (Odow 2015; cf. Cohn 2013). Haiyan registered 355 km/hour of sustained winds that qualify as Category 5. Its strength was about three times that of Hurricane Katrina (Pamintuan 2013) or far stronger than Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy combined (Muskal 2013).

Extrapolating the historicity of place in another context this time lends something to think about. War is another form of disaster albeit human-induced; paths of super typhoons in areas already vulnerable to natural hazards with fewer resources to mitigate risks result in a different type of disaster altogether. Haiyan connected the local with the global at the critical juncture of the crises brought by a changing climate compounded by other risk factors.

### **After Super Typhoon Yolanda: Focus on Leyte Island**

On November 8, 2013, Tacloban City, the capital of the island province of Leyte was flattened by super typhoon Yolanda. In deference to my people on the island and the Philippines, I use the name of Yolanda since it evokes an immense memory of tragedy, perseverance and resilience; of a natural calamity and a political fiasco. Yolanda made landfall in Leyte and directly hit Tacloban City where about 90% of infrastructure was destroyed. The unprecedented 13-foot storm surge washed out houses and buildings along its path, and the city was covered in mud, debris, and dead bodies after the storm including my sister-in-law. Then-Mayor of Davao City, Rodrigo Roa Duterte, was one of the first local executives to respond and said that “God was away when the typhoon hit” (Lacorte 2013). The locally-lived experience of Yolanda’s impact served as a turning point in becoming an “accidental sociologist of disaster”. Somehow those affected by Yolanda weave through our lives in Canada and elsewhere, and these, arguably, cannot be separated from the islands. I continuously argue that the local reflects the interconnections of diverse factors that shape realities. These realities are played out in quotidian lives, in the constructs and structures of inequalities and vulnerabilities.

According to Simon Veron, Maud Mouchet, Rafael Govarts, Thomas Haeverman, and Roseli Pellens (2019), the “island systems are the most vulnerable to climate change which is predicted to include shifts in temperature, rainfall and or sea levels”. The geography of Tacloban City reminds us that the unprecedented height of the Yolanda storm surge proves that rising sea levels in the Philippines are “three times more than the global average” (Lean 2013, cited in Bankoff and

Borrinaga, 2016, 52). But the most important component is the impact on human lives. Super typhoon Yolanda affected 16 million people and etched in our memories the death of over 6,000 people, the exact number could not be determined even to this day with varying claims from the government and local communities. Those who survive continue to tell the story and ground our advocacy for better protection of the environment and communities. I am one with my people in making Yolanda the pivotal turn of our lives, and as a feminist, “the personal is political”.

### **Migration and Displacement: Gendered Vulnerabilities**

My main research area is gender and migration. Super Typhoon Yolanda changed my narrow focus on Philippine migration to include disaster-induced mobilities and displacement. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Service (IDMC 2019), global displacement caused by natural hazards and climate change is three times more than those displaced by war and conflict. In 2020, internal migration due to extreme weather rose to 31 million in the world (Kenny 2021). About 4.1 million people were displaced in the Visayas Islands in the aftermath of Yolanda.

The Philippines is also one of the leading sources of migrant workers and immigrants around the world, and to discount the role of post-disaster realities that foreground choices delimit our perspective. Simply looking at statistics of migration flows will not enhance our understanding of the complex interplay of human-nature relations within unequal systems of resources, amongst others. Unlike traditional migration patterns, the Philippines is highly gendered (Bonifacio 2013). Filipino migrant women predominantly support the service and care industry in the world as nurses, caregivers, domestic workers, hotel workers, teachers, and fast food servers while Filipino migrant men are sought in the construction industries, and information technologies, among others (cf. UN Women 2015, 2016; Kotte 2021; Philippine Statistics Authority 2022).

In 2015, I went home to Tacloban City for a summer field course with my students on the local-global intersections including impact on the environment. Many houses were still abandoned and destroyed at that time, clearly manifesting that households moved to another location two years after Yolanda. The island of Leyte and other islands affected by Yolanda witnessed an influx of migration as the norm among households to survive and cope with the aftermath. I went back to Tacloban City after the summer field course to conduct a study on post-disaster communities in 2016-2017 supported by the University of Lethbridge. In general, there were three thematic directions of migration. First, migration was motivated by support from relatives in other areas within the island or other islands. Second, Yolanda survivors were attracted to migrate to areas with the presence of support from local governments like Davao City. Third, migration towards resettlement was mainly defined by access to resources and transportation immediately after the havoc brought by Yolanda. In all these three thematic migration directions, gender is an integral element of household making decisions of who leaves and stays behind, at times with intermittent intervals among members. In the literature, Srilakshmi Gururaja (2000, 13), contends that there are “dramatic increase in the number of women as heads of households, bear traditional responsibilities for children and ageing relatives” due to displacement. About 80% of disaster-related global displacements occur in Asia and the Pacific region (Andersson 2021). The case of

super typhoon Yolanda in Leyte, in particular, reminds us of our fragile existence under the epoch of the Anthropocene.

Post-disaster displacement in the island of Leyte resulted in forced displacement to other islands in the Philippines where connections are established based on the three thematic directions noted earlier. Of course, these included areas at the behest of the government and private social welfare agencies. There are no statistics or records of how many left Tacloban City or the affected communities in Leyte immediately after super typhoon Yolanda and how many have returned after a few months or years. Two years after Yolanda during the summer field course, many destroyed houses remain which was indicative of non-return. Anecdotal evidence has suggested that those with income support have permanently left the city and started anew selling dilapidated properties behind. Many also have returned to pick up the pieces and live beside their destroyed homes and slowly rebuild when they can.

General findings of my field study in 2016 show that circular migration from rural to urban characterized the patterns within the confines of the island. Many found jobs in the reconstruction and rehabilitation projects generated by international, national, and local support. Men and women have found reasons to stay behind on the island mainly for stable income and other opportunities that come their way. An extensive study in the future could possibly determine what economic opportunities shaped their decisions to rebuild post-Yolanda disaster.

However, an interesting finding in my study through secondary materials from community organizations was the rise of human trafficking of women and girls bound for metropolitan centres, allegedly for domestic work or sex work. The usual pattern of mobility among rural households seemingly increased women and girls taking the lead to earn additional income outside of agricultural work. In other words, intersectional modalities of gender-defined migration together with income level, education, skills, and destination contributed to different migration experiences. While Philippine cultures and practices have no strict gender scripts for mobility, the inequalities and inequities in society make gender a source of vulnerability in many axes of experiences for women, men, and gender-diverse individuals.

The rural landscape in Leyte has changed in the last few decades brought about by migration, both domestic and international. Rurality has changed from the traditional tropes of nipa huts to tall houses of many rural households supported by members who are overseas contract workers. Concrete houses located in vast rice fields, for example, are visible along the highway. The rural economy, while impacted heavily post-disaster, was supported by overseas remittances. My field study also revealed that the infusion of cash-for-work programmes by international humanitarian agencies like the Tzu Chi Foundation enabled Yolanda survivors to work locally.

Another highlight of findings from the field study was the phenomenon of child migration post-Yolanda. Parents allegedly sent their children to live with their relatives who live in other areas on the island or beyond. This is an important area to examine further as to where they migrated temporarily or permanently. Did more girls leave the islands or did more boys leave post-disaster

generally? The role of the extended kinship networks among Filipino families could facilitate such migration flows of children, or perhaps something else.

### **Island Rehabilitation: Continuities and Transformations**

Since 2015, I returned to the Philippines almost every year and witnessed post-Yolanda reconstruction and transformations in Leyte. Newly constructed houses and buildings abound and more physical rehabilitation taking place. Temporary shelters remained in 2017 and the transfer of evacuees to resettlement areas became rapid when then-Mayor Rodrigo Duterte became the President of the country in 2016. Certainly, there are continuities and transformations post-Yolanda.

Based on a short view of transformations in Leyte during the fieldwork, I found four areas of transformation post-Haiyan: physical and structural, rapid urbanization, social-environmental nexus, and gender mainstreaming and resources. Transformations in island communities are impactful in these areas; they occur to the naked eye because of the limited space. They are not mainly due to super typhoon Haiyan but have been going on for some time. Perhaps what Haiyan did was to hasten the process with international assistance. First, the physical and structural dimensions refer to the reconstruction of destroyed infrastructure and the construction of new ones. Rezoning of areas and classification of some as danger zones near the shores took place post-Yolanda. But the road widening projects predate Yolanda.

EVRMC or the Eastern Visayas Regional Medical Center was washed out during Haiyan, formerly located near Magsaysay Boulevard close to the downtown core in Tacloban City. It is now a huge complex of buildings outside of the city constructed to serve the public as a government hospital. Resettlement or relocation of displaced families was also outside of the city. So much could be said about the implications of reconstruction in the lives of women and men in the city post-Haiyan. Structural rezoning affected traditional sources of income for women and men. Others claim that reconstruction post-Haiyan brought a new city outlook, that is, much cleaner and welcoming. On the other hand, it also brought to light the continued marginalization of vulnerable people ---poor women particularly. As more women are heads of households or an increasing number of single mothers, the distance of their commute to the city centre for their main livelihood is challenging. The city has designated routes that each transit point going to their destination yield higher fares. Ultimately, a number have observably returned to their former residences despite the danger.

Second, rapid urbanization with housing developments was exacerbated by apparent new demands from housing loans. New houses were also built in resettlement areas in the northern part of Tacloban City supported by international agencies, government assistance, and private entities. Increased traffic became a post-Yolanda scenario with more private vehicles on the road. Securing private transport for mobility serve as a stark reminder of the difficulty of getting transportation after Haiyan.

Third, is what I call the social-environmental nexus at which point the transformation is critical. While rapid urbanization and the desire to live in the city for education and livelihood are the main drivers, the state of the environment remains problematic. Trees cut down to pave for more roads, mountains flattened or rivers scraped for gravel are just some disturbing phenomena. Of late, however, local communities are being empowered by the disregard for the environment and lack of government enforcement.

Fourth, gender mainstreaming has been a program under the Republic Act No. 9710 or the Magna Carta of Women (2009), yet local resources are insufficient to provide social protection for the marginalized sector. In 2016, a year after the summer field course, there were many still waiting for their full Yolanda relief government assistance in Tacloban City. The Philippine Disaster Reduction and Management Act (RA 10121) provides a comprehensive and integrated community approach to disaster risk management and gender is a key area of action but limited resources impede its programs and activities. For example, the span of rural to urban resources to ensure gender sensitivity in disaster mitigation is not yet realized. However, the popular response of research participants during my fieldwork was: “gender does not matter; each can be equal”. Perhaps so, but the intersections of vulnerabilities pre- and post-disasters could be another research topic to pursue.

I close by saying, “disasters come our way but the unforgettable lesson is to heed their call”.  
Thank you.

- Glenda Bonifacio

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