

Security in Adversity: Highlighting Coastal Women's Agency and Efforts to Organize after Haiyan

MARY BARBY P. BADAYOS-JOVER*

Division of Social Sciences, College of Arts and Sciences, University of the Philippines, Visayas

Abstract

In 2013, Super typhoon Haiyan wreaked havoc on the coastal communities of Northern Iloilo and other areas of the Visayas group of islands in the Philippines. Tremendous losses in livelihood and property were recorded and various international, national and local institutions responded through immediate and strategic interventions. The present paper aims to highlight coastal village women's experiences with post disaster relief and rehabilitation. Using the post-Haiyan experiences of women in the island-village of Bayas as a case study, the paper also emphasizes the opportunity that post-disaster contexts provide for coastal village women's agency. Qualitative data for the study were gathered through a series of group and key informant interviews with community members and leaders. Since the women in the coastal village of Bayas were not engaged in offshore fishing they did not directly benefit from the various boat replacement assistance efforts extended to fishing families. Thus they organized themselves and lobbied in order to address security and sustainability concerns. Such opportunity for women's agency in the context of adversity needs to be supported by existing social networks and external institutions lest it be undermined by cultural practices that continue to marginalize and disempower women in coastal areas.

Introduction

On November 8, 2013, super typhoon Haiyan, locally known as super typhoon Yolanda, a category five typhoon, wreaked havoc on the coastal communities of Northern Iloilo and other areas of the Visayas group of islands in the Philippines. Haiyan was one of the most intense tropical cyclones ever recorded in history, with 195 mi h^{-1} sustained wind speed upon landfall, wind

*Corresponding author. Email address: mpbadayosjover@up.edu.ph

gusts of up to 235 mi h⁻¹ and a 13 feet surge in sea level during the storm (Mercy Corps 2013). More than 16 million people were affected by Haiyan, with the death toll estimated by some government and other institutions as over 6,000 or even closer to 10, 000.

Northern Iloilo in Panay Island in the Philippines was one of the hardest hit by Typhoon Haiyan and various local, national and international institutions responded through immediate and strategic interventions. The island-village of Bayas in Estancia, northern Iloilo, was one of the adversely affected locales that experienced the influx of various post-disaster relief operations. Post-disaster recovery and rehabilitation efforts were generally gender-blind and carried out in typical top-down militaristic tradition by the national and local government units (Badayos-Jover and Defiesta 2014). International institutions likewise extended help to the community without necessarily being mindful of gender considerations. Women's needs were thus not addressed at the outset until the women articulated their own needs in various fora.

Disaster research has mostly focused on women's vulnerability and lack of empowerment in various contexts (Weist et al. 1994; Enarson 2008; Nowak and Caulfield 2008; Enarson and Morrow 1998; Badayos-Jover and Defiesta 2014). Such emphasis is hinged upon women's pre-disaster gender roles and societal status in patriarchal societies that render them weak in the face of catastrophes and the ensuing aftermath. Post-disaster situations often find women lacking in skills and social capital and/or networks that prove crucial for adapting to and even improving ruptured lives. Thus, researchers have pointed to the distinct gendered burdens women face post-disaster, as they contend with the challenges related with family needs and stability while being marginalized in reconstruction efforts led by predominantly male community leaders and institutions providing post-disaster aid. However, there are also instances when women become active in post-disaster reconstruction, even taking on traditional male tasks like house building (Drolet et al. 2015).

The impacts of disasters on nations, social groups and individuals vary depending on their level of vulnerability. These vulnerabilities are in turn influenced by physical, social, economic and environmental conditions as well as shaped by differences in social structures defined by age and physical ability, sex and gender (Enarson and Morrow 1998; Canon cited in Enarson and

Morrow 1998). Thus, gender researchers continue to argue that disasters have differential impact on women and men, with women oftentimes doubly burdened due to pre-disaster social norms that render them sidelined in recovery and rehabilitation (Juran 2012, Enarson 2008, Enarson and Morrow 1998). Such a scenario is quite typical in the Philippines, an archipelagic country that has long been categorized as hazard-prone and has become increasingly so in the context of climate change. However, certain studies like that of Bohle, Etzold and Keck (2009) put forward new frames for analyzing difficult circumstances, such as the agency-based resilience framework which emphasizes the “crucial role of social actors and their agency” (Bohle, Etzold and Keck 2009). This perspective “looks at resilience-building as focused on empowering the most vulnerable to pursue livelihood options that strengthen their social sources of resilience” (Bohle, Etzold and Keck 2009). The said framework is useful in looking at coastal village women’s adaptive capacity or resilience in post-disaster contexts, particularly how their agency as actors manifests in such crucial times.

This paper chronicles coastal village women’s experiences with disaster relief and rehabilitation, following an extreme climatic event. Birkmann et al. (2010) posits that major disasters have “the potential to change dominant ways of thinking and acting but little research has been done on the circumstances under which disasters generate such opportunities for change”. The present paper argues for such a circumstance, particularly the spontaneous expressions of women’s agency during the difficult post-disaster context. While volatile in patriarchal settings like coastal villages, women’s agency redounds to their capacity for individual and collective action, or their commitment to transformative courses of action despite restrictive societal norms (Moya 1990, cited in Eduards 1994). The paper also emphasises the need for institutional support to sustain women’s empowerment at the grassroots level, especially in the context of community re-construction following a major alteration.

Methods

The data used for this paper is preliminary and utilized qualitative methods such as group and individual interviews with the community members of Bayas, an island-village in Northern Iloilo in the Philippines. Such interactions with the community members started in January and went until

March 2014, a few months after Typhoon Haiyan devastated the village. The initial exchanges came about through an extension project carried out by a group of Social Science faculty members from the University of the Philippines Visayas. The project focused largely on helping the coastal community process their disaster experience and giving initial input on community empowerment, including awareness-raising on gender dynamics through sensitising workshops that doubled as focus group interviews. A year and a half later, in mid-2015 and then again in early 2016, the author went back to the locale to do more interviews in line with designing a research proposal focusing primarily on women's agency in post-disaster contexts.

A total of 70 participants (47 females and 23 males) representing the 7 “puroks” or village zonal areas in Bayas attended several gender-sensitising orientation workshops in the first quarter of 2014. They doubled as participants of preliminary focus group interviews. Key informant interviews with village leaders were also conducted at the time and more than a year later, leaders of the new women's association were also individually interviewed. Such interviews provided salient initial insights into the emergence of coastal women's agency following Haiyan and the necessary support mechanisms that are crucial to sustaining fledgling efforts aimed at empowering women in the grassroots.

Results and Discussion

The areas severely affected by Haiyan underwent changes in livelihood and personal lives. The island-village of Bayas which is the locale of focus in this paper is mainly a fishing village, with men doing mostly offshore fishing and women engaged in fish drying and shell gathering. The typhoon destroyed fishing boats and left households with very few options for alternative sources of income. Immediately after the typhoon, community members reacted in stereotypical ways, with women “gathering household items dispersed by the storm surge, washing muddied clothes, cleaning abodes...”. On the other hand, the men “cleared debris blocking roads, gathered dispersed corrugated roofing and cut down damaged house posts”.

When post disaster relief started coming into Bayas, women complained that they were usually “not informed”. Village officials who were in contact

with institutions that provided disaster aid were mostly men and presumably spoke for everyone in the village. This scenario gives credence to what Juran (2012) notes as systemic, structural discrimination that hinder women from accessing aid resources as institutions give aid to the “household head”, invariably defined as a man. What transpired in Bayas then was likewise typical in the sense that disaster relief workers usually subsume women’s needs under general community needs, assuming that women, being part of the community will already benefit (Badayos-Jover and Defiesta 2014). However, there are specific needs of women that are oftentimes overlooked by relief personnel and even community leaders. In the case of Bayas, the typhoon destroyed their community birthing facility and all equipment was washed out (pers. comm. with midwife, 2014), leaving child-bearing women with only the option to go to the town proper on the mainland in order to give birth. Even that option was not readily available after the typhoon as boats that are the main mode of transportation to the mainland were destroyed.

Since Bayas is an island with fishing as the main source of livelihood, post-disaster aid usually came in the form of boats. There was an influx of boat donations from various local and international donors in the months following the typhoon because preliminary institutional assessments by both local government units and NGOs noted that fishing boats were destroyed by the storm surge. Community consultations served as venues for women to articulate their opinions and needs, particularly with regards to donated boats: “It’s always boats...every time people come here to give aid, they give boats. What about aid [specifically] for women?” The foregoing simple articulation was loaded with implications, particularly in light of what Birkmann et al. (2010) referred to as “windows of opportunity for change”, or disasters serving as drivers for change within a number of interacting domains - social, economic, environmental and legal systems. One significant implication of the comment on boats is the mismatch between certain community needs and post-disaster institutional responses. While the immediacy of response following a coastal disaster is imperative, aid institutions may also practice flexibility with regards community needs, as well as the needs and capacities of certain sectors like women, especially in the rebuilding phase (Drolet et al. 2015). Gender-sensitivity is a given if one is to effectively carry out institutional support to disaster survivors. At the very least, being mindful of gender dynamics allows aid workers and donors to ensure the relevance of the help they extend to as

many surviving sectors as possible. Moreover, gender-sensitivity allows one to veer away from traditional notions of fishing as solely a male activity and that men's needs, i.e., boats, take precedence.

While seemingly simplistic, Bayas women's demand for aid specifically targeting women in the post-Haiyan period speaks volumes of a greater need for autonomy from the traditional societal gendered expectations they subscribe to. Traditionally, Filipino women, particularly mothers, would subsume their own needs to that of the other family members' needs. However, a super typhoon not just changed their landscape; it became a turning point for possible transformation in gender relations to take place. They were willing to learn new skills and demand help to get them started on such new skills. Rajasingham-Senanayake (2004) argues that, "contemporary language still lacks the vocabulary necessary for women to [effectively] articulate the transformations they have experienced". However, for the women in Bayas, "there was no turning back, no return to established social orders that make them vulnerable in disasters". One lesson they learned the hard way is to not be solely dependent on fishing as means of livelihood because events such as storm surges can simply render them wanting in an instant.

The women of Bayas were not organized into any association prior to Haiyan and in the few months after the disaster. Their primary sources of income were buying and selling food items, fish selling, store vending and providing services like haircuts. Yet in the months following Haiyan, when various entities came to offer post-disaster relief, the women started to articulate their specific needs. As previously mentioned, the women noticed the rather skewed interventions that generally only benefit men. Hence, when an opportunity came for women's concerns to be articulated via one community level capacity-building project, they insisted on activities solely benefitting women. The project proponents and implementers thus negotiated with the donor agency and initiated the formation of the Active Women Food Processors of Bayas, Estancia in order to capacitate the women.

The Active Women Food Processors of Bayas, Estancia was founded in March 2014, 4 months after Haiyan. Membership is purely community-based hence there was a cross-section of women who requested livelihood workshops and were taught how to process squid as squid is one of the resources women

can access or catch on the island. The project implementers also gave modest food processing equipment to the newly formed women's organization, to get them started on new modes of earning. As in any other newly-formed group, however, the Women Food Processors of Bayas encountered sustainability concerns at the outset. The officers could not successfully impose association dues and members basically prioritised other, government-initiated networks due to monetary incentives. Hence, the group could not come up with the start-up capital to put up a viable business and they also lacked promising markets for their products. Eventually, the initial women's association in Bayas had to undergo a donor-driven reorganisation within the year of its founding to meet basic requirements for financial support by a different external institution.

Strong support by external, more established institutions seems crucial then for women-led fledgling organisations to prosper at the grassroots. The Bayas Women's Association (BAWA) was founded in September 2014, just 6 months after the first attempt at forming a grassroots women's organization. Most of its members belong to the older Women Food Processors group and the "Kalipunan ng mga Liping Pilipina" (KALIPi), a women's association organised by the town or municipal government. According to key informants, BAWA was formed so the members could avail of the post-Haiyan financial and housing assistance provided by Balay Mindanao, an NGO funded by Action Aid UK. Unfortunately, it was not made clear in the initial interviews conducted whether the said NGO specifically targeted women as beneficiaries or it just happened that a group of women wanted to access financial aid. What became apparent was the NGO's interest in the sustainability of their post-disaster assistance, hence, their prescribed mechanisms and processes prior to the actual financial grant. One condition set by the NGO was that only community organisations registered with the Philippines' Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) could avail of their post-disaster financial help. BAWA was organised to fulfill this requirement. The municipal or town officials of Estancia assisted during the processing of documents for BAWA's registration with DOLE, which finally came about in February 2015.

Initially, BAWA was composed of 295 members. Later on, however, the association was divided into 2 groups. To date, there exists 2 chapters of Bayas Women's Association which are in the "barrio" (village proper) with more or less 170 members and in "sitio" (sub-village or zone) Maliog-liog, with 125

members. Both chapters have their own set of officers. With donations from Balay Minadanao, BAWA acquired one pump boat and established a community store. Balay Mindanao also initiated training on disaster risk reduction and business management to help BAWA members manage their community store. Moreover, the municipal or town government located in the mainland released a certificate to allow BAWA to transport supplies for their community store without paying for a gate pass at the port every time.

The members of BAWA can avail of monthly PhP 500 financial assistance from their association for health and education purposes, with only 2 % interests. They can also access rice through credit from their community store, which they can pay on a weekly basis. Moreover, the residents of the “barangay” can use the transport pump boat of BAWA for emergency purposes and they only have to pay for the gasoline and a token of the pump boat operator costs. As any other association of similar nature, BAWA encountered problems like non-attendance of some of the members during their monthly meetings and the delayed payment of those who borrowed money or accessed rice through credit in their community store. However, despite these setbacks, some degree of implicit recognition was accorded to BAWA as they have since been asked to attend village general assemblies and is consulted by the village council in the identification of possible projects. The municipal or town government also requests BAWA to send a representative during municipal or town meetings. BAWA is likewise invited to attend trainings conducted by the local government and other NGOs. Moreover, BAWA participates in the various activities initiated by the town officials like parades, as well as singing and dancing competitions. As of the second quarter of 2016, Balay Mindanao, the NGO that provided financial aid to BAWA, still occasionally visits Bayas village to monitor the progress of the women’s association. According to BAWA’s President, they also consult the said NGO for certain organizational concerns and Balay Mindanao seems responsive enough.

Conclusions

Extreme disasters in coastal areas disrupt lives, upset livelihoods and apparently also bring undue burdens to women as a result of societal gender norms. However, disasters can likewise provide windows of opportunity for change in coastal villages, particularly when it comes to the distinct articulation

of women's needs and the spontaneous expressions of women's agency. Such was the case in the island-village of Bayas, in Estancia, Iloilo, Philippines, in the wake of super typhoon Haiyan. Preliminary qualitative data showed that since the disaster disrupted prevailing gendered norms in the coastal village, women found a chance to articulate their needs. The women even organized themselves into a group that can potentially empower them not just financially but also politically, via representation in the coastal community's leadership bodies. Yet, the foregoing preliminary narrative also highlights that fledgling coastal women's agency requires external institutional support for sustainability, especially in the aftermath of disasters. Said institutional support has to be mindful of the prevailing gender dynamics in coastal villages that impede on the recognition of women, not just as a vulnerable group, but as distinct social actors possessing the ability to speak up for and seek the means to address particular needs. Further research may then present more nuanced understanding of women's agency and the value of formally organizing for women's empowerment, within the context of gender dynamics in coastal areas recovering from disaster.

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