

Stories Women Tell: Five Rural Women's Lived Experiences of Survival and Typhoons

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This paper is an initial exploration of five rural women's interpretations of their lived experiences of daily survival and typhoons. Using feminist standpoint epistemology that builds knowledge from women's experiences, the paper privileges the concrete experiences of the five rural women and their perspectives in viewing rural poverty, women's vulnerabilities in times of typhoons, their difficulties in surmounting the after-effects of typhoons, and their strategies in rebuilding their lives.

Prologue

As an asthmatic and sickly child with limited mobility, rainy days and typhoons fascinated me to no end. Rainy days meant playing in pools of water and shaping mud patties. Typhoons were synonymous with never-ending play and fun. Being one of the few well-to-do families in our community, my grandfather taught us the value of caring for community members and sharing our resources with those who are in need. One translation of such generosity and caring for others is opening our ancestral house to people needing temporary shelter during typhoons. There were no evacuation centers then and the idea of one is unheard of in a closely-knit community. The people stayed in our house for days, sometimes weeks. I happily welcomed mothers bringing with them my potential playmates, their children. I loved helping adults distribute blankets and clothes while my grandmother baked bread and made chicken-flavored porridge for our neighbors. But the best part for me was having lots of children around to play with. I secretly wished that they could stay permanently with us.

Those were the good times of my childhood...

Introduction

The Philippines lies along the typhoon belt of the Pacific Ocean and experiences an average of 20 typhoons every year. According to Jerry Velasquez, senior regional coordinator of the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), the Philippines ranked 12th among the 200 countries at risk from typhoons, floods and other natural hazards. It also has a high incidence of casualties from typhoons. Citing a UNISDR global assessment report, Velasquez compared the Philippines to Japan, another typhoon-prone country. While Japan has 22.5 million people exposed to typhoons annually, as compared to the country's 16 million people, the estimated annual death toll in the latter is almost 17 times higher. Moreover, the World Bank and the National Disaster Coordinating Committee (NDCC) (2003) estimated a loss of four billion pesos and an average of 500 deaths per year due to typhoons. For instance, recent typhoons, particularly Ondoy and Peping in 2009, caused great losses both in terms of property and lives.

The Bicol region, which is located at the southern-most part of Luzon island, is one of the most typhoon-prone areas in the country. It is also one of the poorest. Specifically in Irosin, one of the farming communities in Sorsogon in the Bicol region, typhoons can result in heavy damages to the livelihood of people, even threaten the survival of families. It is also at risk of volcanic eruption and lahar flooding during typhoons and flash floods because of its location along Mt. Bulusan.

This paper centers on the narratives of five rural women from Brgy. Monbon in the municipality of Irosin. Women in Irosin play a critical role in families, and are often the ones especially burdened with coping with the aftermath of typhoons. The narratives provide glimpses of rural poverty conditions and the after-effects of typhoons on poor women and their households. Drawing from the stories of these women, this paper describes women's strategies in coping with daily survival, dealing with the after-effects of typhoons, and rebuilding their lives, as well as their interpretations of these experiences. The paper addresses the following questions:

- How do rural women interpret their lived experiences of everyday survival and typhoons?
- What are the strategies they developed/employ to cope with daily survival and deal with the after-effects of typhoons and rebuild their lives?

This paper has five sections. The first section discusses the objectives, methodology and sampling of the study. The second section describes the poverty situation of rural households from the perspectives of five rural women and their coping strategies against poverty. The third section describes the women's vulnerabilities in times of typhoons, how they cope with the aftermath of the natural disaster and the challenges they face in the rebuilding their lives. The fourth section explores women's interpretations of the above experience. The fifth section poses some reflections and concluding notes.

I. Methodology

This paper takes the feminist standpoint epistemology, an approach to knowledge building and research that enables one to "see and understand the world through the eyes and experiences of [marginalized and] oppressed women and apply the vision and knowledge of oppressed women to social activism and social change" (Brooks, 2007, p. 55). Feminist standpoint epistemology as applied to research gives value to building new knowledge from women's experiences and to understanding the larger social context from the perspectives of women's experiences while using women's experiences as standpoint in mapping agenda for social change (Brooks, 2007). As a methodology in research, it places "women at the center of the research process: *women's concrete experiences* provide the starting point from which to build knowledge." (p. 56), particularly starting with "*women's lives, as they themselves experience them,*" (Brooks, 2007), in order to gain an accurate understanding of women's lives in a particular context.

Using the feminist standpoint epistemology, this paper opts to study the lives of five rural women to gain insight and understanding on how they live and survive rural poverty and recurring typhoons.

Research Method and Sampling

This paper used feminist in-depth interviewing (Hesse-Biber, 2007) as research method with five women as participants. The five women are residents of Brgy. Monbon,² a rural barangay in Irosin. An average of 19 typhoons hit the barangay annually, between September and January (<http://irosin.gov.ph>, n.d.). Brgy. Monbon was hardest hit by Typhoons *Milenyo* and *Reming* in September and November, 2006, respectively.

The five women were selected based on their experiences of flooding and Typhoons *Reming* and *Milenyo* as well as their willingness to share their experiences.

The research conducted employed unstructured interviewing wherein the women were provided with some themes that they could focus on while telling their personal stories. Through this feminist process, the women “storytellers” have more control of the direction of the interviews. The interviews ran like conversations between two women, with the women participants as “storytellers” and the researcher as the “listener.” These roles were also reversed at times when the women asked questions of the researcher about her experience of Typhoon Ondoy and of living in Manila. Aware of the power and authority of the researcher in research, the author integrated many direct quotations from the women to ensure that their voices and thoughts were authentically captured. The paper also distinguishes between the women’s voices and that of the researcher.

II. Rural Poverty and Women's Stories of Everyday Survival

Engaging in Multiple Livelihoods as Strategy for Survival

Betty, 54, an elementary graduate, is a mother to seven children. Her family lives in a bamboo and *nipa* house on their own small lot. She works as a laundry woman for a nearby resort. She does laundry six times in a month and earns Php 2,000.00. In between her work at the resort, she engages in various income activities which include farm work, doing occasional laundry for neighbors and selling vegetables. Moreover, she raises a pig that she sells after six months and earns Php800 to Php900 from it. Out of her earnings from hog raising she buys a new young pig and saves the remaining money for the education needs of her two sons. Another income generating activity is her engagement in the *pagamit* system.² She earns six sacks of *palay* every harvest time from the two hundred pesos revolving capital in her *pagamit* "business." The *palay* earned from the *pagamit* is used for household consumption usually good for only two to three months.

Betty's multiple livelihood activities are complemented by her husband and eldest son's wages from irregular farm work, each earning one hundred fifty pesos a day with one free snack. They usually work four times a week but rarely have work during rainy reasons and bad weather conditions. Since her husband and eldest son's incomes are irregular, the family relied primarily on her earnings. She tries to save at least Php 50 a week from her multiple livelihood activities to augment her capital for her *pagamit* "business." However, whatever is saved is often used up for unforeseen expenses.

The aggregated earnings of the family can only cover the daily modest consumption of rice and vegetables and the education expenses of the children. Due to the tight budget, Betty's family eats fish only on her paydays while meat is a rare fare reserved only for fiestas. Despite her multiple livelihoods, her family has no extra money for emergencies. In case of sickness or calamities, her household relies on loans from relatives and cash advances from the resort employer.

Food is always limited in Betty's household and the situation worsens during rainy seasons and typhoons. When rice is limited, she adds *sabag* or extenders such as camote or cassava when cooking rice to increase its volume. Her family often eats porridge during meals; she would enhance the flavor by adding sautéed ginger. But when rice is not available, her family buys root crops as substitute to rice and in worst cases, her family reduces food intake, either skipping breakfast or supper.

Cutting Down Expenses and Food Pooling in Times of Food Shortage

Irma, 38, single, is a home-based, piece-rate worker. She had completed one year of college but quit schooling when her widower father suffered a stroke and was paralyzed. As a piece-rate worker, she earns an average of Php750 a week making abaca ropes. Home-based work fits with her caregiving responsibility to her father. Since a major part of her earnings is spent on her father's medicines, she makes do with what is left to buy food and pay for electric bills.

Money is always scarce so Irma tries to make ends meet by cutting down on food expenses. For instance, instead of buying vegetables, she gathers taro leaves, *kangkong* (swamp cabbage), wild ferns and fallen coconuts. She also uses food substitutes such as toasted rice for coffee and root crops for rice. When short of rice supply, she asks for rice from her siblings in exchange for her viand. Porridge is Irma's and her father's regular meal. During rainy seasons or when piece-rate work is limited (in her words "*tiempo sin kapigaduhan*"), she and her siblings pool together what they have for their meals. Through this, everyone is able to eat, no matter how limited the food is.

Irma has no savings. In cases of emergencies, she relies on her siblings' help and informal loans obtained at usurious interests. There is not even money to repair the leaks in their roof caused by Typhoon *Reming* in 2006. To avoid getting wet when it rains, she uses cans and old basins to catch the dripping water from the leaks while she and her father sleep under a long table. Although this situation is difficult for Irma and her father, she will not spare money for house repair expenses as the medication of her father remains her priority.

Expense Reduction as Survival Strategy

Lorna, 49, a high school graduate, is a mother to eight children. She works as a home-based worker making abaca ropes at per piece rates. She earns Php500 to Php700 a week. Aside from the piece-rate work, she also gives pedicure, manicure and haircutting services. She also raises pigs (one or two pigs a year) and some chickens. The income from hog-raising is saved for the children's school needs. The chickens and fresh eggs are either for consumption or for quick cash.

Her multiple livelihood activities are complemented by her husband's earnings from his small farm and tricycle driving. Yield from the farm is used for household consumption but the supply is never enough until the next harvest season. When this happens, the family has to buy commercial rice. The daily earnings from tricycle driving enable the family to eat fish or meat and buy some groceries but it is still not sufficient. To reduce household expenses, the whole family engages in farm work instead of hiring workers. Even the school-aged children help in the farm on weekends. Likewise, the children have packed lunches and are transported to and from school by their father before he plies his tricycle route in the town.

In Lorna's household, the lean periods are the months before harvest time and during rainy seasons when tricycle driving is not earning much. During these periods, she makes ends meet by buying cheaper rice and fewer groceries. When rice supply is limited, she also uses extenders such as root crops and adds shrimp paste or vegetables as extenders to fried eggs.

The family lives in a government-funded social housing project located near a creek that swells during typhoons and continuous heavy rains. In the 2006 flood caused by Typhoon *Reming*, the family's house and tricycle were submerged in lahar and silt. Without money for house repairs, they made do with the hardened *lahar* as flooring and took a loan from a relative working abroad to purchase a new tricycle.

A Single Regular Income Supplemented by Credit for Survival

Amelia, 50, a high school graduate, is a single parent with five children. She is also the caregiver of a paralytic uncle. Amelia earns two thousand pesos a month. This income is supplemented by her eldest son's wages from farm work. Since her son's work is irregular, her household relies primarily on her income. This however can barely tide the family over until the next payday. Her family lives in a two-room government-funded social housing project near a creek. The house was submerged in flood in 2006, which destroyed all their belongings and valuables such as family and wedding pictures, and appliances acquired through the *pahulugan* (installment) system such as the television set and electric fan.

Food availability is a problem in Amelia's household during rainy seasons and bad weather conditions. Whenever they ran short of food and money before Amelia's next pay day, they buy food on credit from the nearby *sari-sari* store. Porridge is the usual family breakfast. Porridge also becomes the regular meal in the household when they have reached their credit limit at the *sari-sari* store. If this is not enough to make ends meet, skipping meals is the next cost-cutting measure. The younger ones are given priority during meals; i.e., the children eat first while the remaining food is shared among the adults. Amelia's family has no savings except what is needed to pay the monthly electric bill.

Relying on a Network of Relatives and Neighbors in Hard Times

Cherry, 31, is a mother of two children, ages six and one. She works from two to six months as substitute to teachers who take leaves either due to pregnancy or sickness. However, because their children are still young, her husband requested her to stay home to take care of the children. Her husband is a security guard earning three thousand pesos a month. They live in their own half-finished semi-concrete house in a lot given by her mother.

The bulk of her husband's income goes to the payment of a "5/6" loan which was used for her caesarian operation. She gave birth to a pre-mature baby in

2006, at the height of the Typhoon *Reming* flash flood. To help out with the daily expenses, she takes on home-based piece-rate work that earns her two to three hundred pesos a week. In some occasions, she earns extra cash from tutoring the children of her relatives and for preparing lesson plans or correcting examination papers of regular teachers.

When there is no food in the house, she relies on her mother who is generous enough to help out. She also eats at her mother's house when her husband is off to work. She substitutes the liquid of boiling rice when she runs out of powdered milk for her younger child. During emergencies, she relies on the contributions of relatives. Another source of credit is an informal moneylender, popularly called "lo(a)ndon bridge" in the community. To get a loan, they use her husband's ATM card (where the salary of her husband is deposited by the security agency) as collateral.

III. Women's Interpretations of their Lived Experiences of Typhoons

Women's Experiences of Vulnerability in Times of Typhoons

A community system or asset is considered vulnerable when its characteristics or circumstances make it susceptible to the ill effects of a hazard (Oxfam, 2010). Similarly, people are vulnerable to typhoons when their internal capacity (attributes and resources) is susceptible to or cannot cope with the adverse effects of the typhoons. Though natural hazards like typhoons affect both men and women, societal factors make them respond and adapt differently. UNIFEM (2008) stated that due to gender norms and biological factors, women are 14 times more likely to die in times of natural disasters as compared to men. Further, the survey conducted by the Asia-Pacific Women Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) in 2006 revealed that women are more at risk than men because of their "lower socio-economic status, barriers to choice and lack of access to resources."⁴

These studies about the gender-differentiated effects of disasters and calamities resonate in the stories of the five women about the hardships and

vulnerabilities they experienced during the flooding caused by Typhoons *Reming* and *Milenyo*:

Cherry, pregnant at that time, recalled her ordeal:

Sa kagustuhan kung makatawid dahil malalim na ang tubig, inakyat ko ang pader kahit hirap ako dahil kabuwanan ko na at nag-spotting ako dahil sa nerbiyos (In my determination to save myself from the flood, I even climbed a wall despite my difficulty because I was already nine months pregnant, and I experienced "blood spotting" because of tension).

Irma had a similar experience:

Iba ang pakiramdam ko habang nakalubog sa baha. Naghahalo ang lamig ng ulan at mainit na tubig na may putik mula sa bulkan. Alam ko delikado ang mababad sa tubig pag meron ka (I had a strange feeling while immersed in the flood. It was from the combination of cold rain water and warm muddy lahar water. I know it is not good to be in drenched when having your monthly period).

Of the five women, Betty and Amelia experienced living in an evacuation center. Betty and her family stayed in the evacuation center for a month during which her younger children got sick because of the congestion, lack of facilities and basic hygiene. Likewise, Amelia, whose house was submerged in mud, stayed in the evacuation center for almost two months. As women, they experienced difficulties related to their gender-specific, personal hygiene needs. They recalled the difficulty in finding privacy in the evacuation center to change clothes and bathe, among others. Betty said:

Ako nga tinitiiis ko na lang ang di masyadong pag-ihing dahil iisa nga ang CR may pila pa at wala pang tubig (I just endured not being able to urinate much because there

was only one CR ["comfort room" or toilet], and there was a long queue, and no water to use inside).

Amelia also shared her experience:

Mahirap din maligo. Di ka makahilod dahil nakadamit ka, dahil ang gripong igiban ng inumin ay yon din ang paliguan (Taking a bath was difficult. You cannot scrub yourself because you have your clothes on, and the faucet in the bathing area is also where people get their drinking water).

On the other hand, Irma, Lorna and Cherry complained that only those in the evacuation centers were given emergency relief assistance. People like them who chose not to go to evacuate centers were excluded despite the fact that they suffered the same losses as those in evacuation centers: they also lost their livelihoods, they had no food and money, and their house were just as badly damaged. They said the limited space and congestion in the evacuation center discouraged them, so they chose to stay in their relatives' houses.

The women's role as caregivers of their families and relatives constrained them during disasters. At the height of the typhoon, Amelia, being the caregiver of her paralytic uncle, was caught in a dilemma whether to stay with him or abandon him to save herself. She was relieved when a *barangay tanod* (local official) rescued them:

Paano ko siya bubuhatin? Mabigat pag lalaki... naisip ko na magpaiwan na lang kami. Ayoko namang ako lang ang makaligtas. Magi-guilty naman ako at habang buhay akong kukunsensiyahin ng aking mga kamag-anak (How can I carry him? Men are heavier... I decided we both stay behind. I don't want to save only myself. I would feel guilty and besides my relatives would condemn me for life).

With regard to whose welfare should be secured first, Lorna opined:

Siyempre, kung sino ang mas mahina at walang kakayahang iligtas ang sarili, sila dapat unahing iligtas.

Magsasakripisyo ka talaga. Dahil limitado ang madadala ng pang-rescue na bangka sa pagtawid, di mo uunahin ang sarili kundi ang mga bata muna. Kaya nagpaiwan na lang kami ng asawa ko. Pareho kami may lubid na nakatali sa baywang. Kung sakaling di na kami mabalikan ng bangka, itatali na lang namin ang aming sarili sa malaking puno para di kami maanod (People who are weaker and have no capacity to save themselves should be secured first. You really have to make sacrifices. Because the rescue boat can only carry a limited number of persons, you can't put yourself first before the children. That's why my husband and I stayed behind. We tied ourselves together at the waist because in case the rescue boat would not be able to come back for us, we would tie ourselves to a big tree so we wouldn't be swept away by the flood).

Similarly, Irma and her siblings decided to evacuate their sick father and younger children first.

Women's Strategies in Coping with the After-effects of Typhoons

A common observation among the women was that the worst part of the experience was dealing with the aftermath of the typhoon. They lost their livelihoods, they had only very little food and no money. Relief assistance was no longer available, even from the barangay council.

According to the five women, typhoons meant hardships and food scarcity to their households. Right after the Typhoons *Milenyo* and *Reming*, the women made use of their "well-tested strategies" for daily survival: food adjustment (eating once or twice a day instead of three meals a day); meal modification (eating porridge or mixing rice with extenders); food substitution (buying the cheapest rice and use of additives instead of meat or fish); eliminating fish and meat in the diet (meat reserved only for special occasions); communal eating (pooling of food with parents or

relatives), as well as eating less and in succession (food is apportioned to family members, the younger ones and working adults eat first).

Betty and Amelia resorted to food reduction: limiting meals to one or two meals a day, either skipping breakfast or supper (or both), and sleeping off hunger when food is not available. For Irma and Lorna, food substitution worked well for them: substituting root crops for rice, food flavor cubes for fish or meat and using vegetables as extenders to instant noodles. In Cherry's case, she regularly brought her children to eat at her mother's house while her husband was off to work.

Several members of Betty's household out-migrated in search for work: her husband and eldest son had gone to nearby towns to work as farm workers and abaca strippers while her two older daughters migrated to Manila and to a nearby town to work as housemaids for a year or two. The earnings of the children from domestic work were sent to her to support the family's daily needs. With the out-migration of her husband and older children, she and the smaller children were left to clean up, repair the house and fend for their daily needs while support from her husband and children was not yet available. To cope, Betty relied on cash advances from the resort employer or informal money lenders and some "belt-tightening" strategies.

Lorna requested the children to wake up early to walk the three-kilometer distance to school to save transportation money.

The women were at the helm of their households after the typhoons, even directing their husbands and children to contribute in rebuilding their lives.

From Betty:

Ang asawa ko mas hilo pa kesa sa kin. Tanong ng tanong kung anong gagawin kaya ako na talaga ang nag dedesisyon. "Sige maghanap kayo ng trabaho maski saan dahil wala yan dito. Hoy, huwag kang tumunganga dyan — komo walang trabaho dito di ka na kikilos. Maghanap

ka ng makakain kahit ano. Punta ka sa bundok, pag kinakain ng ibon, pwede rin yan sa tao." Buti sumusunod naman ang asawa ko (My husband is more stressed than I am. He kept asking me what we should do, so I was the one who took over. "Go out and find any kind of work because there is no work here. Don't just sit there – not having a job doesn't mean you can be idle. Find food. Go to the mountain, anything eaten by birds is edible to humans too." I'm glad he did what I asked of him)

Lorna:

Nagmiting kaming pamilya kung anong pwede gawin ng bawat isa: "Ikaw para di ka huminto sa pag-aaral, gising ka maaga, maglakad ka papuntang school." "Ikaw maghanap ka sa mga kamag-anak mo ng mauutangan." Madalas nag-iiyakan kaming mag-asawa. Pero di namin pinapakita sa mga bata. Ang tagal kasi naming inipon and pambili sa tricycle... Pero pag nagkakaisa kayo sa pamilya, lalong lalakas ang loob nyo na magsimulang muli. Unti-unti, nababawasan ang panghihinayang (We had a family meeting to discuss what each one can do: "If you don't want to stop schooling, you have to wake up early to walk to school." "See if you can borrow money from your relatives." My husband and I cried a lot of times. But we did not let our children know this. It took us a long time to save for a tricycle.... But when there is unity in the family, you gain strength to start over again. Slowly, frustrations lessen.)

Amelia:

Minsan nakaka-depress. Wala ka na nga, lalo ka pang nawalan. Pero pag nakita mo ang mga bata na umaasa sayo, lalakas loob mo. Pang-alihw ko nga sa sarili ko, di

ako dapat malungkot dahil nasira ang bahay namin habang ang iba okey lang kasi matibay bahay nila. Pero sabi ko baka may iba rin silang problema. Si Uncle matibay nga ang bahay at maganda pero di naman sya makalakad nang bumaha (I felt depressed. I have only a little and even those, I lost now. But when I look at my children who depend on me, I become strong. I console myself by thinking I shouldn't be sad because our house was damaged while others' houses are still okay. Maybe those other people have their own problems. My uncle has a good house but he was disadvantaged during the floods because he's paralytic.

Irma summarized her experience as: "*Ang bagyo ay bahagi na talaga ng buhay namin dito. Pakiramdam ko pahirap nang pahirap ang buhay pero kanyang diskarte lang. Nasa sarili na yan at tiwala sa Diyos. Nakakaraos din*" (Typhoons are part of our lives here. I feel our life situation is getting more difficult though. Survival depends on one's resourcefulness and faith in God).

Although the five women have common experiences of the after-effects of the typhoons – loss of jobs and incomes, loss of livestock, damages to houses and things, food insecurity – each of them has different capacities and strategies for coping.

Betty lost her capital for the *pagamit* and vegetable businesses. Until now, she has not been able to raise the capital to re-start her small business as well as repair her house which was partially damaged by the typhoon. Amelia is still in the process of replacing her damaged appliances by joining a *pahuwagan* (rotating savings). The much-valued family album which was also damaged in floods, however, can no longer be restored.

On the other hand, Lorna's house flooring was covered with lahar after the typhoon. She and her husband also lost their livelihoods as their farm and tricycle were buried in mud and their livestock drowned. One of her children had

to stop schooling. At this point, the family's only source of income is the home-based piece-rate work of making twine. However, with the help of a relative working abroad, her family was able to secure a loan to buy a new tricycle and recondition their farm. Her child was also able to go back to school.

Cherry and Irma continue to struggle with the after-effects of the typhoons: Cherry's family is still paying the loan for her hospitalization while Irma's father developed a respiratory ailment that required regular medication and additional medication expenses.

The women stated that they had relied the least on the government and external assistance during those times. For one, they were not sure if relief assistance would come. It was also limited to food rations mostly, whereas they were also in dire need of cash to buy kerosene, salt, cooking oil, and kitchen utensils. Despite the assistance of various agencies doing relief work in the area, the packs they distributed were usually the same – rice, noodles and sardines. Similarly, due to politics, not all households were able to avail of assistance from the barangay and municipal officials, especially if they did not vote for the incumbent officials. For those who stayed in evacuation centers like Amelia and Betty, it was the municipal social worker who decided on the duration of stay in the evacuation center. Amelia was caught unprepared when the social worker told her to return to their house within a very short time.

The government housing assistance to flood victims was not very accessible as well. As flood survivors, Lorna and Amelia were awarded free houses through the municipal housing project. However, due to the small size and limited land space for planting vegetables and hog raising activities, they do not see themselves residing there permanently. At present, the houses were only used as their family "evacuation centers" during typhoons.

Women's Strategies in Rebuilding their Lives and Adaptations to Typhoons

Poverty, aggravated by the regular – and sometimes devastating — typhoons in their community, is part of women's lives in Ironsin, yet they are still

tenacious in their struggle to recover from every disaster. Their optimism and strong faith in God lift their spirits. Though Betty has not yet raised the needed capital to re-start her *pagamit* and vegetable business, she is looking forward to recover her capital and resume her “businesses” by saving 20 pesos every payday. When her businesses resume, she plans to repair their house and to enroll in PhilHealth as a self-employed person. Betty said:

Wala namang mawawala kung mangarap at magplano ng buhay. Wala namang bayad ang mangarap. At saka mabuti na ang mangarap at may gusto kang abutin (Dreaming and making plans for your life are free and nothing is wrong with these. These even provide you with a sense of direction).

Lorna is currently engaged in multiple livelihood activities, including chicken and pig raising, gardening, and taking piece-rate work. Cherry and her family stay with her mother so she can work fulltime to help pay their loan and to save. Amelia joined a *paluwagan* (rotating savings group) to have extra money to replace her lost things and to save.

The women’s life strategies are honed by a long history of poverty and deprivations: repairing what was damaged, securing loans and material support to regain their livelihoods, diversifying livelihoods as a form of informal insurance mechanism, and saving in cash or in kind (livestock and poultry) as protection against any exigencies. In their own ways, the women employ innovative strategies in rebuilding their lives. Likewise, the support of social networks plays a significant role in their recovery. The women mobilize their families, relatives and friends as primary sources of cash, material and emotional support. Only when these social networks have been exhausted do the women turn to money lenders or pawn whatever they have – heirloom jewelries, labor, farm and farm equipment and tools, to name a few.

Furthermore, with their traumatic experiences of Typhoons *Milenyo* and *Reming*, the women have developed mitigation and adaptation strategies in preparation for typhoons and rainy seasons. During summer, usually between April and May, Betty and Irma weave coconut leaves to cover roof leaks while Amelia and Lorna, who live

beside a creek, encircle their houses with sandbags to secure them against flooding. Amelia's son made an improvised ruler to measure the depth of water in the creek to determine when to evacuate. Cherry keeps an "emergency bag" containing valuable documents like her college diploma and transcript, her husband's employment-related documents, marriage and birth certificates, and their wedding mementoes.

The women learned to appreciate and apply local knowledge of their grandmothers and mothers about weather prediction which they had taken for granted in the past. For Betty, fireflies and ants coming out signal the onset of rainy season – thus, she has to start saving some matches, candles and salt. Irma watches out for dark clouds with strong winds and for ducks flying and roosting on roofs as signs of an incoming typhoon. At this point, she makes sure her father has his medication supplies, and checks if there is boiled water for drinking and extra water in the containers. During the rainy seasons, Amelia continuously monitors the weather report through the TV set in her uncle's house while assigning her children to continuously monitor the water level using their improvised water meter. Lorna sees to it that the tricycle is available for emergency evacuation while Cherry makes sure that her cellphone has enough power and credit for a phone call, in case there is an emergency. These adaptation and mitigation strategies developed by the five women form part of their emerging notion of a "culture of safety."

IV. Women's Interpretations of their Lived Experiences of Survival and Typhoons

The five women consider Typhoons *Reming* and *Milenyo* as the worst typhoons they have ever experienced. *Delubyo* (end of the world) is the metaphor that they associate with their experiences with the two typhoons. On the other hand, they note that poverty and typhoons have similar effects on their lives – both mean more hardships and grave food insecurity for their households.

As described by Betty, "*Ang bagyo, malakas man o hindi pareho lang and epekto sa amin – walang trabaho at gutom minsan ilang araw, lingo o buwan*" (Typhoons, whether strong or not, have the same meaning and effect to

us -- no work and hunger for days, weeks or months). However, they note that their experiences of poverty serve them in surviving typhoons, though typhoons worsen their poverty situation.

There are particular difficulties they experience as women during typhoons: living in evacuation centers, being left at home to care for children and infirm relatives. They believe that their vulnerability is a result of their poverty condition: not having a sturdy house, no reserve food supply, irregular incomes, and no savings for emergencies.

For all the women, the recovery period is the most difficult and stressful because of the following reasons: (1) they are the ones responsible for the family's daily food; (2) external support, if there is any, is only during emergency relief period; and (3) assistance to create livelihoods and income is limited to male-oriented food and/or cash-for-work types such as cleaning roads and repairing public infrastructures like roads, bridges and public structures. The women noted that support should not be confined only to emergency situations. They believe that strengthening their economic situation is a key for them to recover immediately.

They also realized the importance of having multiple livelihood sources so when the main livelihood (e.g. farming or tricycle business) is affected, they still have alternatives. The women highlighted the importance of savings and the support of their relatives and friends in helping them recover. Resourcefulness, faith in God and support from relatives and friends are the elements that enabled them to recover from the after-effects of typhoons and to rebuild their lives.

V. Some Concluding Notes

For the women, a life of poverty and their recurring experiences of typhoons have common effects on them – non-availability of work and income and food insecurity. Despite the hardships of daily living coupled with the pains, stress and grief they experienced during typhoons, the women manage to rebuild their lives, albeit slowly and with difficulty. The women's optimism and

resourcefulness, fostered by experiences of poverty since childhood, comprise an internal resource for them in their way to recovery.

They all know well the relationship of poverty and typhoons in their lives: their constant experiences of typhoons further aggravated their poverty situation yet their poverty experiences strengthened their capacity to cope and survive the adverse effects of typhoons on their lives. They are caregivers and food providers in their households; a typhoon means greater hardships for these rural women. Such a situation is made even worse by the fact that their community experiences an average of 19 typhoons a year.

On the other hand, women played key roles in recovery and in rebuilding their lives. Women's resourcefulness enabled them to develop coping and adaptation strategies to withstand recurring typhoons. They are often at the helm of their households in crisis situations: uniting family members in coping against difficulties, making major livelihood decisions, and developing a "culture of safety" in their households.

As gleaned from the experiences of these women, what can social development practitioners as well as disaster relief workers learn from them?

First, the women are active agents in their households in times of economic hardships and natural calamities like typhoons. They can be tapped as resources in community programs, especially in disaster interventions as decision-makers, sources of knowledge and information about strategies and needs of households, and as initiators of strategies in mitigation and recovery activities.

Second, while women are innovative and resourceful, they still need assistance especially during the recovery period. Government and other humanitarian organizations can reorient their assistance not only during emergency but also and especially during the recovery phase. Likewise, NGOs can advocate to donors to fund pre-disaster programs as well as economic projects at the recovery stage.

Third, women and men are biologically and socially differentiated and in times of natural calamities and disasters, women have gender-specific concerns

which are often overlooked. Although there are some humanitarian organizations that have started to address this issue, majority of these organizations are still oriented to the gender-blind programs that assume women and men have universal as well as common needs and circumstances.

And lastly, the image of women as agents of their own household survival has to be recognized and valued to replace the stereotyped images of women as "victims of disasters" and as "being poor and helpless" as currently portrayed in media. However, to facilitate and sustain women's participation in community endeavors, the issue of the traditional gender division of labor has to be addressed. For instance, tapping women's time and efforts during disaster programs should also consider the issue of gender division of labor in the household so that women's engagement in such community initiatives would not add to their existing productive and reproductive tasks. Education work for both women and men is a critical strategy in this regard.

Epilogue

Betty, Amelia, Lorna, Irma, and Cherry – five courageous women in my community. Despite poverty and typhoons, their stories are narratives of courage, optimism and hope. In conducting this research, the women were the storytellers while I actively listened to them. They told their stories interspersed by sighs, pauses, silences and restrained weeping. In a way, the research has changed me – by challenging my pre-conceived notion about rural poverty and ways of thinking about rural women's capacity to survive poverty and typhoons. As the five women tell their stories, the mothers with children entering our iron gate of my childhood memory became more vivid. Perhaps the stories of those mothers were similar to theirs. Upon seeing the devastation brought about by the past typhoons in our community and my personal experience of Typhoon Ondoy, I knew typhoons are never fun for adults, especially for poor mothers. The fun of it was just a mere fantasy of a child who lived in a sturdy house longing for playmates. Yet, the fun brought about by typhoons and rainy days that I experienced in my childhood will be etched in my memory ... forever.

As for the five women, they continue to struggle to remain afloat whether in bad times or in good times...

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Endnotes

¹The names of the respondents were changed to foster anonymity.

²"*Pagamit*" refers to the system of lending money to farmers paid with palay at harvest time: 3 cavans of palay for every Php 1,000 loan.

³Brgy. Monbon, the area of study is located in Irosin, one of the municipalities that comprised the province of Sorsogon. It is the third most populated barangay in Irosin with a population of 3,629 as of 2009. It is also one of the catchment areas proximate to agricultural production sites of Irosin. Its wet season is from August to February but due to the recent climatic variability, rainy season is almost experienced throughout the year. (<http://irosin.gov.ph>, n.d.).

⁴Survey of Women's Human Rights Violations in the Aftermath of the Tsunami in India, Indonesia, Thailand and Sri Lanka and the October 8, 2005 Earthquake in Pakistan, a project coordinated by APWLD, a women's human rights network composed of over 140 members in 23 countries in Asia and the Pacific.

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