



POLICY BRIEF on Climate Change, Gender and Informal Work

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Women in the Informal Economy in Times of Typhoons and Flooding: Experiences, Strategies, Challenges and the Need for Social Protection by Teresita V. Barrameda

The Philippines is considered one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world due to its location and high exposure to natural hazards. Located in the Pacific Ring of Fire, it is prone to seismic and related hazards, and lying along the Western North Pacific Basin, it averages 20 typhoons per year (CBDRM Training and Learning Circle-Philippines, 2009; ADB et al., 2008). A 2003 World Bank study noted that natural disasters eroded the country's development gains as a large portion of its budget supposedly intended for social services and economic production are re-channeled to emergency and rehabilitation response each year.

The informal economy households are among the most vulnerable during typhoons and flooding. Though both women and men are adversely affected by these extreme events, they respond and adapt differently. Largely excluded from the current social protection schemes designed for formal workers, women in the informal economy have creatively tapped their social networks as well as systems like *damayan* (mutual aid) and *paluwagan* (forced savings) as social safety nets to cope with typhoons and flooding.

Recent typhoons tend to be more frequent, intense, and severe due to climate change. Without social protection, the risk of climate change-induced disasters could further threaten the lives and survival of the women informal workers and their families. Social protection for informal workers is critical to enhance their resiliency in times of typhoons and flooding. Likewise, the experiences,

knowledge and skills gained by the women in coping with typhoons and flooding are important resources that can inform a gender-responsive disaster risk reduction and management (DRRM) and climate change (CC) programs. Thus, women informal workers' participation in DRRM decisions is of utmost importance, and their significant contributions in the local economy development of their communities need to be recognized.

Impacts of Typhoons and Flooding on Poor People

As earlier explained, the country is prone to catastrophic hazards such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, droughts, typhoons, and floods (UNISDR, 2009). Historically, typhoons have had the most catastrophic impacts in terms of fatalities and damages (ADB et al., 2008).



Poverty exposes people to the risk of natural disasters. The pressure to survive and the lack of access to land have forced the rural poor to gravitate to urban areas in search for work. Lack of access to employment and decent housing have compelled the poor to inhabit high risk areas like flood plains, steep slopes, creeks, riverbanks, irrigation dikes, and garbage dumps. Others seek shelter in congested and run-down dwellings with deficient water, sanitation and power facilities. Such conditions

further expose them to health hazards due to water contamination, congestion and poor sanitation.

A study done by the World Bank and the National Disaster Coordinating Council (NDCC) stated that poorer communities tend to be the most vulnerable and that at household level, “poverty is the single most important factor” that determines vulnerability (2003: p.7).

Vulnerabilities and Coping in Times of Typhoons and Flooding

Vulnerability refers to “a set of prevailing and long term factors and conditions of weaknesses which adversely affect the ability of individuals, families and communities to protect themselves, cope with or recover from damaging effects of a disaster” (CBDRM Training and Learning Circle-Philippines, 2009). Vulnerability, as noted by Bohle (in Makoka and Kaplan, 2005) has two sides - external (exposure to hazards) and internal (one’s capacity to cope). The level of risk and vulnerability of people to natural disasters is also affected by their economic, cultural and political conditions.

Poor households are often the most vulnerable to typhoons and flooding due to their socio-economic standing – location in unsafe and flood-prone areas, non-typhoon/flood-resistant housing materials and design, fragile and unsustainable livelihoods and economic enterprises, no savings and fewer assets, lack of food security, and proneness to illnesses because of poor nutrition, health, sanitation and hygiene conditions. The informal economy households who belong to the working poor are therefore among the most vulnerable to natural disasters.

Many informal economy households are survivors of Typhoons Milenyo, Frank, Ondoy and Peping. Participants of this study¹ noted the direct and indirect impacts of these typhoons and accompanying flooding on their lives, including loss of livelihoods, productive assets, houses and household utensils; disrupted food production; food insecurity; illnesses; poor nutrition; and psychosocial problems. Their very fragile liveli-



hoods are primarily affected because the loss of or damage to their sources of income and productive assets are not easily replaceable since majority of them have no savings or access to formal credit institutions.

After a typhoon, a major coping strategy of the informal economy households is taking of loans to rebuild/repair houses, re-start livelihoods, and for consumption and medication purposes. Sources of loans are either relatives/social networks or informal money lenders. In particular, those belonging to organizations or cooperatives sought loans from their own organizations while those who have no organizations accessed loan from informal sources, usually through the 5/6 usurious arrangements. Men who lost their livelihoods tend to cope by migrating to nearby communities in search for work, leaving behind women to take care of the cleaning, repair and family survival. In some cases, the women and young daughters are the ones who migrate to work as housemaids in nearby towns and cities. Food adjustment is another coping strategy

that includes reduction of food intake, change of diet (porridge as main staple) as well as food substitution (root crops to replace rice or as rice extenders).

Because the study participants had not experienced typhoons and flooding as intense and severe as the recent ones, they were not able to prepare and cope with the damaging consequences. Nevertheless, they were still able to cull valuable lessons: a) the importance of belonging to an organization; b) early warning system can save lives; c) the need for social protection as fallback in times of natural disasters; d) the necessity of savings and availability of cash for emergency situations; and e) the importance of preparedness of households and com-

Current Responses to Typhoon and Flood Hazards: Preparedness, Mitigation and Adaptation

The severe typhoons and flooding that the participants experienced have made them aware of the importance of preparedness. At the same time, they also developed local knowledge and strategies on preparedness, adaptation and mitigation. With news of an upcoming typhoon, households in both rural and urban research sites closely monitor the weather condition through the radio. They listen to early warnings and prepare an “emergency pack” containing extra clothes, mats and blankets, food and drinking water, flashlights and batteries, candles and matches, money for emergency and important documents.

Other preparedness strategies include keeping clothes and valuable documents in plastic packs, transfer of important appliances and other household items to higher locations, securing animals and pets in safer sites, and preparation of plastic containers and rafts out of ply boards and banana trunks. In urban research sites, the participants store drinking water and food good for at least two to three days of flooding. In the rural research sites, other preparations include securing roofs and posts of houses, especially those made of non-permanent materials, early harvesting of crops and vegetables as reserved food, transferring of livestock and farm animals to higher places.

Flood-proofing of houses is a major strategy for both rural and urban households to adapt to typhoons and flooding. These include elevation of

existing houses by building an additional storey, use of cement or concrete housing materials, use of water-proof wall coating materials, transfer of electrical wirings and sockets to higher locations like near ceilings, and concrete fencing of houses; some even invested in bancas. Many of the households that opted to flood-proof their houses are those that have experienced severe and/or frequent flooding. Since an additional storey or buying a banca entail costs beyond their means, many have accessed loans from relatives and social networks. While those with no resources resorted to other adaptive measures such as keeping plastic water containers and floaters ready for use, cleaning of canals and collecting plastics near their homes, some even placed sandbags near their entrances to deter the ingress of flood, and planted trees in backyards as wind-breaks or barriers. Members of organizations or cooperatives see the potentials of indigenous social safety nets such as the *damayan* fund (mutual aid/support) and *paluwagan* (forced savings) through continuous contributions and allocating a portion for disaster purposes. Especially in rural households, diversification of crops and planting of typhoon and flood-resistant crops are considered important adaptation strategies to ensure food security.

Mitigation measures at the household level in both rural and urban households include waste segregation, non-burning of garbage, reuse of plastics and tree planting. Measures at the community level in urban areas include participation in the local government-led community cleaning of creeks and canals, zero waste management programs and clean-up drive. In rural areas, measures include communal cleaning of creeks, stacking of sandbags near rivers and creeks and community reforestation and patrolling to deter illegal logging. All the mitigation measures are done in the spirit of *bayanihan* (community cooperation).

The local government units (LGUs) and their own organizations are the study participants’ sources of information on disasters.



Vulnerabilities and Priorities of Women in the Informal Economy



Many studies have emphasized women's vulnerability in times of natural disasters because of their traditional and social roles and responsibilities as well as their different life skills. These result in differences not only in terms of vulnerabilities, but also in terms of notions of self-rescue, adaptation and mitigation strategies. (Waititu, 2009).

Water borne diseases are considered common following typhoons and flooding. Women study participants note that being sick or having a sick family member is an added expense that increase their stress and worries. Likewise, the lack of clean water, privacy, and access to proper sanitation pose health hazards to them as they are compelled to refrain from going to the toilets or to sacrifice personal hygiene needs. Others recount the difficulty of being pregnant, lactating or caring for sick or old family members. As caregivers of their families, many women participants agree about the difficulty they experienced in carrying young babies, children and older relatives while crossing floodwaters especially when male family members are not around. In addition, the loss or damage of productive assets and livelihoods has pressured women to take on more than one livelihood or income generating activity. Furthermore,



the tedious work of cleaning and repairs as well as the responsibility of feeding the family all fall upon women's shoulders when men migrate in search for work outside the community.

After typhoons and flooding, the women have identified the following as their immediate concerns: a) support to develop sustainable livelihoods and food security; b) access to affordable credit and marketing support; c) provision of affordable typhoon and flood-resistant housing programs; d) relocation to safer areas with support social services; and e) availability of social safety nets during disasters.



The Policy Environment: Potentials, Gaps and Issues

Recently, two laws related to disaster and climate change have been enacted – the Climate Change Act of 2009 (RA 9729) and the Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (DRRM) Act of 2010. Both laws have provisions on women. RA 9729 recognizes women as one of the vulnerable groups and ensures the incorporation of a gender-sensitive, pro-poor perspective in climate change plans and programs (Section 2). It recognizes the differential impacts on women (Section 13) and provides for the allocation of funding for training, capability building and micro-credit schemes for rural women (Section 18). On the other hand, the DRRM Act mandates the Local Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office (LDRRMO) to establish an efficient mechanism for immediate delivery of food, shelter and medical supplies for women and children, particularly creating a special area for breastfeeding and car-



ing for babies (Sect. 15).

As gleaned from several gender-sensitive provisions, the current laws recognize the different needs and situations of women and men, and also of children, a good indication of sensitivity and recognition that women and men have different vulnerabilities and needs in times of natural disasters. However, the laws merely recognize

women as beneficiaries, rather than actors in DRR and CC programs. Moreover, both laws do not provide mechanisms for women's participation in decision-making. Although the laws enjoin civil society participation in program implementation and volunteer work, there is no special consideration for women's participation in decision-making, especially women in the informal economy. The challenge now lies in how women in the informal economy can maximize the space for participation provided to civil society organizations.

Although the laws do not limit participation to men only, the fact that there is no specific mention of women's contributions in CC and DRRM, and no mandate requiring a specific percentage of women's participation in cC and DRRM bodies limits the potential of the laws to facilitate women's empowerment.

Conclusions

Typhoons and flooding can disrupt the fragile condition of people in the informal economy as a result of their internal and external vulnerabilities. With climate change, typhoons and flooding may be more frequent, intense, and severe in the coming years, pushing them further into poverty. Thus, the need for interventions to enhance their adaptive capacities is critical. The following recommendations are proposed:



Recommendations:

1. The disadvantaged condition of women as result of their social roles, physical makeup and poverty situation make coping and recovery difficult for them. A gender perspective is needed to ensure gender-responsiveness of DRR and climate change programs, beginning at community level;
2. As caregivers and food providers of their families, women have developed knowledge on preparedness, adaptation and mitigation, as well as an awareness of their constraints as women. Women's knowledge can inform DRR and CC programs on the needs and priorities of their families, highlighting their crucial role in decision-making, and the importance of their participation in local DRR and CC bodies;
3. The good practices of *damayan* fund and similar community-based social safety nets are commendable but insufficient as social protection mechanism in times of disasters and need to be complemented or enhanced;
4. The government can play a crucial role in the provision of social protection for women



informal workers to enhance their resiliency to natural disasters and climate change. Existing social protection schemes for formal workers can be expanded to include informal workers and designed to take into account their specific needs and economic and work conditions - unstable and insufficient incomes. Other social safety nets can be extended to them during emergencies and reconstruction including food/cash-for-work and provision of cash as emergency assistance in rebuilding livelihoods, social transfers and price controls during disasters, to name a few.

End Note

This data is based on several focus group discussions and key informant interviews conducted by the writer in five communities populated by informal women and men workers that include Brgys. Kinale and Balangibang, Polangui, Albay, regularly flooded during rainy seasons due to the Bicol River Basin water overflow; Brgy. Maslog, Legazpi City, Albay, located at the foot of Mt. Mayon, prone to lahar flooding during typhoons and rainy seasons; Angono, Rizal, a town situated at the bank of Laguna Lake, prone to regular flooding; and Sta. Barbara, Iloilo that suffered severe flooding in 2008 due to Typhoon Frank. The FGDs in Legaspi and Albay were conducted on June 3-5, 2010 and in Angono, Rizal on July 30, 2010 while the KI interviews in Sta. Barbara were conducted on August 23, 2010. Except for Angono, the four other research areas are rural. In Sta. Barbara, Iloilo, the informal workers are women and men home-based workers, upland/lowland small farmers, unpaid family farm workers, and vendors. In the three rural areas in Albay, the respondents include men seasonal farm workers, agricultural workers, construction workers, vendors and petty traders while the women are barangay health workers, unpaid family farm workers, vendors, petty traders, laundry women, and home-based workers. In Angono, the women respondents include home-based workers (bead makers, rug makers, sewers), vendors, petty traders and the men are drivers and vendors.

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