

## **Sexual Minorities and Disasters in the Philippines: Where Are They?**

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The Philippines, being one of the world's disaster-stricken countries, is experiencing complex impacts from climate change and disasters. With its geographical situation and physical characteristics, the exposure of the country to disasters and natural/man-made hazards is very prominent (DRRNetPhils, n.d). Disasters, whether it be natural or man-made, poses a huge hindrance in the development of a country, particularly in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Measures are needed to help adapt and lessen their vulnerability to impacts of disasters and climate change.

On November 8, 2013, the Philippines experienced the strongest typhoon (tropical cyclone) ever recorded. Super Typhoon Haiyan, locally known as Yolanda, created full extent of casualties and damages as flood waters escalated quickly (ABS-CNB News 2013). According to the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council of the Philippines, the death toll reached 6,300, the number of missing people remains at 1,061, and 28,689 people were injured in Tacloban City alone (GMA News 2014). It took only a few hours to obliterate the Eastern Visayas region and the cities affected within the region, and this led to reshape thoughts about disasters and how it challenges the world's preparedness capacity (NDRRMC 2014: 11).

“In a world perceived as increasingly vulnerable to disasters due to climate change, managing disasters and risks has become a dominant response of governments and humanitarian aid industry over the world (Alburo-Canete 2014: 34)”. Prominent policy discourses on disaster risk reduction in the Philippines primarily target vulnerable groups which are solely composed of women, children, persons with disabilities, and the elderly. It has been using a gender lens in reducing vulnerabilities and increasing capacities for resiliency after the disaster strikes.

Despite the special focus on gender, programs and services offered in the disaster rehabilitation and recovery efforts in the Philippine setting are bound by the man-woman binary. This idea reinforces an essentialist view on femininity and masculinity that portrays men and women as one, homogenous group where all members have the same capacities and vulnerabilities in times of natural hazard. It must be taken into consideration that intersecting and diverse power relations exist in these groups of people who have diverse needs.

Furthermore, this framing invisibilizes social groups who are outside the gender binary in disasters. Existing disaster policies and practices foster 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich 1980) where sexual minorities are stigmatized and discriminated due to their sexual orientation and gender identity (Browne & Nash 2013; Gaillard et al. 2016). In particular, sexual minorities are disregarded socially, economically, and institutionally in dealing with vulnerability and resiliency in increasing capacities. Existing DRR policies embody heteronormative norms and values in both the everyday life and during disasters, making people outside the man-woman framing more vulnerable when faced with natural hazards (Gaillard et al 2016). They do not have access to cultural, social, economic, and political structures, which worsens their vulnerability.

Sexual minorities, specifically the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community were treated differently during the recovery phase of Typhoon Haiyan in Leyte. Leyte is known to have conservative and repressive treatment towards sexual and gender minorities in the area, where growing up as an 'LGBT' person would cause great anxiety about the intense gossip cultures and they are restrained to be themselves without constraints and

hint of judgment towards their sexuality (Ong et al., 2015). Middle income LGBTs socially benefited where their own sexuality was promoted and they were accepted by their own communities due to the foreign aid workers' presence on the ground. On the contrary, lower income sexual minorities do not have the same social acceptance treatment towards them as many of them have remained focused on earning a living (Ong et al 2015).

My fear is that having this kind of man/woman framing in disaster response would increase the vulnerability of LGBTs who are also in dire need of social services and support from all groups and institutions offering help to victims of disasters. Since policies are pushing for an 'inclusive' principle, it should consider the diverse needs and various peoples residing within the country and make sure that people will be safe from all forms of discrimination.

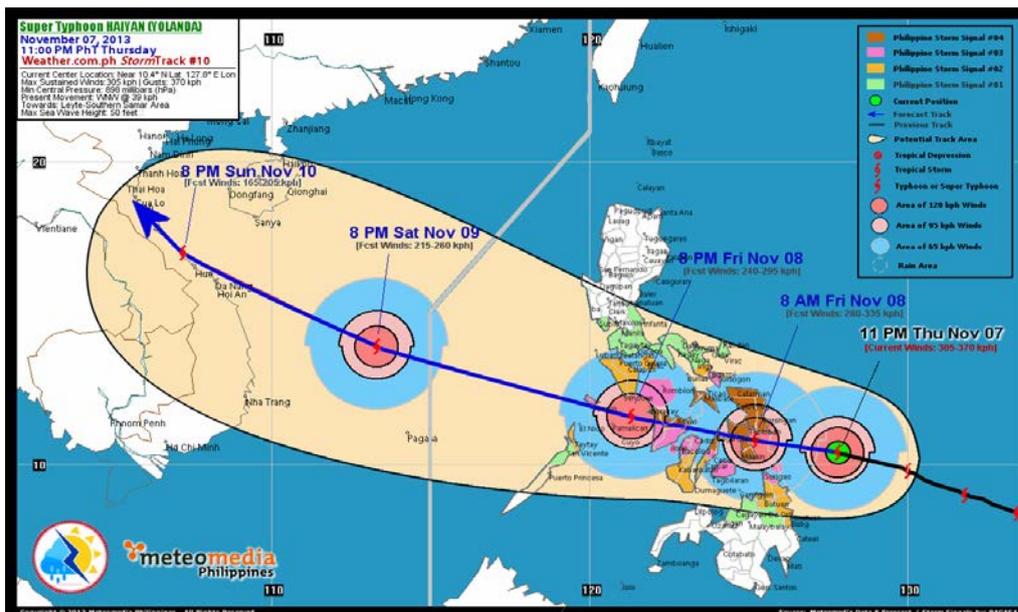


Figure 1: Typhoon Haiyan Route in the Philippine area of responsibility. Source: Metromedia Philippines (2013)



Figure 2: Arturo Golong, a gay man living in Tacloban, Leyte, who shared his story to Oxfam in the Philippines regarding the discrimination experienced by sexual minorities during and after Typhoon Haiyan. Source: Oxfam in the Philippines. (<https://philippines.oxfam.org/life-gay-man-resettlement-site>)

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