

# Women's Lived Experiences of COVID-19 in an Urban Bottom Settlement in Metro Manila

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## Introduction

It has been nearly two years since the COVID-19 pandemic overwhelmed the world. It has also been widely recognized that the pandemic revealed various social problems and political contradictions which already existed. This article is a record of a Filipino woman's everyday life under the COVID-19 community quarantine in an urban bottom area in Metro Manila, one of the global cities. The author of this journal is Laura (not her real name), aged 39, living with her husband, their five children (from 18 to 11 years old), her in-laws, and sister-in-law. Her husband, Nino, an engineer working for an electronics company, and Laura were both born and grew up in area M. Laura has been the author's research assistant for more than ten years and has sent the author her journal by SNS and e-mail since March 2020 to share her experiences under the community quarantine<sup>i</sup>.

Laura's journal shows us her anxiety towards the financial and health matters of her families and relatives, changes in social and community life, and the political distrust and religious values under the pandemic. As first-hand data, this report is expected to contribute to sociological studies of the pandemic experiences of people in Metro Manila.<sup>ii</sup>

## 2. Background

The Philippine government has implemented an original quarantine system named "Community Quarantine (CQ)." There are four levels of CQ, which are Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), Modified Enhanced Community Quarantine (MECQ),

General Community Quarantine (GCQ) and Modified General Community Quarantine (MGCQ), depending on the restriction level.<sup>iii</sup>

In Metro Manila, ECQ (Enhanced Community Quarantine) was implemented from March 15, 2020 and lasted for two months. Then ECQ was eased to MECQ (Modified ECQ), and on June 1, 2020, GCQ (General Community Quarantine) was implemented, lasting until March 29, 2021, when the ECQ was again announced due to an increase in COVID-19 cases in the Philippines. The journal in this article was written during the second period of ECQ in Metro Manila, from the end of March to April 2021.

M area, where Laura and her family are living, is in Barangay<sup>iv</sup> Malanday, Marikina City, which is located in the northeastern part of the Metro Manila area. Barangay Malanday has the largest population of the barangays in Marikina City, its population being 55,442 as of 2015<sup>v</sup>. Half of all households in Malanday are informal settlers who do not hold land titles. (Seki, 2017) Area M could be defined as a squatter area in a broader sense, since it is a mixture of households with and without land title, and rental housing. Since Barangay Malanday is located beside the Marikina River, one of the main rivers of Metro Manila, it is a disaster-prone area often flooded by huge typhoons such as Typhoon Ondoy in 2009. Residents of area M are always the victims of serious floods and are forced to evacuate when floods occur.

Under ECQ in 2020, when restrictions on the mobility of people and transportation were at the highest level, many of the male residents of area M lost their jobs, since the majority of them are drivers of passenger jeeps and tricycles. Married women in area M, such as Laura, have been in charge of reproductive work to maintain their lives with their husbands, who are usually workers who are paid daily, and children, since it is quite difficult for these women to find formal employment due to age discrimination and lack of educational attainments<sup>vi</sup>.

### 3. Laura's Journal from March 12 to April 21, 2021.

#### *3-1: One Year of Lockdown — March 12, 2021*

Metro Manila was placed under community quarantine, on this day of last year to prevent the spread of COVID-19. I remember last year, the same day as today, Filipino did “panic buying” due to worries and afraid of losing or consuming up their food or essential needs. In almost all the supermarkets, there were long queues of many people. I still remember that I was so scared that our money become not enough and we couldn't afford to buy food and other needs for stock in case the situation got worse. All of the transportation were suspended and lots of business were closed at that time. At every border of the place, check points were set up to prevent the virus spreading. Work was cut down and the public had to stay inside their houses.

While the COVID cases had increased, hospital service couldn't cater. Lots of hospitals couldn't accept the patients, because of lack of health workers and space in the hospital. The lockdown extended until May, and Nino, my husband, had no work for four months.

It was most difficult time for our life since we only relied on the relief foods and financial support from the government. The school started in October instead of June thru online classes. For the families who couldn't buy the gadgets, it was most difficult time. In December 2020, tourist spots such as Boracay and Palawan were opened, however, the tourists from UK could not enter because of the new variant of COVID. In January 2021, new case of UK variant was found in the Philippines and it became half million cases of COVID in January. Still, COVID cases are increasing every day. February 28, 2021, vaccine arrived from China and vaccination started in March. It's been already one year after COVID came. How are you, Filipino?

How are we right now? I'm a mother of five kids. All of them are studying and they eat every day. For me, it's quite hard to support them, but of course, I have to manage. We need to survive. Now I don't know if the virus is really affecting the rise of the price of items. Last year, pork was 240 Philippine pesos (Php) per kilo, but now it's 360 Php. Fish were 120 Php per kilo but now they cost 180 to 240 Php, depending on the class of the fish. It's so hard to make budget, especially for the family with many children like us. In my opinion, life became more difficult now. I always thank God since Nino has still his work. Many of his coworkers had to resign because of the economic situation of the Philippines got worse. Company of Nino has the employees work only three days per week. Employees come to the office alternately, like women are on Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday, then men on Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. So that, all of them at least receive the salary. However, many of the employees found it is not enough to support the family. Thus, other people found another work. Hard, it's so hard to live.

Actually, I used to say that it's up to God, because I was afraid of becoming sick, so I brought alcohol with me wherever I went. However, we got used to it, and we are not very conscious about personal hygiene like before. We often forget or are not aware of bringing alcohol or social distancing.

### 3-2: *Vaccination and Politics* —March 15, 2021

Nino told me that his company implemented the vaccine since they are in the field of essential workers. Government started vaccination for essential workers and front liners. They are prioritized for vaccination. Next will be senior citizens. Actually Glen, husband of my sister, got vaccinated yesterday because he works for a hospital. Nino prefers the vaccine of Astra Zeneca from India, or Pfizer, because the efficacy rate is higher than Sinovac from China. Glen got the injection of Sinovac. Many don't like the vaccination because of fear of side effects. Nino doesn't like it, neither does mother of Nino, or my-sis-

ter-in-law. They are afraid of side effects, especially if it comes from China.

Cases of COVID are increasing in this country every day. Thousands of new cases are added. I feel sad since it seems the same thing repeat like last year. Why, even when there are vaccines, are the cases suddenly increasing? I don't know if it's coincident or the government has a plot. Last month in the news, I saw that World Bank approved a loan for the Philippines. Loan that should be used for purchasing vaccine and for the distribution. I hope they really use the money for the vaccines, not for funding their election campaign next year. As a citizen, I'm concerned. It seems like right in time for the election, so government got loan.

There are so many problems in the Philippines due to COVID-19, however, according to the news, Sara Duterte, daughter of President already has a tarpaulin for election campaign on the streets. Too early to campaign. I feel pity for the Filipino people, if the money is not used for vaccines. I'm suspicious that government loans were not meant to be just for COVID vaccines, but to be also used for 2022 election. I'm just wondering, because the number of COVID cases suddenly increase then government is just afraid of preparing the vaccines for all, or they are just thinking of putting the money into their pockets. Just my opinion.

### *3-3: Changes in Social Life —March 18, 2021*

My friend invited us on the baptismal and first birthday of her daughter. Kiel, my eldest son, is a *Ninong*, godfather or baptismal father. Church allowed only 10 people to enter. It is completely different from before. Church used to be filled up with lots of people upon baptismal. People are required to wear face shield and mask inside the church and they have to observe social distancing. Minors and senior citizen are not allowed to enter. Church was very silent since there were not so many people inside. Lights inside were almost down

unlike before. It used to be very beautiful with lot of lights and full of people inside the church.

After the event, we attended the reception. It is supposed to be a happy event since it is the first birthday of the baby; however, it was so quiet because children were prohibited to come to the venue. It was very quiet inside the room. No kids are playing around, no music, and no games. Very sad to think that it is supposed to be a happy event for the kids, but because of the virus it has been changed. The virus changed our life.

On our way back home, we had to ride tricycles. We had to take two tricycles, even though we are family living in the same house. Only one passenger is allowed in the tricycle. It is so hard for us to pay doubled fee. From the venue to the house, it cost 60 pesos per tricycle. Our transportation was 120 Php. It is a big amount for us. It is even good enough for a meal.

#### *3-4: Strict Quarantine Again —March 22, 2021*

President Duterte approved placing Metro Manila, Bulacan, Cavite, Laguna and Rizal<sup>vii</sup> under GCQ, General Community Quarantine, with additional restrictions from March 22, 2021 until April 4, 2021. It is sad to be like this again. Lockdown, check points and curfew again. Government has no idea but lockdown. It is a pity for the people who won't die from COVID but from hunger due to losing their job, without means of livelihood. People are not afraid of virus, but of hunger. It is confusing that business establishments and shopping malls are open but restaurants inside are closed. I wonder how many businesses are closed.

Curfew will be again from 10pm to 5 am and we are prohibited to go out. Does government know the way to solve the problem regarding COVID? Government seems not to want to purchase vaccine for making the normal life of

the people come back. They should purchase the vaccines and speed up the vaccination. Many are starving, having difficulties, and suffering from the sickness. The action of the government in this matter is not enough. With billions of loans, yet the government continue to say that they have no money to buy these vaccines. All vaccines are donation from China. Where is the loan going to? I feel pity on children. Stores and restaurants were almost all reopened, but now they are told to close again. I wonder what a big impact this has on them. Business entities will be losing and closing. How many families are going to be starving since parents lose their job?

*3-5: Increasing of the Cases —March 26, 2021*

9,838 cases, the highest ever! Now we have the highest record of COVID. I'm scared what will happen to us. We have no way of living now. We don't have money to buy grocery or rice for stock. How can we survive? We might die if total lockdown is implemented. I won't let my kids go out again. We will be careful again. Nino will be the one to go out of the house for shopping. We have to save alcohol.

My kids were happy since they could play outside whatever happened. Actually, I allowed them to play outside if they were together with their cousins. But now, they will be back to gadget and TV.

I feel like I got an attack. Attack of anxiety, because of the news. This pandemic really triggers my mental health; anxiety attacks me. In God hands, we surrender everything. We seek for God's protection because he is all that we can turn to in these challenging times.

*3-6: Meaning of "Staying at Home"—April 4, 2021*

Today is the 6<sup>th</sup> day of lockdown<sup>viii</sup>. How are you, Filipino? No work no pay for 7 days. What a life! Actually, staying home and being locked down is

easy thing if you have food at hand in your refrigerator, and if you have food on your table to feed your family.

If you have no need to make payments for electricity, water and house rent etc., staying at home is comfortable. That's true. If you have no kids to study, with tuition fee to pay even though they are not going to the campus, staying at home is comfortable. If you have no kids and relatives whom you should take care of for maintenance of medicine every day, staying at home is comfortable. Who don't like to stay at home if they have enough money in their pocket, if they can feel like they are on their vacation? But how about us? We are depending on the salary of husband to buy the food. For us, it's not easy to stay at home especially when you see your family can't eat enough meals for whole day. For some, staying at home might be easy since they don't know the feeling of being hungry. They can't understand because their food on the table are always delicious.

Effects of staying home are quite big on companies, business, stores, malls and restaurants. I understand. I even understand what the government says. However, I wish our government will think of good way to combat COVID, aside from lockdown and curfew. I wish our government will find a good and decent plan for all of us, especially for the poor.

Lockdown is extended until April 11. Another 7 days. Oh my God! Please have mercy on us.

*3-7: Economic impact for family—April 15, 2021*

In my family, my mother-in-law has no customers<sup>ix</sup> since last year. I remember, every March, many people used to order her to make school uniforms. Now because of distance learning, she has no orders for uniforms. Every month, she always sew the gowns for wedding, debut and party; but, no more.



Now, even if there is a wedding, bride wears only a simple white dress. That might be practical because we are not sure what will happen afterwards. Thus, she thought of making cloth masks instead. However, DOH (Department of Health) announced that cloth mask shouldn't be used, then she stopped making them. Gayeng, my sister-in-law, got an idea to make hair accessory and sell them online. That's fine, at least she has income, even though it is much smaller, compared with wedding gown. However, we have to think like her to make income. She needs income since she has to eat every day, take medicine and pay for the rent of her dress shop.

Gayeng was quite OK last year since she worked for call center and she could work from home. She could help her mother to pay the rent for shop. She even sold the hair accessories which her mother made to her office mates. However, she changed her work and now she is under "no work no pay." Her current job is for mall at Eastwood, a business and shopping area in Quezon City. She didn't like to work for call center since it made her tired and lack of sleep due to the night shift. Of course, sleeping at night is important. Due to ECQ, shopping mall is closed. Only essential establishments are open. She had no work for two weeks and today, on 15<sup>th</sup> day<sup>x</sup>, she has no salary to receive.

*3-8: Financial Assistance and Community Pantry —April 21, 2021*

We received the financial assistance from the government. 1,000 Php per head in the family, while the maximum is 4,000 Php; it means, even if you have seven family members, you can only receive 4,000 Php, not 7,000Php. Our city mayor got angry with it, saying that it is not the right way to support families. My cousin, Cherry, she has one child so she has to receive 2,000 Php, but she could only receive 1,000 Php. DSWD (Department of Social Welfare and Development) is the one to make the list of beneficiaries, so local government doesn't know what the bases of the list is and amount each family will receive, according to our city mayor. It is OK for us even if the amount is 4,000 Php

only from the government. At least it would be a big help for us.

Now there is a new virus, a good and beautiful virus: Community pantry. The Maginhawa<sup>xi</sup> Community pantry in Quezon City inspired many cities to put up their own version in their own areas. It is the best of the Filipino spirit, “*Bayanihan*,” or cooperating among people/community, which is still alive! In spite of the hardship we have encountered, many people want to help the other who have needs. Community pantry is open for the people who have no money to buy food. In this challenging time, we have to get together to help each other to conquer this hardship. Helping each other---- that is the most beautiful phrase on the banner of community pantry. You can give as far as you can, and you can also take as far as you need. According to the Facebook post of my cousin, he saw an old lady near the community pantry. Observing her way of dressing, my cousin thought that the lady was on the line for community pantry to receive the food. But he surprisingly found out that the old lady had three packs of noodles with her for donation to the pantry. Even though she herself is poor, the lady wanted to share what she can with others who need more. Poor people are often the most generous because they know what it feels like to have nothing. Salute to all organizer and individual who put community pantry in their city. Let's help as much as we can, and may the aid reach to those who are really in need.

#### 4. Conclusion

Laura's journal in the beginning of the second year of lockdown reveals her voices of anxiety, care, worry, doubt and hope under the pandemic. Anxieties about health, employment, income stability, and education for the children multiplied and became a burden on a married woman such as Laura in urban bottom areas in Metro Manila. The author intends to provide a sociological analysis of Laura's narratives in my next article.

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- i Ogaya and Morales (2021) is one of the reports of our collaborative research on the lives of people in area M under the pandemic.
- ii The original text of the journal was written in Tagalog and English. The author of this article translated the Tagalog part into English. In section 3, "I" refers to Laura, the author of the original journal.
- iii President Duterte called COVID- 19 Inter Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases Resolutions (IATF) on March 9, 2020. IATF issued a series of resolutions and guidelines for COVID-19 and CQ. These are available at [https://iatf.doh.gov.ph/?page\\_id=77](https://iatf.doh.gov.ph/?page_id=77)
- iv A barangay is the smallest administrative unit in the Philippines. Marikina City consists of 16 barangays.
- v 2015 Census of Population and Housing, NSO.
- vi See Ogaya (2021) for a gender analysis of employment structure in area M.
- vii Provinces around Metro Manila.
- viii Metro Manila was under ECQ from March 30.
- ix She is a dressmaker.
- x In the Philippines, salaries are usually paid twice a month, on 15<sup>th</sup> of the month and the end of the month.
- xi Maginhawa is a street in Quezon City.