

PHILIPPINES

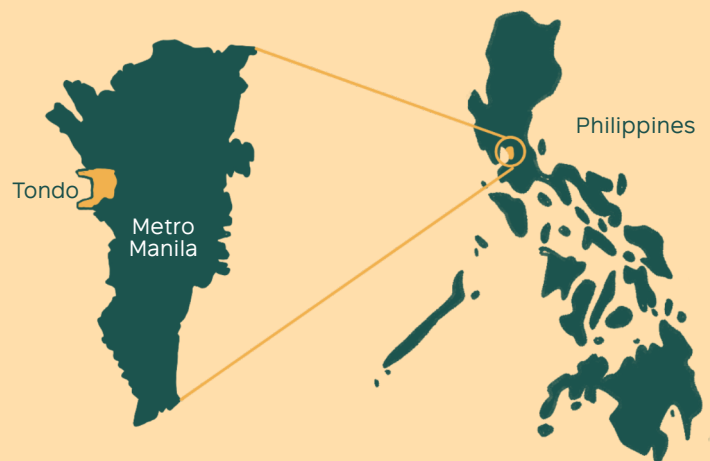
# “Rehabilitation, not reclamation!” Women’s Struggle for Adequate Housing in Aroma Community



# Background

The Aroma community is located in the vicinity of the Manila North Harbour facilities in Tondo, Manila. It is part of the Vitas Temporary Housing site together with Happyland and Helping communities. The temporary housing site which has more than 30 two-storey warehouse-type buildings was built in 1995 to relocate informal family settlers living in the Smokey Mountain landfill when it was shut down. As it is a “temporary” facility, the families were meant to be transferred eventually to permanent government housing projects. However, not all the families were transferred. In addition, the lack of sustainable livelihoods in the permanent relocation sites pushed families to return to the temporary housing site where at least they could continue eking out a living from garbage recycling and other informal work. Years of government neglect resulted in the current poor shape of both the buildings and the streets.

In contrast, construction and modernisation projects are being implemented in the nearby Manila North Harbour and in Manila City itself to attract both local and foreign capitalist investors and take advantage of trade and investment liberalisation. Efforts to modernise the Manila North Harbour Port through privatisation were given a green light in 2006 under the Manila North Harbour Modernization Project. In 2009, the Philippine Ports Authority awarded the public-private partnership project to the Manila North Harbour Port Inc. (MNHPI), a consortium of the Pangilinan-led Metro Pacific Investments Corporation (MPIC) and Romero-owned Harbour Centre Ports Terminal Inc. (HCPTI). In 2018, MNHPI was effectively taken over by Razon’s



International Container Terminal Services Inc. (ICTSI) and Ang’s San Miguel Corporation, one of the country’s largest conglomerates. The project which intends to rehabilitate and modernise the ailing and dilapidated port facilities will take 25 years to complete.

The City of Manila is also undergoing changes. Under former Mayor Joseph “Erap” Ejercito-Estrada’s administration (2013–2019), 17 public markets were targeted for privatisation. Four were taken over by XRC Mall Developers Inc. and one by Marketlife Management and Leasing Corporation.<sup>1</sup> In 2020 amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, Mayor Francisco “Isko” Moreno Domagoso’s administration (2019–2022) sold the Divisoria Public Market to a firm that is 40 per cent owned by a Chinese company that is registered in Seychelles, a tax haven.<sup>2</sup> Several Manila Bay reclamation projects have also been approved. There are 27 reclamation projects along Manila Bay as of 2022. Out of the 27, six were approved while seven are already for implementation.<sup>3</sup> Among those already approved is the New Manila Bay City of Pearl, a Chinese-funded project under the Belt and Road Initiative that will reclaim 407 hectares to build a modern, “smart city” that will be used for commercial and residential purposes.

<sup>1</sup> Doris, F. (2019, August 14). 2 market operators sa Maynila binigyan ng ultimatum. Pilipino Star Ngayon. Retrieved from <https://www.philstar.com/pilipino-star-ngayon/metro/2019/08/14/1943219/2-market-operators-sa-maynila-binigyan-ng-ultimatum>

<sup>2</sup> Tigla, R. (2022, April 27). Isko sold Divisoria to a secretive Chinese firm in Seychelles. The Manila Times. Retrieved from <https://www.manilatimes.net/2022/04/27/opinion/columns/isko-sold-divisoria-to-a-secretive-chinese-firm-in-seychelles/1841403>

<sup>3</sup> Philippine Reclamation Authority. (2021). Proposed reclamation projects in the Philippines. Retrieved from <https://www.foi.gov.ph/requests/aglfmVmb2ktcGhyHQsSB0NvbnRlbnQiEFBSQS03MDcwODk2OTE2NTUM>



While modernisation and infrastructure projects are being pursued, affordable and adequate housing for urban poor communities is being neglected by the government. The National Housing Authority (NHA) is in charge of the government's socialised housing for poor beneficiaries. However, the public-private partnership (PPP) model that is being applied for socialised housing enables private developers such as Ayala and Phinma Properties to earn profits from securing lucrative government contracts.<sup>4</sup> The housing units are built in low value, faraway places to keep the costs down as much as possible. As a result, these relocation places also lack accessible public transportation and social services.

Mobilisations of port workers and nearby communities against eviction from their jobs and homes followed the subsequent years of the privatisation of Manila North Harbour. Vendors and consumers staged protests against the privatisation of public markets. Affected communities and environmentalists also opposed the reclamation projects that will not only displace communities and fisherfolk but will also negatively impact the remaining wildlife in Manila Bay. Residents of the Aroma community along with the others in the Vitas Temporary Housing site have long feared that their community will also be targeted for infrastructure projects and that the day will come that they too will be finally evicted from their communities.

Since year 2000, the NHA which has jurisdiction over the temporary housing has already warned the residents of impending demolition. In 2010, the NHA declared the residences unsafe for residency. In November 2017, the Office of the Building Official of Manila issued the demolition order of the Vitas Temporary Housing because of the buildings' structural vulnerability.<sup>5</sup> In a

statement by the General Manager of the NHA in June 2019, their motivation for the relocation of the residents in the temporary housing is "not for anything else, nor economic and financial returns that the NHA will get, but for [the residents'] safety and security".<sup>6</sup> In contrast, the then Manila City Mayor Estrada stated in an interview in 2018 that the area needs to be made "attractive for investments, businessmen, foreigners, to bring back the old glory of Manila".<sup>7</sup>

The juxtaposition of the ongoing modernisation and infrastructure projects in Manila City and the gross government neglect of urban poor communities makes it evident that residents of Aroma and other urban poor communities are not part of the government's vision of a "glorious Manila". Instead of upholding their rights to adequate housing and decent jobs, past and current governments relocate them to faraway places in attempts to make the urban decay go away and make the city palatable once more for profit-seeking local and foreign investors. Once again, the threat of imminent eviction in the Aroma community was made apparent when the nearby Katuparan urban poor housing was issued a demolition order in September 2020, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic.



<sup>4</sup> IBON Foundation. (2017). Private sector-led housing program undermines meager housing budget (IBON Facts & Figures excerpt). Retrieved from <https://www.ibon.org/private-sector-led-housing-program-undermines-meager-housing-budget-ibon-facts-figures-excerpt/>

<sup>5</sup> Subingsubing, K., & Reysio-Cruz, M. (2018, June 27). Scavengers living in condemned tenements face eviction. Inquirer.net. Retrieved from <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1004529/scavengers-living-in-condemned-tenements-face-eviction>

<sup>6</sup> National Housing Authority. (2019, June 19). GM Escalada on his motivation of relocating Vitas Temporary Housing occupants [Facebook status update]. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/OfficialNHA/photos/a.284624298638888/714567882311192/>

<sup>7</sup> Taruc, J. (2018, July 16). I-Witness: 'Vitas ng Tondo,' dokumentaryo ni Jay Taruc [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHIDdxCBLvM>



## FPAR Journey

From August 2019 to November 2020, GABRIELA Youth conducted the Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) with the urban poor women from the Aroma community to document their experiences and assist the community in building their capacity to strengthen their movement demanding adequate and affordable housing. Desk research was used to gather data on the government's modernisation and infrastructure projects in Manila City. The women's and community's experiences were documented through focus group discussions, key informant interviews and community assemblies.





# FPAR Findings

## Violation of the Aroma community's right to adequate housing

Three decades of government neglect led to the dilapidation of the buildings and streets in the urban poor community. Sanitation is poor. There is no proper sewage and drainage system. Most units do not have running water and their own toilets. The lack of proper waste disposal facilities as well as the lack of other sources of livelihood aside from collecting and recycling garbage resulted in the large piles of waste that are now a common sight in the neighbourhood. Mothers constantly worry about their children's health and safety due to the unsanitary and decayed conditions.

The residents of the Aroma community are aware of the dilapidated conditions of their housing and the community. However, they are still resisting the NHA's offer to relocate them to housing projects in Naic, Cavite (50 km south) and Pandi, Bulacan (35 km north). Monthly amortization costs for the new houses start from around USD 4 (PHP 200/month). However, Aroma residents worry that they still could not afford this because of the lack of sustainable livelihoods in the relocation sites.

A typical household in the Aroma community earns an average of PHP 400 or around USD 8 a day. Majority of the expenses go to food, water, electricity, hygiene, house maintenance and rent. Husbands typically work in the informal sector as vendors, vulcanizers, tricycle drivers, scavengers, sellers of second-hand items, sewers and barbers. Women supplement their husbands' and/or their own small income doing odd jobs, recycling garbage, and operating sari-sari stores (small neighbourhood convenience stores in the Philippines). Without jobs in the relocation sites, the residents will have no income to feed their families and pay the monthly amortisation. The lack of accessible services for health and education in the housing projects are also making the residents resist relocation. In the city, the Aroma residents can still somehow take advantage of the meagre public health and education services that are being provided by government and non-government organisations. Without these services, they would have to spend more for health and education. Some of those who already relocated to Naic went back to Aroma community because the place lacked jobs and social services.

**“...more and more relocatees from Naic have returned to Aroma due to lack of employment opportunities and low access to social services in the area.”**

-Member of Samahan ng Mamamayan  
ng Temporary Housing



The residents are demanding in-city relocation as well as the rehabilitation of the existing facilities, citing the Republic Act No. 7279 or the Urban Development and Housing Act of 1992 which provides for decent, affordable housing with basic services and employment opportunities for homeless and underprivileged citizens. According to women focus group discussion (FGD) participants:

**“If the reason for evicting us is because our building is old, then they should just renovate the building so we can continue living here. We want on-site relocation because our livelihood is here.”**

-Participant in the women’s FGD in Aroma community

**“All I hope for our community in Aroma is that [the government] fix it and not displace the poor. Life is already hard; yet they wish to make it harder for us. People in power want to dispose of us.”**

-Participant in the women’s FGD in Aroma community

The NHA and government authorities insist however that the reclaimed land where the Aroma community and the rest of the Vitas Temporary Housing stands is not for residential use. The Executive Order 1086 by the former dictator President Marcos and the Executive Order 221 by the former President Estrada put the jurisdiction of the Vitas Reclamation and Industrial Area under the NHA to make use of the area for port-oriented commercial and industrial activities. Similarly, Manila City’s land development zoning plan indicates that the land on which the temporary housing stands on is allocated for industrial use.

## **Lack of meaningful participation in decision-making processes to adequate housing**

Meaningful participation in the decision-making process on the housing situation in the Aroma community is virtually non-existent. The decision on demolition in 2017 was issued as a 'notice' and did not go through public consultation. Urban poor organisation, Samahan ng Mamayan ng Temporary Housing (SMTH) lobbied the local government and protested to stop the impending demolition. In 2019, the NHA became persistent with convincing the residents to dismantle their own houses (self-demolish) and to be relocated to the government housing projects. According to one of the residents:

**“The NHA goes to our community neither to consult us nor to hear our pleas. They just want to convince us to accept the housing units in Naic.”**

-Participant in the women's FGD in Aroma community

## **COVID-19 worsened women's vulnerabilities**

The women and their families lost their livelihoods during the harsh lockdowns imposed by the government at the height of the pandemic. Most of the women are in the informal sector. Those who recycled garbage, maintained small retail stores, and worked as vendors in the nearby market and in the port area were affected by the stay-at-home order. Husbands who worked in construction sites, automotive shops, or as tricycle/pedicab (a bicycle fitted with a sidecar) drivers also lost their jobs. As a result, families went hungry. Government aid was selective in its beneficiaries, late and not enough to sustain their needs.

**"Patronage politics was very rampant and greatly influenced the aid distribution. The local government deducted PHP 100 (around USD 2) from the PHP 1,000 (around USD 50) aid that they distributed. They said the deduction was for the processing fee, but we know they just pocketed the amount."**

-Participant in the women's FGD in Aroma community

Due to the crowded conditions of hospitals, women were not able to access the medical services that they needed. They feared that they might contract COVID-19 if they go. According to a pregnant FGD participant:

**“[I] avoided going to the hospital even when feeling ill because [I might be] misdiagnosed as being COVID-19 positive. I am also afraid of getting exposed to COVID-19 positive patients.”**

The worsened economic distress during the lockdown contributed to the spike in cases of violence against women (VAW) especially in urban poor communities. During the pandemic, VAW was not considered an emergency, and therefore not addressed. During an informal discussion with women in the Aroma community, some of them recounted stories of abuses during lockdown. According to one of the women:

**"There were many cases of violence against women during the pandemic. Couples who lost their jobs and stayed at home argued, which often led to physical violence."**

## **Militarised lockdowns instilled fear in the community**

Lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic were enforced by armed police and military personnel. Checkpoints were set up and curfews were implemented throughout the city to limit the population's movement. Being one of the most populated barangays, Aroma was surrounded with checkpoints all throughout the duration of the strict community quarantines. According to one of the women FGD participants:

**“We cannot easily go out, even just to the market. I pity the kids because our house is small and crowded, and yet, they cannot go out because we fear they might get arrested by the barangay or the police”.**

Aroma community residents who participated in the mobilisations during Labour Day (May 1) and Independence Day (June 12) in 2020 to condemn President Duterte's ineffective pandemic response were met with threats and harassment from the police. Police harassment is however not new to the community. In 2019, personnel from the Philippine National Police-Special Weapons and Tactics Team (PNP-SWAT) were seen in the community, supposedly in search of drug dens. Members of the community believe they were sent to scare the residents into leaving Aroma.



# Women's Empowerment

Women have taken initiatives to struggle for adequate housing by educating, organising and mobilising members of their community. The FPAR discussions enabled them to understand their problems with adequate housing within the larger context of the government's thrust for profit-oriented modernisation and infrastructure initiatives. FPAR methods such as door-to-door interviews and small group discussions were useful in enabling the researchers and community organisers to directly interact with the residents.

The FPAR process contributed to building new resources for campaigning. One of these is the petition drafted and disseminated by the local community leaders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The petition incorporated their collective positions and demands on their struggle for adequate housing and decent jobs. They also produced campaign materials expressing their demands for free COVID-19 mass testing, adequate social assistance during the pandemic, and respect for their human rights against the government's militarised lockdown.

The FPAR provided capacity-building opportunities for women in the community. Young women participated in trainings and workshops that tackled social issues, youth leadership, public speaking and advocacy writing. Discussions and participatory workshops on the political and economic situation of the Philippines, including trade and housing issues, were also conducted. As a result, young women became involved in the local struggle for adequate housing, the broadening of the alliance and the empowerment of women leaders.

The young women formed the youth wing of Samahan ng Mamamayan ng Temporary Housing that sought to empower the youth in the community in the struggle to fight dislocation of employment, livelihood and housing. One of the young women recalled that before, she was not permitted by her family to get involved with political organisations. She said,

**“Before, I was not able to join because I was told that I am too young to understand. Now, I am joining the organisation because I know that we must fight for our livelihoods and homes.”**

The capacity-building efforts resulted in the higher participation of women in their community in local actions and dialogues with decision makers. At least 10 women members of SMTH from each tenement building led initiatives on informal talks, house-to-house discussion activities, local gatherings and actions. Young women were also actively involved in the activities throughout the FPAR journey.

# Recommendations

## For the government of the Philippines

- Shift from the neoliberal framework in designing development policies serving the interests of the private sector, towards genuine land reform and national industrialisation for a self-reliant economic development that would address the roots of chronic poverty in the country.
- Stop forced evictions. Institutionalise transparent and democratic participation in decision-making processes on urban poor housing issues. Urban poor communities must have free, prior and informed consent and meaningful participation in decisions affecting their right to decent housing.
- Repeal E.O. 1086. Renovate the existing housing facilities and provide in-city relocation for the residents of the Temporary Housing.
- The City Government of Manila, the National Housing Authority, and other state entities must respect the human rights of the urban poor, especially during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Provide support to the urban poor in terms of jobs and access to social services in relocation areas.
- Implement strict laws on domestic violence cases.

## For the community

- Look for opportunities for political engagement with decision makers and local leaders.
- Advocate for women's human rights to equal treatment and end violence against women in all spaces and levels.
- Build a strong community through political awareness and education.
- Organise a campaign network including various youth, organisations, campus publications and influential individuals in support of the local community's fight for livelihood, housing and other basic social services against the displacement of residents in Aroma, Tondo.





## About Gabriela Youth

GABRIELA Youth is a mass organisation for young women in universities, colleges, schools and communities that seeks to forward women's rights. GABRIELA Youth takes an active stance on the issues of human rights, poverty, globalisation, militarism, violence, health, education, labour and trade, and other salient issues affecting women. The organisation conducts local awareness campaigns in schools and communities in order to strengthen the linkages between the domestic and national issues.



## About APWLD

The Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) is the region's leading network of feminist organisations and individual activists. For 35 years, we have been carrying out advocacy, activism and movement-building to advance women's human rights and Development Justice.



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