

Looking for Safe Haven in a City Torn Apart by War: Narratives of agency from internally displaced persons in the southern Philippines

Romeo Joe Quintero

Abstract

In this paper, I interrogate the dominant representation of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in humanitarian discourse as helpless victims in need of rescue. Based on the stories of IDP women and gender diverse individuals in the Philippines affected by the Zamboanga City siege in 2013, I illustrate how they exercised agency to shape their trajectories of displacement. The capacity of Filipino IDPs to contend with their displacement is shaped by their power as *bakwit* (evacuees), and by their class and ethnoreligious identities. While Christian Filipino IDPs had access to material, financial, and social resources, allowing them to engage in temporary migration after displacement, Muslim Filipino IDPs with limited access to these same resources found themselves in unwanted mobility and prolonged situations of displacement. Yet, Muslim Filipino IDPs do not lack agency, as they continue to actively and consciously forge new strategies to regain a sense of home in extended exile. Ultimately, while identifying *bakwit* power as a useful conceptual tool to make legible how IDPs exercised control at different stages of their displacement, embracing such a framework should not negate the long history of political violence in the region that continues to keep some people on the move.

Keywords: internally displaced persons, Philippines, agency, armed conflict, *bakwit* power

Suggested citation: R J Quintero, 'Looking for Safe Haven in a City Torn Apart by War: Narratives of agency from internally displaced persons in the southern Philippines', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 22, 2024, pp. 34-51, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201224223>

Introduction

On 9 September 2013, a faction of the Islamist separatist movement in the southern Philippines, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), organised an armed incursion and occupied several coastal communities in Zamboanga City.¹ This ensued in a 23-day period of urban warfare between the MNLF, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), and the Philippine National Police (PNP). While the Philippine security forces were successful in containing and ending the spread of the crisis on the ground, its aftereffects were disastrous with long-lasting implications.² An estimated 10,000 homes were destroyed, more than 200 people killed, and close to 120,000 people forced out of their homes. A decade later, some internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Zamboanga City are still waiting for durable solutions that may never come.

Internally displaced persons are individuals who involuntarily fled their homes due to armed conflicts, human rights violations, or natural disasters, but do not cross an internationally recognised state border to seek protection.³ The living conditions of those in situations of forced internal displacement are often inadequate and unsafe, as they remain under the protection of the very same governments who may have been responsible for their displacement. This is very much the case for many IDPs in the southern Philippines, who are frequently suspected of supporting the Islamist separatist movement that emerged in response to the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos Sr between 1965 and 1986.⁴ But the armed resistance in this region has an even longer history that can be traced back to colonial land policies of homesteading and resettlement. Long-Christianised Filipinos who were landless farmers in the northern and central Philippines were promised arable lands on the southern island of Mindanao by Spain and the United States on the condition that they would permanently resettle there.⁵

¹ M C T Medina, 'Aftermath of the 2013 Zamboanga Siege: Peacebuilding Strategies from Civil Society', *Philippine Sociological Review*, vol. 64, 2016, pp. 9–39.

² *Ibid.*; M A Salazar, R Law, and V Winkler, 'Health Consequences of an Armed Conflict in Zamboanga, Philippines Using a Syndromic Surveillance Database', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 15, issue 12, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph15122690>.

³ B Ní Ghráinne, 'The Relationship between Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees', in *Internally Displaced Persons and International Refugee Law*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2022, p. 11.

⁴ D J Ringuet, 'The Continuation of Civil Unrest and Poverty in Mindanao', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 24, issue 1, 2002, pp. 33–49.

⁵ F C Abaya-Ulindang, 'Land Resettlement Policies in Colonial and PostColonial Philippines: Key to Current Insurgencies and Climate Disasters in its Southern Mindanao Island', Land Grabbing, Conflict and Agrarian-environmental Transformations: Perspectives from East and Southeast Asia (Conference Paper No. 54), 2015, pp. 1–16, https://www.iss.nl/sites/corporate/files/CMCP_54-Abaya-Ulindang.pdf.

However, they brought hybrid ways of life that were different to the customs of the native southern peoples of Lumads and Moros, which eventually led to land disputes, ethnoreligious tensions, and deep class divisions. Even though the ethnoreligious composition of Zamboanga City is dominated by Christian settlers, the coastal communities that were heavily affected by the 2013 siege were largely populated by Muslims.

The dominant scholarship on forced internal displacement in the Philippines denotes that IDPs with limited access to material, financial, and social resources find themselves dependent on others for support over extended periods of time.⁶ This is especially true for many women and girls who are often excluded from decision-making on matters that affect them most.⁷ Since displacement entails family separation and the loss of support systems developed in response to crisis situations,⁸ many IDP women and other vulnerable groups rely on the welfare and protection delivered in camps.⁹ While this may be the reality of many Filipino IDPs, it is not always congruent with how they see themselves.¹⁰ As documented in other sites of displacement across the globe, many displaced persons do not put their lives on ‘hold while they wait for others to make decisions on their future’.¹¹ They ‘make strenuous efforts to avoid’ humanitarian protection ‘to preserve their limited autonomy and control over their [lives]’.¹² Internally displaced women assume leading economic roles in some sectors of the informal economy, such

⁶ M J Baquiano and P I P Padilla, ‘Unpacking Internal Displacement in Philippine Media Using Social Representations Theory’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 50, issue 6, 2024, pp. 1572-1589, p. 1573, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2186211>; Y Su, ‘Networks of Recovery: Remittances, Social Capital and Post-disaster Recovery in Tacloban City, Philippines’, *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, vol. 67, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2021.102641>.

⁷ C Cazabat *et al.*, *Women and Girls in Internal Displacement*, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2020, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/202003-twice-invisible-internally-displaced-women.pdf>.

⁸ A Raven-Roberts, ‘Women and the Political Economy of War’, in C Cohn (ed.), *Women and Wars: Contested Histories, Uncertain Futures*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2013, p. 43.

⁹ Baquiano and Padilla.

¹⁰ J J Canuday, ‘The Power of the Displaced’, *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, vol. 15, issue 1, 2006, pp. 115–136, <https://doi.org/10.1177/011719680601500106>.

¹¹ S Turner, ‘Camps as Vessels of Hope’, in F Yi-Neumann *et al.* (eds.), *Material Culture and (Forced) Migration: Materializing the Transient*, University College London Press, 2022, p. 53.

¹² O Bakewell, ‘Community Services in Refugee Aid Programs: The Challenges of Expectations, Principles, and Practice’, *PRAXIS: The Fletcher Journal of International Development*, vol. 18, 2003, pp. 5–18, p. 12.

as food vending and tailoring.¹³ Others seek out urban areas for better economic opportunities,¹⁴ while those in camps might sell their food rations to buy market food that meets their needs.¹⁵ More importantly, the external help that IDPs receive during displacement forms only a part of their experience. Many of them invent a wide range of strategies to govern their lives in exile, thereby challenging the common notion that they are simply passive victims in need of rescue.¹⁶

In this article, I illustrate how IDP women and gender diverse individuals in Zamboanga City exercised agency to shape their trajectories of displacement. Building on the concept of *bakwit* power,¹⁷ or the power of the evacuees, displaced women and gender diverse individuals challenged the conventional understanding of agency to recognise decision-making beyond individual choices. From fleeing the war and finding refuge to either returning home or rebuilding their lives, IDPs in Zamboanga City consciously and actively engaged in social networks to navigate structural forces beyond their control.¹⁸ They improvised their ‘behaviour to make it attuned to [their] changing situations’ of forced displacement.¹⁹ Their enactment of agency can be distinguished by class and ethnoreligious identities. Christian Filipino IDPs with access to material, financial, and social resources experienced temporary displacement, and some were able to find refuge with friends or family members. Meanwhile, Muslim Filipino IDPs with limited access to these same resources found themselves in protracted situations of displacement. This is not to say that only Christian Filipino IDPs experienced temporary displacement

¹³ E Alexion, D Burns, and E Stites, *Literature Review: Livelihoods and Durable Solutions to Internal Displacement in Somalia Region, Ethiopia*, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, Boston, 2021.

¹⁴ D Buscher, ‘New Approaches to Urban Refugee Livelihoods’, *Refuge: Canada’s Journal on Refugees*, vol. 28, issue 2, 2013, pp. 17–29, <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.36473>.

¹⁵ C Boeyink, and J-B Falisse, ‘Class in Camps or the Camped Class? The Making and Reshaping of Socio-economic Inequalities in the Refugee Camp of North-western Tanzania’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 48, issue 20, 2022, pp. 4885–4904, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2123434>.

¹⁶ P Okeke-Ihejirika *et al.*, ‘Beyond Poverty Fixation: Interrogating the Experiences of Internally Displaced Persons in Nigeria’, *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 41, issue 9, 2020, pp. 1476–1497, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1782732>.

¹⁷ Canaday.

¹⁸ K B Harpviken, *From ‘Refugee Warriors’ to ‘Returnee Warriors’: Militant Homecoming in Afghanistan and Beyond*, Working Paper in Global Migration and Transnational Politics, no. 5, 2008, pp. 1–17, <https://www.prio.org/publications/255>.

¹⁹ A V Lagmay, ‘Bahala Na!’, in R Pe-Pua (ed.), *Handbook of Filipino Psychology Volume 1: Perspective and Methodology*, University of the Philippines Press, Manila, 2018, p. 329.

and Muslim Filipino IDPs lived in protracted displacement. When we consider the intersections of class, gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, and location of IDPs in Zamboanga City, we see deeply fragmented patterns of mobilities, further nuancing dominant understandings of forced internal displacement as unilinear.

Bakwit Power: Rethinking IDP agency in the Filipino cultural context

Within the humanist tradition, agency is oftentimes associated with concepts such as autonomy, freedom, rationality, and moral authority.²⁰ In this model, white Western men are viewed as agentic, because of their perceived inherent capacity to make rational, conscious, and independent decisions. On the contrary, women and children are portrayed as irrational, emotional, and unconscious individuals, who undermine the superior masculinist mind.²¹ This simplistic model of agency has been heavily criticised by poststructuralist scholars for its essentialist and dualist tendency. Poststructuralism considers agency to be a product of social relations, discourses, and subjectivity.²² From this perspective, there is no core concept that makes the individuals who they claim to be, as they ‘can only ever be what the various discourses make possible’.²³

The question of agency is also central to the theorisation of migration. Forced migration is commonly understood to be induced by some form of crisis, ‘marked by less time for planning, preparation, and researching information on possible destinations’.²⁴ Implicit to this perspective of migration is that displaced individuals are victims of unfortunate circumstances, unlike economic migrants who are not compelled to move and demonstrate a fairly high level of control over their trajectories of migration.²⁵ Some migration scholars assert that displaced individuals most likely find themselves in ‘destinations they may not have moved

²⁰ C R Showden, ‘Conceiving Agency: Autonomy, Freedom, and the Creation of the Embodied Subject’, in *Choices Women Make: Agency in Domestic Violence, Assisted Reproduction, and Sex Work*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2011; B Davies, ‘The Concept of Agency: A Feminist Poststructuralist Analysis’, *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology*, issue 30, 1991, pp. 42–53.

²¹ Davies.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

²⁴ C Hunkler *et al.*, ‘Spatial and Social Im/Mobility in Forced Migration: Revisiting Class’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 48, issue 20, 2022, pp. 4829–4846, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2123431>.

²⁵ E Piguet, ‘Theories of Voluntary and Forced Migration’, in R McLeman and F Gemenne (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Environmental Migration and Displacement*, Routledge, London and New York, 2018.

to under different circumstances'.²⁶ Although not all forcibly displaced individuals may conform to this essentialist narrative, resisting their portrayal as helpless could undermine their claims for assistance and protection.²⁷ Framing themselves as victims of war may lead to additional protection but could also further reinforce the narrative of victimhood.²⁸ In essence, these narratives of victimhood do not acknowledge that vulnerability and resistance are not mutually exclusive. As Saba Mahmood reminds us, we must refuse the understanding of agency from the lens of subordination and resistance, because 'just as our own lives don't fit neatly into such a paradigm, neither should we apply such a reduction to the lives of [forcibly displaced] women'²⁹ and sexual minorities.

In this paper, I draw on the concept of *bakwit* power, as theorised by Jose Jowel Canuday, to illustrate how IDPs in Zamboanga City dealt with the disruptive force of displacement.³⁰ *Bakwit* is the Filipino vernacular for evacuees that IDPs in Mindanao use to refer to themselves. Canuday explains that *bakwit* power lies in the creative capacity of Filipino IDPs to transform, reorder, and negotiate their lives throughout displacement. Building on concept of the 'weapons of the weak' by James Scott, who describes how the powerless 'use implicit understandings and informal networks'³¹ to enact everyday forms of resistance, Canuday explains that with or without humanitarian aid, IDPs in the southern Philippines modify their social relations 'to pave the way for new socio-political arrangements that allow them to evacuate, to return, and to rebuild their communities.'³² One specific example is the 2003 *Bakwit* Power mobilisation in Central Mindanao that called on the Philippine government and armed groups to engage in peace talks.³³

I extend *bakwit* power to understand how IDP women and gender diverse individuals in Zamboanga City improvised strategies to determine where and how

²⁶ Hunkler *et al.*, p. 4837.

²⁷ C Mainwaring, 'Migrant Agency: Negotiating Borders and Migration Controls', *Migration Studies*, vol. 4, issue 3, 2016, pp. 289–308, <https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnw013>.

²⁸ Y Cadena-Camargo *et al.*, "'We just been forced to do it': Exploring victimization and agency among internally displaced young mothers in Bogotá', *Conflict and Health*, vol. 13, issue 1, 2019, p. 4, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-019-0205-1>.

²⁹ S Mahmood, 'Agency, Gender, and Embodiment', in *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2005, pp. 153–188, p. 174.

³⁰ Cadunay.

³¹ J Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1985, p. xvi.

³² Baquiano and Padilla, p. 3.

³³ Canuday; Baquiano and Padilla.

they move. Their capacity to conceive and enact agency exists on a continuum; it is spatially, temporally, and relationally situated.³⁴ What makes *bakwit* power suited to the theorisation of agency is that it is deeply rooted in the lived experiences of Filipino IDPs themselves, highlighting their stubbornness to endure and persist despite difficult circumstances. IDP women and gender diverse individuals in Zamboanga City exercised agency at different times throughout their trajectories of displacement. Their approaches constantly changed depending on new information, opportunities, and challenges presented to them along the way, which also went beyond individual considerations and depended on which aspect of their identity was most salient.³⁵ At the same time, I am cautious in using *bakwit* power in describing the agency of IDPs in Zamboanga City in order not to overlook the issue of political violence. Discussing the agency of IDPs is not intended to glorify their capacity to push back against constraints and dismiss the reality that many of them live in profoundly dire situations.

Methodology and Data Collection

My research participants came from different ethnoreligious and linguistic communities and occupied diverse experiences and identities. I interviewed 11 research participants, who were at least 18 years old when the Zamboanga City siege erupted in September 2013. One identified as a trans woman, two embraced a fluidity of gender expression and identity, while the rest were cisgender women. They were all forcibly displaced by the armed conflict and still resided in the city afterwards. The Carleton University Research Ethics Board approved the study in May 2021. Pseudonyms are used throughout in order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

I was overly cautious not to evoke unpleasant memories during the semi-structured interviews I carried out with research participants between July and August 2021. I conducted the interviews in English, Tagalog, Chavacano, and Cebuano to allow research participants to recollect, in their own words, their experiences of displacement, home, and belonging.³⁶ Letting participants articulate their experiences in their chosen languages was intended to encourage a sense of empowerment, because it facilitated their capacity to ‘perceive [themselves] as people who feel, people who will, people who think, and people who act as a

³⁴ Showden.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ While the research participants and I switched between English, Tagalog, Chavacano, and Cebuano, my lack of proficiency in Tausug may have prevented some interlocutors from fully expressing the complexity of their experience of displacement. This is also why I relied on *pakikiramdam* (shared inner perception) to sense nonverbal cues of research participants.

whole'.³⁷ This created space for research participants to centre their stories from their own standpoint, producing specific knowledge that could be recorded for research.³⁸ Given that the fieldwork occurred at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews took place in a variety of locations, such as schools, restaurants, and private homes to observe social distancing. Only research participants who agreed to be audio-recorded were chosen for the interview, which generally lasted between 30 to 60 minutes. I also transcribed all interviews and analysed them using grounded theory to identify thematic connections, similarities, and particularities.

A host of feminist scholars have argued that one's research positionality in the field is never static.³⁹ 'Boundaries are blurred with shifting and ambiguous identities [and] research is infinitely layered and interwoven.'⁴⁰ Although I was born and raised in Zamboanga City and carry epistemic positionality that allowed for some nuanced understanding of my research participants' lives, I was not necessarily an insider. I anticipated that there would be a gap between how I expressed my identities and how my research participants perceived them. This inevitable gap needed constant negotiation with each research participant to acknowledge our differences without it becoming a source of tension. Since I grew up in a neighbourhood notorious for crimes and gangs, research participants who were aware of this place saw that we shared identities, signalled in their response of 'you know what it's like there'. Meanwhile, Muslim Filipino women who perceived me as an outsider addressed me as 'sir' even though I repeatedly asked them to use my nickname. Moreover, because they were recruited through snowballing and had been informed of my project and the sack of rice (25 kg) being offered as incentive for participating, some Muslim Filipino women I interviewed presented themselves as poor and needy. They described themselves as *palaboy* (homeless), *madumi* (dirty), or *skwatters* (squatters). While I empathised with their experience

³⁷ L M Strobel, 'A Personal Story: On Becoming a Split Filipina Subject', in M L de Jesus (ed.), *Pinay Power: Theorizing the Filipina/American Experience*, Routledge, London, 2005, pp. 16–26.

³⁸ G Rose, 'Situating Knowledges: Positionality, Reflexivities and other Tactics', *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 21, issue 3, 1997, pp. 305–320, <https://doi.org/10.1191/030913297673302122>.

³⁹ B Mullings, 'Insider or Outsider Both or Neither: Some Dilemmas of Interviewing in a Cross-Cultural Setting', *Geoforum*, vol. 30, issue 4, 1999, pp. 337–350, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-7185\(99\)00025-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-7185(99)00025-1); G Adeniyi-Ogunyankin, 'In/Out of Nigeria: Transnational Research and the Politics of Identity and Knowledge Production', *Gender, Place & Culture*, vol. 26, issue 10, 2019, pp. 1386–1401, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2018.1481370>.

⁴⁰ B Sherif, 'The Ambiguity of Boundaries in the Fieldwork Experience: Establishing Rapport and Negotiating Insider/Outsider Status', *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 7, issue 4, 2001, pp. 436–447, <https://doi.org/10.1177/107780040100700403>.

of prolonged displacement, I did not feel comfortable expressing pity for their situation and did not want to view or present them as voiceless victims. I was rather fascinated by their performance of paradigmatic victimhood in framing how they are acted upon as subjects ‘symbolising inequality, poverty, passivity and helplessness.’⁴¹

Findings

On Fleeing the Conflict

While perception of threat to physical life is an indication of displacement, it is not ‘a linear phase model of departure–journey–arrival.’⁴² Individuals carefully plan their mobility in conjunction with how much material, financial, and social resources they could lose, convert, or carry with them.⁴³ For some research participants, beyond the material understanding of home as a shelter and asset, it is also like a Jenga puzzle where each block symbolises a family member tightly holding one another. Abruptly removing a block could therefore weaken the stability of the home they know and protect. This is why family members generally stagger their movements out of conflict zones when confronted with violence, ‘embark[ing] on quite different journeys’⁴⁴ depending on the resources, local context, and duration of the conflict.⁴⁵

This is reified in the stories of research participants who described their displacement trajectories as involving ‘more locations than simply home and one place of shelter.’⁴⁶ Ivy, a trans woman who was trapped in ground zero with her father and brother, underscored the centrality of care in shaping one’s control over trajectories of displacement. She explained, ‘I didn’t [evacuate]... All the women and [...] children were the first to be evacuated... My father and brother,

⁴¹ C Brun and P Blaike, ‘Introduction’, in C Brun, P Blaike and M Jones (eds.), *Alternative Development: Unravelling Marginalisation, Voicing Change*, Routledge, London and New York, 2014, p. 10.

⁴² Hunkler *et al.*, p. 4835.

⁴³ N Van Hear, ‘Reconsidering Migration and Class’, *International Migration Review*, vol. 48, issue 1, 2014, pp. 100–121, <https://doi.org/10.1111/imre.12139>.

⁴⁴ S Christ and B Etzold, ‘Family Figurations in Displacement: Entangled Mobilities of Refugees towards Germany and Beyond’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 48, no. 18, 2022, pp. 4419–4435, p. 4419, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2090160>.

⁴⁵ L Vignal, *War-Torn: The Unmaking of Syria, 2011–2021*, Hurst and Company, 2021, p. 161.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

who happens to be PNP [part of the Philippines National Police], and my father is already old enough that he has maintenance, so if I ever went with the women, who would look after my father?... There, that's why I also got trapped there.'

The three of them remained in ground zero to protect their home for another four days until they realised that the situation on the ground had reached a vital threshold. This is a strategy employed by many people in other sites of armed violence. They constantly evaluate the threats they are exposed to, along with their access to immediate needs like food, water, electricity, and basic services.⁴⁷ While access to information about potential places of residence is also important, it is often confusing and incomplete.⁴⁸ This made it difficult for Ivy to compare the situation in ground zero to the conditions at the Joaquin Sports Complex (Grandstand)⁴⁹ where they intended to seek temporary shelter.

The presence of security parameters and knowledge of their whereabouts are vital factors that also shape trajectories of displacement.⁵⁰ Even though the siege in Zamboanga City received international attention from news outlets, the information about the checkpoints established by the MNLF had not reached Ivy. In effect, she had to pass through a checkpoint held by the MNLF to exit ground zero. These checkpoints served as filters that marked and distinguished people based on the perception of their identities and documentations.⁵¹ But since Ivy's father and brother are part of the PNP, they could not easily escape because they were 'carrying guns, uniforms, badges, ammunitions'.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*; A Steele, 'Seeking Safety: Avoiding Displacement and Choosing Destinations in Civil Wars', *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 46, issue 3, 2009, pp. 419–429, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343309102660>; X Devictor *et al.*, *Forcibly Displaced: Toward a Development Approach Supporting Refugees, the Internally Displaced, and Their Hosts*, World Bank Group, Washington, D.C., 2017, pp. 44–45, <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-0938-5>; J Schon, 'Motivation and Opportunity for Conflict-Induced Migration: An Analysis of Syrian Migration Timing', *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 56, issue 1, 2018, pp. 12–27, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343318806044>.

⁴⁸ Vignal; Devictor *et al.*; Schon.

⁴⁹ The Joaquin Sports Complex is a stadium known to local residents as the Grandstand. It was turned into the biggest temporary evacuation camp serving more than 10,000 people. R G A Go, 'DPWH to Finish Zambo Sports Complex Rehab this Month', *Philippine News Agency*, 7 December 2018, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1056080>.

⁵⁰ Vignal.

⁵¹ P Bonizzoni, 'The Border(s) Within: Formal and Informal Processes of Status Production, Negotiation and Contestation in Migratory Context', in M Ambrosini, M Cinalli, and D Jacobson (eds.), *Migration, Borders and Citizenship: Between Policy and Public Spheres*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2019; B Anderson, N Sharma, and C Wright, 'Editorial: Why No Borders?', *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, vol. 26, issue 2, 2009, pp. 5–18, <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.32074>.

Accordingly, geographical boundaries are not fixed. They are fluid and constantly reimagined.⁵² This allowed Ivy to negotiate her passage through the checkpoint by intentionally presenting herself as a cis-Muslim Filipino woman. She described, 'So, I left my baggage [behind so I could carry] their luggage. I was carrying it, because if you're a woman, they will not check you... unlike if you're a man... So good thing, lucky me, and thanks to God, when I walked through the check point, they did not search my body... I probably didn't look gay, that's why.' Ivy disguised herself as pious by wearing the veil, which was complemented by her ability to speak Tausug.⁵³

Ivy exercised her power as a *bakwit* by foregrounding her ethnicity and reconfiguring her femininity. Her gender performance of dominant social norms that are commonly associated with Muslim Filipino women allowed her access to safe passage. However, Ivy's trajectory of displacement did not end after she escaped from ground zero and reached the Grandstand. She described how upon arriving in the Grandstand, she and her family backed out of using the temporary shelter 'because of the difficult situation there... so we decided to stay at my brother-in-law's house.'

Following this, Ivy decided to live separately from her extended family and sought temporary shelter from a friend, who was located not too far from ground zero. She explained, 'I went to my best friend's house which is near the downtown area, because... I wanted to return again to retrieve my things. I'm really eager to sneak in again. So, every now and then, I was attentively listening on the radio or went close to Budget Wise because it's just near to us. I kept on doing [this] for another two weeks.' Although it is rare for people in contexts of armed violence to move alone,⁵⁴ Ivy's decision to live separately was part of a collective strategy. By staying close to home, Ivy was hopeful that the crisis would end in a matter of days. She went back and forth to check the situation in ground zero, assessing whether it was safe for her and her family to return. Yet, it was impossible to retrieve the things she left behind, as the level of armed violence in the area had not de-escalated. Rather, it had gotten worse when the AFP razed the area to the ground with fire. When I asked Ivy if this is a common practice by the AFP during wars, she explained that it is part of their standard operating procedure to drive out MNLF members who remain in hiding in the area.⁵⁵ This made Ivy hypervigilant in navigating around the city as she crossed different boundaries.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Tausug is one of the widely spoken languages by Muslims and some Christians in Zamboanga City.

⁵⁴ Vignal.

⁵⁵ In a separate conversation I had with a resident of Zamboanga City, who was from another community affected by the siege, he said that some MNLF members concealed themselves by pretending to be residents of the city. He cited this as another reason for the clearing-out procedure.

Another research participant who was trapped in ground zero was Lily. Unlike Ivy who initially refused to leave ground zero, Lily and her brother, Ronnie, could not immediately flee as the only exit route they knew had been blocked by the MNLF. This was partly due to how they initially perceived the violence, which delayed their time to respond. Since Lily and Ronnie lived in an area where many residents work in the illicit and informal sectors of the economy, Lily had come to normalise the violence in the area as part of their mundane night life. She explained, 'By 11 p.m. [on 8 September 2013] there was already a shooting, but our neighbours thought it was nothing because it is considered normal there... Someone said that some folks were only testing their guns. Then, it started happening again at dawn until 5 a.m.... We did not escape because... we thought it was nothing, because they [MNLF] said they were only passing by.' But when the police gradually arrived, the MNLF started taking people in as hostages. Someone also knocked on Lily and Ronnie's doorway to ask about their ethnicity and religion. She explained, '[Ronnie] said that someone had asked [about our ethnicity and religion], his reply was we were only renters... The owner of the house is a Christian.'

The MNLF segregated civilians based on their ethnoreligious and linguistic characteristics. They screened residents by speaking to them in Tausug at checkpoints or by knocking on their doors. Those who could not respond in the same language were pulled out from the crowd to be held as hostages and used as human shields. Ronnie, who is from another ethnoreligious group but proficient in Tausug, misled some members of the MNLF who speculated whether the people living in their house were of Christian faith. While Lily is not so fluent in this language, she adopted an alternative strategy to blend in with the crowd by wearing a veil. The power of Ronnie and Lily as *bakwit* lies in their awareness of what they could and could not control in their environment, which is what kept them alive and allowed them to plan an alternative route.

Like Ivy, Lily exercised *bakwit* power by wearing a veil to intentionally present herself as a Muslim Filipino woman to circumvent captivity and reach safety. Deniz Kandiyoti calls this bargaining with patriarchy, a strategy deployed by women in the Global South to 'maximize [their] security and optimize life options with varying potential for active or passive resistance in the face of oppression'.⁵⁶ This strategy proved useful for Ivy and Lily because they were selectively targeted for fitting 'the profile of a rival sympathizer'.⁵⁷ Moreover, Lily and Ronnie's trajectories of displacement did not end after escaping from ground zero. While it is sometimes impossible to organise long-distance travel during emergency situations,⁵⁸ the

⁵⁶ D Kandiyoti, 'Bargaining with Patriarchy', *Gender and Society*, vol. 2, issue 3, 1988, pp. 274–290, p. 274, <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124388002003004>.

⁵⁷ Steele, p. 422.

⁵⁸ Vignal.

local government offered some residents free transportation to travel to other cities within the province of Zamboanga Del Sur, where the eldest sibling of Lily and Ronnie lives. Although most forced migrants choose to remain in relatively familiar environments and with their relatives,⁵⁹ others resort to family separation as a temporary strategy to ‘help a child escape from military recruitment or to send a politically active member into hiding’.⁶⁰ In the case of Lily and Ronnie, their older siblings collectively decided that a change in environment would be in their best interest, as it would help them cope with the trauma brought by armed conflict. What their trajectories of displacement illustrate is that some migration journeys may be shorter, extended, or farther.⁶¹

On Securing Refuge

IDPs who sought shelter from relatives or friends were designated by the City’s Social Welfare and Development Office (CSWDO) as ‘home-based IDPs’. Many of them, like Ivy and Lily, were also ‘untagged’ and rendered ineligible for humanitarian aid and resettlement programs.⁶² Conversely, IDPs with limited access to material, financial, and social resources were forced into unwanted mobility. In Zamboanga City, the largest evacuation camp was established in the Grandstand, the same location where Ivy had arrived and left due to its dismal conditions. Civilians in the camp were registered and housed in makeshift tents that offered insufficient protection from the weather. Many also arrived with few personal items, having had to abandon them when they fled their homes.

Iris, a mother of ten children, moved to Zamboanga City with her family in 2008 to escape a series of conflicts in Jolo City, prompted by clan rivalry, military pacification, and the Abu Sayyaf group linked to Al-Qaeda.⁶³ Since Iris and her family lived as informal settlers in ground zero, with few material possessions because of the lingering fear of forced evictions and demolitions, they had fewer reasons to remain in place. More importantly, she did not want to risk the

⁵⁹ Devictor *et al.*

⁶⁰ B Wilmsen, ‘Family Separation: The Policies, Procedures, and Consequences for Refugee Background Families’, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, vol. 30, issue 1, 2011, pp. 44–64, p. 45, <https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdq045>.

⁶¹ Hunkler *et al.*

⁶² United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Untagged” but not Forgotten: Home-based Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Zamboanga’, *Philippines Humanitarian Bulletin*, issue 9, 2016, <https://ochaimphil.github.io/Humanitarian-Bulletin/HumBulletinSept2016.html>.

⁶³ S Herbert, *Conflict Analysis of the Philippines*, K4D Helpdesk Report 648, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton, 2019, https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/14661/648_Conflict_analysis_of_The_Philippines.pdf.

safety of her children and made decisions based on the need to get through the danger unharmed. But similar to some IDPs, she had to leave the Grandstand and embarked on another journey. She explained, ‘We were very terrified, sir. Especially when we heard the shootings. I was really panicking, sir, because I have 10 children... One is a grown-up, but the rest of them are still tiny. I said, that is okay, it is up to Allah what will happen to us. [Then], someone offered help to drop us off there... We had no clue where else to go. We only knew to go there... [But] we could no longer endure the situation there because it was so dirty.’

Concerns over not knowing where else to go is also reflected in the stories of other IDPs in my research. Poppy, who was dropped off at the Grandstand from the General Public Hospital where her now late son had been admitted for Thalassaemia, was left to wonder if, ‘*End of the day na ba to?*’ (Is this the end of days?). She explained that in the three months she was in this evacuation camp, ‘I never received money... We’re okay for the food, they also gave us milk for the children, it was also okay, you just have to line up... It was overcrowded with people, sir. Then our tent, sir, we were on the soil... it was like covered in cellophane where we slept... it took some time before they provided us with *banig*.⁶⁴ But unlike Iris and Poppy, who eventually found alternative living arrangements, IDPs with no options for leaving the evacuation camp had to persist through multiple difficult situations. Hyacinth, who is a widow with four children, also came from Jolo City where she had been displaced twice by the armed violence in the region. She described, ‘For four years, sir, [we were in the Grandstand] before we went here [to a transitory site]... Too long, sir. Our tent was flooded [by typhoon Yolanda], we stayed there’.

Giorgio Agamben claims that camps are ‘states of exceptions’, where individuals are denied rights and reduced to ‘bare life.’⁶⁵ Even though the movements of Iris, Poppy, and Hyacinth were not restricted, the requirement to register with the CSWDO and stay in the Grandstand to receive food rations and resettlement units left them with few options but to remain despite the imminent danger of dying from food insecurity, malnutrition, and communicable diseases. Their life in this IDP camp increased their vulnerability, since losing their homes entailed losing their livelihood systems. But this is not to say that they just waited for humanitarian assistance to come. While Iris and Poppy exercised their power as *bakwit* by

⁶⁴ Pronounced ‘buh-nig’, these are traditional handwoven mats used as sleeping mats or floor mats. Mass produced *banig* are made of plastic materials.

⁶⁵ G Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998. See also A Ramadan, ‘Spatialising the Refugee Camp’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol. 38, issue 1, 2013, pp. 65–77, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2012.00509.x>; O Bakewell, ‘Encampment and Self-Settlement’, in E Fiddian-Qasmiyeh *et al.* (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014.

leaving the camp, others like Hyacinth exercised her *bakwit* power by refusing to participate in some humanitarian projects for women's empowerment while in the Grandstand. Furthermore, when asked about the quality of humanitarian relief they received, Hyacinth simply laughed and said, *Wag nang madamot, sir* (Don't get greedy, sir) to avoid portraying herself as complaining and ungrateful.

IDPs who remained in the Grandstand used their creative *bakwit* power to get the most out of humanitarian assistance. This is exemplified by Rose who pooled in her familial resources to buy a cooking pot to make meals for children while the adults waited in line for food rations. She said, 'The children were already hungry because you had to stay in line for a long time. Then, my sister-in-law suggested that we buy something just for the children... We were able to buy a cooking pot... we had to prioritise the children, then we go in line for ourselves'. In other cases, IDPs who had no money to spend on anything either skipped meals or shared the little food rations they had to prioritise the nutrition of their older and younger family members. The informal support systems that poor Muslim IDPs developed in the Grandstand point to the collective orientation of *bakwit* power. The sharing of few resources with other members of displaced communities is 'not simply because it [is] perceived to be the morally right thing to do, but also because it [is] inevitable that they would need similar help from their community in the future.'⁶⁶

The experiences of largely Muslim Filipino IDPs in the Grandstand stood in stark contrast with some home-based IDPs with relatively better socioeconomic status. Daisy, for instance, expressed that while she appreciated the donations she received from co-workers and friends, she was also sceptical in receiving them in case it may undermine her autonomy. She said, 'Since I am not sure who some of the donated clothes belonged to, I only accepted donations from people I know'. Daisy also added that she would make sure to wash them before wearing. While Daisy associated the receiving of donations with vulnerability and suffering, and exercising agency for her was establishing livelihoods free from humanitarian assistance, not all home-based IDPs hold this view. Ivy, for example, willingly accepted the food supplies she received but redistributed them to other IDPs who needed them more, since she had remittances from her sister to rely on for support. What their stories illustrate is the different ways in which one's understanding of *bakwit* power can be informed by ethnic, religious, and classed identities.

⁶⁶ D Patterson, 'We Survive Together: Utilising Transnational Resources for Community Welfare in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya', *Anthropology Matters Journal*, vol. 20, issue 1, 2020, pp. 94–116, p. 115.

On Rebuilding Lives

A durable solution for IDPs is thought to be achieved when they ‘no longer have specific assistance and protection needs that are linked to their displacement’,⁶⁷ which typically involves return, local integration, or resettlement. Among these conventional solutions, return to and reintegration in the traditional communities of IDPs are the preferred outcomes advocated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).⁶⁸ However, the reliance on return as the viable, durable solution implies that forced migration is a physical problem that can only be resolved through ‘a restoration of order in their nation-states’ or communities.⁶⁹

For Jasmine, her intention to return was linked to her positive pre-conflict memories of home, which included engaging in financially rewarding activities. Prior to being displaced, Jasmine managed a *sari-sari* store (convenience store) that allowed her to earn income and fulfil her maternal obligations. Even though her store had eventually closed down after she was displaced, she was able to rebuild it through the financial assistance she received from her sibling. Jasmine’s *bakwit* power rests in her recognition that a durable solution to forced internal displacement goes beyond the physical reconstruction of communities or return. It also includes regaining previously disrupted daily routines and perception of safety in places of origin.⁷⁰

Accordingly, IDPs who lived in ground zero as informal settlers were either resettled elsewhere across the city, or like Rose, Poppy, Iris, and Hyacinth, were transferred to a transitory camp to await permanent resettlement. But since they have been displaced for over five years without any durable solutions, they are now in a situation of protracted displacement.⁷¹ Even though some of them have secured employment, they still feel unintegrated. This sentiment is shared

⁶⁷ K Long, ‘Rethinking “Durable” Solutions’, in E Fiddian-Qasmiyeh *et al.*

⁶⁸ Z C Collado, ‘Determinants of Return Intentions among Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) of Marawi City, Philippines’, *Development in Practice*, vol. 30, issue 1, 2020, pp. 113–124, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2019.1673320>.

⁶⁹ Long, p. 478.

⁷⁰ Collado; Y Su and L Le Dé, ‘Whose Views Matter in Post-disaster Recovery? A Case Study of “Build Back Better” in Tacloban City after Typhoon Haiyan’, *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, vol. 51, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2020.101786>.

⁷¹ J Milner ‘Protracted Refugee Situations’, in E Fiddian-Qasmiyeh *et al.*, p. 152; J Hyndman and W Giles, ‘Protracted Displacement: Living on the Edge’, in A Bloch and G Dona (eds.), *Forced Migration: Current Issues*, 1st edition, Routledge, 2018, p. 74.

by Hyacinth who now works as a custodian but keeps on wishing to return home. When asked if she still calls Zamboanga City home, Hyacinth expressed, ‘For me, I can’t do anything. We’re here, we’ll just call Zamboanga beautiful.’⁷² Such testament is not an inclination to surrender, but a recognition of her everyday *bakwit* power to find an end to her situation of protracted internal displacement.

Conclusion

The ability to move to cope with war is influenced by a number of factors. As conveyed in the stories of IDP women and gender diverse individuals in this paper, their trajectories of displacement varied significantly as they were shaped by their class, ethnicity, and religion. Their patterns of mobility were also influenced by their access to informational, financial, material, and social resources. They further involved available alternative housing arrangements in response to displacement and the geopolitical history of the region. In other words, the experiences of IDP women and gender diverse individuals point to the inherently unjust nature of displacement.

Home-based IDPs with some degree of economic privileges did not instantly leave their home during the siege, regardless of their proximity to the battlefield. Some had stronger reason to stay and safeguard their belongings. And when they did decide to leave, they had better options for where and how they could seek temporary shelter. Some also made frequent attempts to return home to retrieve their belongings. Although these actions may seem reckless, many of them understood the risk in delaying their evacuation and choosing to engage in this form of journey after displacement.

IDPs with limited means and information on how and where to move found shelter in evacuation camps. Although their options may seem undesirable, it does not completely negate their autonomy or lead to loss of dignity, as they still had control over their decision-making. The level of insecurity in the Grandstand made them deeply conscious of each other’s suffering. Muslim IDPs in the Grandstand formed informal support systems to address various concerns over food insecurity and malnutrition. Their demonstration of collective *bakwit* power was specific to the social, political, and cultural context of the Philippines, and depended on their complex identities and social locations.

⁷² See also R J Quintero and A Hari, ‘Queering Protracted Displacement: Lessons from Internally Displaced Persons in the Philippines’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 19, 2022, pp. 125–29, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201222199>.

The *bakwit* power of IDP women and gender diverse individuals in Zamboanga City was widely manifested. They calculated their situations at every step of the way by weighing the consequences their decisions would have on themselves and their families, even at the cost of enduring hardship or sacrificing personal desire. Some IDPs manoeuvred their way out of ground zero by foregrounding their identity, while those in the Grandstand avoided asking for better humanitarian assistance to prevent the risk of being portrayed as complaining and ungrateful. This brings us back to the situated, temporal, and relational nature of agency, which can ‘ebb and flow’ and not simply ‘increase throughout time’.⁷³ With the use of *bakwit* power, the paper recognises how stubbornness in itself is a form of agency that is grounded in local cultural context. At the same time, embracing IDPs’ agency does not romanticise their ability to improvise for solutions. As I have noted earlier, there is a danger in over-emphasising the agency of IDPs, as it may undermine their experiences of human rights violations and could lead to withdrawal of humanitarian support and protection. Nevertheless, *bakwit* power offers us with new ways of understanding the agency of displaced individuals outside of active and independent resistance against structural conditions,⁷⁴ and how agency is conceived through careful considerations of the past, present, and future.⁷⁵

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I would like to thank Amrita Hari for her multiple readings of my work while I was at Carleton University. I would also like to thank Philip Kelly and Lisa Davidson for giving written feedback on an earlier version of this paper. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers and editors of this special issue for a supportive publication experience. Finally, I am forever indebted to the women and gender diverse individuals in Zamboanga City who shared their stories with me. All errors remain my own.

Romeo Joe Quintero is a PhD student in Human Geography at York University, Toronto. His research interests lie around questions of prolonged displacement in urban areas of the southern Philippines. Email: jquin090@yorku.ca

⁷³ Showden, p. 19.

⁷⁴ Showden.

⁷⁵ U Ozkaleli, ‘Agency in Multiple Temporalities: Being Syrian Women, Becoming Widows and Refugees, Remaining Pious’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, vol. 89, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2021.102538>; Mahmood; A Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis*, University of California Press, 1990.