

Re-examining the Phenomenon of Homelessness During the COVID-19 Pandemic in the National Capital Region

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Abstract

The case study aims to take a closer look about homeless individuals in the cities of Quezon and Manila while the country is facing the COVID-19 pandemic. It re-examines the phenomena of homelessness in the middle of a pandemic, looking at the experience of Joel and Rosamay (not their real names). The author employed a qualitative research design which began with a single case study of a homeless family in Quezon City. After writing the case, the author conducted a focus group discussion (FGD) with other homeless individuals staying in Sto. Niño Parish in Tondo, Manila to corroborate the data from the case study. The author also participated in a stakeholder consultation conducted by the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) and Kariton Coalition, a group of individuals from various churches, civil society, and faith-based organizations campaigning for the rights of Homeless Street Families and Individuals (HSFIs). The author used the lens of structural social work and the perspective of neoliberalism in re-examining homelessness.

The author emphasizes that homeless individuals and families are among the marginalized sectors that were made vulnerable by the COVID-19 pandemic coupled by the militarized response of the Duterte administration and negligence to a health and social issue. The structural social worker practitioners are reminded to practice the following: 1) connecting people to needed resources, 2) changing social structures, where feasible, 3) helping service users negotiate problematic situations and 4) deconstructing sociopolitical discourse to reveal the relationship with individual struggles (Payne, 2005). Social workers are reminded to be critical of the social and political structures that pose as barriers to their respective clients, revealing struggles of their clients and influencing changes not only directed to the individual client but to the environmental structures that deters the potential of the client to change and improve their situation.

Families in street situations are among the most vulnerable sectors at present. They have a right to live in the city. It was not their choice to stay on the streets. It became their only option for survival given a political system that refuses to provide mechanisms and support for them to change their situations. It is incumbent, especially upon the social workers in Local Government Units (LGUs), to work with families in street situations in formulating programs and services that will start from a recognition of their dignity and their human rights as individuals and families.

Keywords: Homeless Street Families and Individuals, COVID-19 pandemic, structural social work, neoliberalism

Introduction

Of the estimated 106 million population of the Philippines, at least 4.5 million are homeless individuals, three million of whom are in Metro Manila (Fealtman, 2020). This data springs from the understanding that homelessness is primarily an urban phenomenon, considering the fact that land is more or less readily available in rural areas.

The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) conducted a survey of street dwellers in 2010. The DSWD survey results showed that there were 1,476 street dwellers in Manila City, including the members of the Badjao community. Visetpricha et al. (2015) argue that this group of people roaming the streets should not be included in the list since they can afford to rent for accommodation. In 2015, the DSWD Director for the National Capital Region estimated that there were 3,500 street-dwelling families in the cities of Manila and Quezon. As of 2018, Quezon City had a homeless population of at least 700 families and individuals living in public spaces such as parks and sidewalks.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the fore the plight of homeless Filipinos, especially when quarantine restrictions and lockdowns were put in place to control the spread of the virus. The militarized response of the Duterte administration—headed by the military, a sector whose expertise is neither epidemiology nor other health sciences (Imbong, 2021)—led to lockdowns and created militarized zones of control of cities. Poor residents such as homeless families became targets of punitive practices and expulsive policies (Ortega, 2016) leading to violation of their rights.

By sheer aspiration, having a home is the perpetual dream of homeless families. Yet, the government housing program is far from providing housing facilities for these homeless individuals. Similar to other social services, the government's housing program is dictated by the demands of capital and, in so doing, the process of the national shelter program is trapped within the neoliberal mold. Housing has become a commodity that remains inaccessible to the poor, especially the homeless families.

Philippine Government Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

In January 2020, the first two cases of COVID-19 positive patients were reported in the Philippines. Both were tourists, one of them died. Local transmission of the disease was reported in February 2020 and then, when the number of cases spiked, the national government announced a lockdown on March 16, 2020, placing the National Capital Region (NCR) under Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ). The national government called for physical distancing and urged residents to stay in their own homes. But where would the Homeless Street Families and Individuals (HSFIs) stay to protect themselves from the virus without violating government policies and protocols? How were the HSFIs treated by the national government in the midst of a pandemic?

The Duterte administration, known for waging the war on drugs, also responded to the pandemic as the war on the unseen enemy, the COVID-19 virus. The lockdown directive meant home quarantine for all, suspension of public transportation, strict regulation of food distribution and of essential health services, and heightened presence of fully-armed uniformed personnel in strategically positioned checkpoints—a militarization of the government's

response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Yusingco, 2020). This militarized response to a health crisis was followed by cases of human rights violations ranging from police attacks against activists and the detention of relief workers, to arrests of individuals who violated the “stay at home” policy of the Duterte administration (Pizarro & Yusingco, 2020). To further legitimize the militarized response, the Duterte administration created the narrative of the *pasaway*. In the context of lockdowns, the term *pasaway* referred to people violating government-imposed health protocols (i.e., staying inside their homes) who were seen as virus spreaders and became the bane of the government’s pandemic response (Hapal, 2021). Things became more repressive when President Duterte said violators of quarantine protocols and lockdown measures would also be shot.

The pandemic response of the Duterte administration was based on the policy of exclusion—marginalizing groups from political, social, and economic processes on the basis of their class. Quarantine violators were not treated equally. A case in point. Dorothy Espejo, a 69-year-old homeless grandmother, who, after allegedly shouting expletives at barangay officials who called to her as she slept on the streets of Manila, was jailed for resistance and disobedience to authority, with possible imprisonment of up to six months and a fine of PhP100,000.00. On the other hand, Sen. Aquilino “Koko” Pimentel III, was confirmed to have been COVID-19 positive and was expected to observe strict protocols on self-quarantine. Yet, the senator breached not only these protocols but the ECQ itself by rushing his pregnant wife to the hospital, thus potentially endangering his wife and his unborn child, as well as all the health workers at the hospital that he came into contact with during that time. The senator’s reckless action forced the hospital personnel he came into contact with to self-quarantine. Obviously, this contributed to a reduction in the number of available health workers in a country that was in dire need of nurses, doctors, and other health workers (Imbong, 2020). Espejo was seen as a quarantine violator and *pasaway* who was eventually charged and imprisoned with the belief that imprisoning her was a way to keep everyone safe; while Sen. Pimentel, who also breached quarantine protocols, called for compassion and was not imprisoned despite violation of the protocols in place.

In the absence of decent housing where they can protect themselves from the dangers of a contagious virus, the homeless can merely secure a night’s rest on exposed sidewalks making themselves most vulnerable to the threat itself, negating the very notion of quarantine. This situation of homelessness worsened as demolitions of informal settlements continued despite the declaration of a national health emergency (Imbong, 2020). Local authorities ordered the closure of centers providing shelter and food to street dwellers for not observing physical distancing. Such policies placed the homeless in extremely vulnerable situations.

The Department of Budget and Management (DBM) reported that, as of December 31, 2021, a total of PhP690.26 billion had been released to continually support the COVID-19 response programs of various implementing agencies. The government had obligated a total of PhP637.97 billion (92.4%) and disbursed PhP570.04 billion (89.4%). The Bayanihan to Heal as One Act or RA 11469 was also enacted granting the President additional authority to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. Bayanihan 1 had an allotment of PhP387.93 billion of which PhP369.08 billion was obligated, while Bayanihan 2 had an allotment of PhP214.12 billion of which PhP204.07 was also obligated (DBM, 2021). There was no budget in both Bayanihan 1 and 2 allocated for the homeless families.

Methodology

The author employed a qualitative research design which began with a single case study of a homeless family in Quezon City. After writing the case, the author conducted a focus group discussion (FGD) with other homeless individuals staying in Sto. Niño Parish in Tondo, Manila to corroborate the data from the case study. To deepen the author's understanding of the context of the aggregate data from the case study and the FGD, she participated in a stakeholder consultation conducted by the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) and Kariton Coalition, a group of individuals from various churches, civil society, and faith-based organizations campaigning for the rights of HSFIs. The stakeholder consultation focused on the review of the CHR Joint Memorandum Circular to propose for immediate and long-term programs for the benefit of the HSFIs. The input and discussion from the stakeholder consultation supported the findings from the case study and the FGD.

Framework for Analysis

Understanding homelessness

The CHR, through an August 2021 advisory on the rights of persons experiencing homelessness and destitution during pandemic, defines homeless street dwellers as having a very loose community network, which differentiates them from slum dwellers who live in a tighter network. The same advisory also clarified the rights of persons experiencing homelessness and destitution against the pandemic and served to remind the national government of the increasing vulnerabilities experienced by our HSFIs during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was a call for immediate action to ensure that their concerns were appropriately addressed (CHR, 2021).

The CHR advisory cites Leilani Farha, former Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing, and her three-dimensional approach in defining homelessness. The first dimension addresses the absence of home in terms of both its physical structure and its social aspects. The second dimension considers homelessness as a form of systemic discrimination and social exclusion, whereby "the homeless" become a social group subject to stigmatization. The third dimension recognizes homeless people as resilient in the struggle for survival and dignity and potential agents of change as rights holders (CHR, 2021).

Furthermore, other studies have also shown that reasons for people living in the streets are far more complex, whether it be due to homeless peoples' own decision or because they are forced due to circumstances present in their lives.

Rights of homeless families violated during the pandemic

The right to food is an inclusive right. It is not simply a right to a minimum ration of calories, proteins, and other specific nutrients. It is a right to all nutritional elements that a person needs to live a healthy and active life, and to the means to access them (OHCHR, 2010). The right to food can also be described as follows: the right to adequate food is realized when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, always has physical and economic access to adequate food or means for its procurement (OHCHR, 2010).

According to Joel (not his real name), in the morning, he would look for ways to make ends meet. “*Susubukan ko muna dumiskarte ng makakain ng mag-iina ko. Kung minsan ay naglalako ako ng isda. Dito ko na minsan kinukuha yung pang-ulam namin. Pagdating ng ala-una ay susunduin ko na yung mga anak ko sa eskwela at didiretso kami sa QC Circle para makapang-limos sa mga nagpipicnic.*” (I will try my best to make sure that my wife and children are able to eat. There are times when I sell fish; I sometimes get our daily meals from what I sell. By 1:00 p.m. I fetch my children from school, and we stay at the Q.C. Circle where we ask for alms from people having their picnic there) (J. Toledo, personal interview, May 19, 2021). By 7:00 pm, they would return to a jeepney owned by a friend to rest and sleep.

The right to livelihood

The right to an adequate standard of living requires, at a minimum, that everyone shall enjoy the necessary subsistence rights: adequate food and nutrition, clothing, housing, and the necessary conditions of care when required. The essential point is that everyone shall be able, without shame and without unreasonable obstacles, to be a full participant in ordinary, everyday interaction with other people. Thus, people should be able to enjoy their basic needs in conditions of dignity. No one should have to live in conditions whereby the only way to satisfy their needs is by degrading themselves or depriving themselves of their basic freedoms, such as through begging, prostitution, or forced labor (Icelandic Human Rights Center, n.d.).

In 2019, the Quezon City government formed the Task Force Disiplina (TFD) to clear sidewalks of illegal structures and to ensure that no homeless individuals would roam the streets. When the pandemic started in 2020, the TFD was directed to enforce health safety protocols in public spaces, a task that involved confiscating the carts of sidewalk vendors and demolishing the makeshift tents of individuals and families living in the streets. Calling such draconian steps as measures to “rescue” street dwellers amid the pandemic, the TFD forcibly brought the homeless to “temporary shelters” such as the Amoranto Sports Complex and Quezon Memorial Circle.

Lens of Structural Social Work

Structural social work is part of a critical, progressive tradition that has been concerned with the broad socio-economic and political dimensions of society, especially the effects of capitalism, and the impact of these influences in creating unequal relations amongst individuals (Weinberg, 2013). It is focused on examining the interplay between the agency of individuals and structures, particularly the barriers brought about by institutions that limit and discriminate individuals based on class, race, gender, ability, religion, economic means, etc.

Obviously, the hegemonic influence of neoliberalism that has shaped the contours of Philippine society is also evident in how the government deals with the problem of housing for the poor, especially the street dwellers.

Neoliberalism is a perspective that champions the market as the prime regulator of economic activity and seeks to limit the intervention of the State in economic life to a minimum (Bello, 2009). Neoliberalism in the Philippines was introduced in the form of various structural programs imposed by the World Bank in the early 1980s. It advocates for capitalist-led and investment-oriented developments and champions for the extension of market rationalities of

competitiveness into social life and relations while minimizing state and individual choice as a means of guaranteeing human welfare (Ortega, 2016). This perspective resulted in policies and projects that are not only our country's market competitiveness on a global scale, it has also legitimized public-private partnerships and left public services to non-governmental organizations; privatization of public services such as real estate development was encouraged to be placed under the control of the elite (Ortega, 2016). Real-estate development is seen as proof of a city's productive economy that will yield availability of jobs, an increase in revenue/taxes, and the promotion of tourism while displacing the urban poor and homeless families that are seen as eye sores in the development trajectory of cities.

Even the National Shelter Program (NSP) as the guiding framework of the Philippine Government in addressing the housing needs is market driven. The NSP highlights the Resettlement Program and the Community Mortgage Program (CMP) as being targeted to assist the lowest 30% of households.

The impact assessment of the NSP showed that the households that become beneficiaries of the programs are those who were formerly informal settlers and not part of the lowest 3 income deciles (UP Planades, 2018). Despite questions on the target beneficiaries for the government housing programs, the national housing agencies such as that of the National Housing Authority (NHA) and Socialized Housing Finance Corporation (SHFC) has continued to build housing structures and low-rise buildings and promoted partnerships and alliances with the private sector such as that of private developers. The promotion of mixed-use housing to promote access to livelihood is but a typical actualization of neoliberal planning that is based on the promotion of an economic agenda that enhances the city's competitiveness and attract investment (Recio, 2021) despite failing to reach the families within the lowest 3 income deciles and that of homeless individuals and families.

The current Marcos administration's priority program is the Pambansang Pabahay Pilipino Program (4PH) with an ambitious target of constructing one million housing units within six years. It aims to build 10- to 30-storey housing units in highly urbanized cities and four-storey low-rise buildings in urban and urbanizing areas. This target focuses on the number of housing units which can reduce the housing need which exceeds 6.5 million units (4PH Operations Manual, 2023). The 4PH outlines alliances of the Department of Housing, Settlement and Urban Development (DHSUD) and private developers to produce the target housing units without discussion on subsidizing for the cost of these units to make it affordable to the target population that needs the housing units.

Moreover, structural theory posits that the conditions of the structures benefit those in power for them to maintain their privilege at the expense of a marginalized group. Structural social work theory begins from a conflict, rather than an order perspective (Mullaly, 1997). The theory regards society as composed of groups with conflicting interests who compete for resources, power, and the imposition of their own ideological views of the world. In this perspective, social problems are more the result of "defective rules" which pathologize those who are marginalized (Mullaly, 1997) and the consequence of institutional arrangements which maintain social hierarchies, rather than faulty socialization of individuals.

The process of degrading a person's status from being a renter to being homeless is also expressed by Joel. Sharing the same predicament with homeless individuals, he also experienced

the clearing operations carried out by the TFD before the pandemic.

He and his wife, together with their four children, stayed in a temporary shelter at the Quezon City Memorial Circle. At the time of the case study, his eldest child was 11 years old, while the youngest was two. Previously, they had been renting a small room in a community beside the Central Market along Kalayaan Avenue. *“Maliit lang ang inuupahan namin na kwarto noon. Hindi nga kami pwede tumanggap ng bisita. Nagbabayad kami ng Php 2,500 kada buwan para sa maliit na kwarto na may matarik na hagdan. Minsan na ngang nahulog ang anak ko doon pero ito ang espasyo na pwede naming tirahan.”* (Our family was renting a small room. We couldn't even accept visitors. We paid Php 2,500.00 per month for this small room with steep stairs. There was one time one of my children fell from the stairs. But this is the space that we could live in.) (J. Toledo, personal interview, May 19, 2021).

For two years, Joel's family stayed in that small room. He supported them with the little he earned from selling fish, serving as a parking attendant in a nearby establishment, and collecting and selling recyclable scraps. In 2018, Joel became sick and could not work. Unable to pay rent for the month, he and his family were evicted by the lessee. Joel preferred to comply instead of appealing or having a confrontation. So, he and his family left. Joel built a *kariton* or pushcart using discarded pieces of wood and old tarpaulins to provide a roof over their heads.

As observed and stated earlier, the military mindset that steered the government's response to the pandemic expectedly led to punitive actions against perceived violations of health protocols. It was fundamentally an anti-homeless people measure. In 2019, Joel's *kariton* was dismantled by the TFD in one of the sidewalk clearing operations led by the Metropolitan Manila Development Authority (MMDA). No one in the demolition team cared to talk to him and his wife before taking their *kariton* apart, unaware that one of his children was inside it. *“Ilang damit lamang ang naisalba namin dahil tuluyan na nilang sinira yung kariton namin. Pati birth certificate ng mga anak namin ay hindi na namin nakuha.”* (We were only able to save a few clothes since the demolition team destroyed our *kariton*. Even the birth certificates of our children, we were not able to save) (J. Toledo, personal interview, May 19, 2021).

Without any means to provide shelter for his family, Joel asked one of his jeepney driver friends if he and his family could stay in the jeepney at night. They were allowed to do so on the condition that they wake up by 4:30 a.m. and leave the jeepney before sunrise. *“Kailangan namin linisin yung jeep at ibaba yung gamit namin para maihanda na yung jeep sa pagpasada.”* (We needed to clean the jeepney and unload our things, so the jeepney would be ready for its trips) (J. Toledo, personal interview, May 19, 2021). His family would then spend the day in one of the waiting sheds along Kalayaan Avenue, while his four children would go to school. Joel and his family would go to the gasoline station across the street to use the bathroom.

Obviously, living on the streets had put Joel's family in danger. In one incident, a drunk homeless man barged into the jeepney, and caused a scene. Joel asked him to leave. The incident reached the barangay council. The jeepney owner installed a rear door with a latch to provide protection for Joel and his family. Despite their situation, his children continued attending school, with one of them having been accelerated to the next grade. Joel even expressed that, even if his family was on the streets, he made sure that his children continued to go to school.

The HSFIs staying outside the Sto. Niño Parish in Tondo, Manila shared that they had been staying in the streets prior to the pandemic. Then, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, they experienced maltreatment from the local government unit (LGU) of Manila. Rosamay narrated that, during the lockdowns, they were inhumanely treated by the Manila City personnel. “*Sa halip na kami ay tinulungan, dinampot kami ng mga tauhan ng LGU, sinira nila ang aming kariton na may kakaunting gamit namin at nawalay sa aking anak na dinala sa Boys Town at ako naman ay nanatili ng ilang araw sa City Hall*” (Instead of helping us, the LGU personnel destroyed our cart and our things, I got separated from my child who was brought to Boys Town while I stayed for some days in the City Hall). (Rosamay, personal interview, August 21, 2022).

Joel is one of the many families that experienced how the pandemic exacerbated an already inhumane situation, from being renters of a small space to being families living on the streets and being the so-called *pasaways* in the government’s war against COVID-19. He and his family became collateral damage in a situation where they should have been receiving assistance and services from the government.

In the narrative of Joel and Rosamay, the LGUs served as an extension of the government structure that further marginalizes homeless families who are seen as passive recipients of assistance, the *pasaways* of the government’s response to the pandemic, by not providing attention to the lived experiences of the homeless families. They are lumped together as a group that is further stigmatized and marginalized by government structures and their response.

The Alignment of the Housing Program within a Neoliberal Mold Forces the Homeless to Fend for Themselves

The government’s response for housing is basically clothed with tokenism.

After losing their *kariton* and with the pandemic forcing the homeless off the streets, Joel agreed to move to a temporary shelter at the Quezon Memorial Circle. He thought it would be safer for his family to stay there as strict lockdown measures were being enforced. With them were at least 500 homeless individuals staying in open air tents. Although the park was spacious, Joel felt they were detained. “*Parang nasa loob ng kulungan sa loob ng Quezon Circle. Kapag bagong pasok ay tinatanong kung anong pangkat ka. May mga insidente rin ng nakawan at pag-aaway. Pero nakisama ako sa kanilang lahat para makaiwas sa gulo.*” (We are like prisoners inside the Quezon Circle. If you were new arrivals, they would ask you what group or pangkat you belong to. There were also incidents of theft and quarrels. I befriended everyone just to avoid trouble) (J. Toledo, personal interview, May 19, 2021).

The “rescued” homeless received meals and hygiene items that had been donated to the local government. There were two months during which canned goods and sardines poured in every day as donations from government and private groups. Joel learned that some sold the relief goods they received to be able to buy drugs. Those who wanted to feel “high” would mix donated rubbing alcohol with water and drink it. Individuals staying in the shelter were allowed to leave only if they had a gate pass and they had to return within the day. If one returned the next day, he or she was required to stay in a quarantine facility for observation of COVID-19 symptoms.

The Quezon City Social Services Development Department (QCSSDD) supervised the temporary shelter. Each homeless individual or family had an assigned social worker who would assist them in claiming the assistance from the city government. Joel as a fish seller, was able to receive Php 5,000.00 from the city government. It took him seven months to finally receive the mandated government emergency cash assistance under the Social Amelioration Program or SAP. He said that his family was supposed to receive Php 16,000 but he got only half of the said amount. According to the social worker assigned to them, the other half was channeled to the services provided in the temporary shelter. Joel and his family stayed at the Quezon Memorial Circle for seven months, hoping that they would qualify for the city government's housing program for the homeless. But this did not happen.

During their stay in the temporary shelter, Joel and his family frequently experienced severe stomach aches and loose bowel movement. The shelter, however, did not have medicines for these medical conditions. The SSDD had to order medicines, and those who needed them would be lucky if they received the medicines within a week. Joel and his family did not receive any up to the day they left the shelter. On their last day, he had to sign documents, one of them claiming that his family received a certain amount of money which he said they never got. His family was among those who were given a pack of groceries, while others received cash. Although life on the streets in Metro Manila was not easy for his family, Joel did not consider returning to Naga City in Camarines Sur because finding work would be difficult and he no longer had relatives living there. *“Kapag bumalik kami sa probinsiya, ang magiging trabaho ko lamang doon ay pedicab driver at wala ang mga kamag-anak ko na maaring tumulong sa amin.”* (If we will go back to the province, the available work for me there will be as a pedicab driver, and we have no relatives that can help us) (J. Toledo, personal interview, May 19, 2021).

The experiences of many homeless individuals and families are outright dehumanizing. The government's approach is to force them to keep quiet and deliberately remove them from the visual landscape of the population that pretends that homelessness does not exist and is not an issue (Rothe & Collins, 2016). This experience was further magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic as highlighted by the experience of Joel and others.

Social Work's Commitment to Social Justice

A structural approach to social work can be viewed as a practice that acknowledges the role of social structures in producing and maintaining in-equality and personal hardship and the importance of offering concrete help to those in need or difficulty (Lundy, 2011). Using the lens of structural social work, it also highlights the critical human rights approach which upholds the following commitments (Nipperess, 2016):

- Working towards greater social justice and equality for those people who are oppressed and marginalized within society;
- Working alongside and with oppressed and marginalized people in a “bottom-up” rather than “top-down” approach;
- Incorporating an analysis of power that helps to explain the oppression and marginalization of vulnerable groups and nature;
- Interrogating dominant assumptions and beliefs about human rights; and
- Working towards emancipatory personal, cultural, and social change.

Looking at the experience of Joel and his family, they experienced the first and second dimensions of homelessness before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. This made them accept the response of the local government units to the point of experiencing abuse of their basic human rights.

Social workers are in the position to further humanize social problems and to politicize the responses for homeless families. Being at the frontline, the social work profession is ideally situated to bring to light the struggles of the marginalized sectors such as the homeless families, provide for their immediate needs, and at the same time work with them in responding to their long-term needs including housing. This requires the social workers to continuously engage in consciousness-raising activities and the critical reflection process wherein the lived experiences of the oppressed and the marginalized are discussed, sorting through the myriad issues and linking these to power relations with the end view of embedding the political content of the analysis. With this, the profession engages in meaning making and provides space for the marginalized, such as the homeless families, to actively engage in changing their narratives. Beginning with lived experiences means working to ensure that these voices are not only heard but are valued throughout the organization in which the social worker is employed (Nipperess, 2016).

Homeless People Fighting Back

While inside the temporary shelter, Joel and his family met Pastor Tim Ngo and Camille Ibañes of a group called Street Believers. Joel's wife, Rachel, was among those who underwent a short seminar on soap making which could serve as their source of income. In October 2020, Joel and his family decided to leave the halfway shelter and participate in the reintegration process of Street Believers. His family moved to the halfway house of Street Believers in Caloocan City where Joel was offered a work opportunity as a construction worker at a project in Quezon City. Street Believers also helped with the education of the children and the livelihood of his wife, Rachel.

Unfortunately, Joel was not able to fulfill the condition of the reintegration program which prohibits participants from drinking alcohol. Street Believers dropped his family out of the program, but still helped find a place for him and his family and shouldered their rent for the first two months. While this case study was being prepared, Joel and his family were renting a small house in Pook Arboretum, a working-class community in Barangay UP Campus.

Homeless individuals and families were greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and they were further made to feel ostracized by the militarized response of the Duterte administration and being on the receiving end of the State's criminal negligence with regard to the homeless. Tranum (2021) asked the question if the phenomena of homelessness can be treated like a pandemic. She proposed a three-pronged approach for programs focusing on affordable housing, support programs, and prevention. The city attracts rural poor by offering opportunities to escape from rural poverty (Ghosh, 2020). In the city, they work in low-end jobs but they remain too poor to be able to access formal housing, forcing them to live in informal settlements as renters or in the streets as homeless. Their conditions are further in peril in the midst of the implementation of neoliberal policies that restructure the cityscapes by building private properties and gated communities that result in their eviction. If homelessness were to be treated as a pandemic, there should be a shift in the role of government and a view of housing

the homeless as a social investment and promoting their right to the city. An urban sociologist Robert Park wrote that this right to the city means not merely a right of access to what already exists, but a right to change it after their heart's desire (Harvey, 2008 p.1). The concept has been used as a vehicle for social inclusion. It suggests that marginalized people not only have the right to inhabit a city but also the right to design, reshape, and transform it (Vaddiraju, 2016).

Support programs must be in place in order for homeless individuals and families to be able to access housing programs, instead of excluding them and turning a blind eye to their current conditions. Just as Joel mentioned, all he wanted was for he and his family to have a house that would keep them safe, but their economic means does not permit them to avail of housing programs. Access to housing programs also calls for the current system to provide support for the families to keep their homes. Thus, there is a need for government to invest in affordable housing, while also regulating the housing market (Tranum, 2021).

Joel is only one of the many homeless individuals struggling to keep his family safe. Having a house that he and his family can call their own is a dream that Joel hopes to make into reality. He has friends now residing in Bulacan and paying a monthly amortization of Php 200. Joel is willing to pay Php 800/month for a housing unit within Quezon City. "*Hindi ko talaga pinangarap na tumira kami ng pamilya ko sa kalsada. Nagkataon lang na walang-wala ako at wala rin akong makapitan. Kaya sa kalsada kami nanirahan. Sana magkatotoo yung pagkakaroon namin ng bahay—yung tunay na pabahay para sa mahirap. Magkaroon ng lugar na matatawag na akin para sa mga anak ko, para lumaki sila na mayroong matatawag na tahanan.*" (I did not aspire for me and my family to live on the streets. It just happened that I had nothing and did not have anyone to ask for help. I hope one day my dream of having my own house for my family will be a reality—the real housing for the poor. To have a place that I can call my own for my children, so they will grow up having a place they can call home).

Conclusion

Social work is not merely a conduit of government services. It also looks at the dynamics of the homeless family and the environment, and how the current government and organizational structures deter homeless families in accessing services—and then connecting them to resources in order for them to solve their problematic situation.

Structural social work practitioners are reminded to fulfill the following: 1) connecting people to needed resources, 2) changing social structures, where feasible, 3) helping service users negotiate problematic situations, and 4) deconstructing sociopolitical discourse to reveal the relationship with individual struggles (Payne, 2005). Social workers are reminded to be critical of the social and political structures that pose as barriers to their respective clients, discern their struggles, and influence changes not only directed to the individual client but to the environmental structures that deter the client from changing and improving his/her situation.

Families in street situations are among the most vulnerable sectors at present. The national and local government units should work together to provide a holistic approach in responding to their needs. These families have a right to live in the city. It was not their choice to stay on the streets. It became their only option for survival given a political system that refuses to provide mechanisms and support for them to change their situation.

It is incumbent, especially upon the social workers in LGUs, to work with families in street situations in formulating programs and services that will start from a recognition of their dignity and their human rights as individuals and families.

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