



# AMERICAN JOURNAL OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES (AJDS)

VOLUME 1 ISSUE 1 (2023)



PUBLISHED BY  
**E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA**

## A Phenomenological Study on Young Women's Resilience Strategies Amidst Pandemic

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### Article Information

**Received:** March 22, 2023

**Accepted:** April 03, 2023

**Published:** April 17, 2023

### Keywords

*COVID-19 Pandemic,  
Non-Skilled Workers,  
Resilience, Young Women*

### ABSTRACT

Women are significantly affected by COVID-19 pandemic. The sexist and discriminatory practices and roles have even burdened them. With the challenges and problems that they encountered; this paper analyzed how the lives of young women have been affected during the pandemic. It also explores on their recovery and resilience strategies by highlighting their experiences and work activities to help sustain the basic needs of their families. Using gender lens to studying women's lives and experiences, a qualitative design of face-to face, in-depth interviews was employed. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to analyze the data. The study group consisted of young women aged 24-29 (students and non-students) and were previously part of a non-skilled work sector who lost their jobs during the pandemic. Findings were presented according to time frame; their lived experiences before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. Three main themes were drawn from the findings: the trend of social media, social capital, and the personality of women. The result indicated that COVID-19 pandemic had triggered the preconceived notion of gender roles. Productivity and sustainability have even dwindled. Although challenged by work restrictions, young women have shown different kinds of resilience and coping strategies to provide the needs of the family especially of their children. Women's strategies and mechanisms have debunked the stereotypical knowledge and preconceived notions about women. Unlike the notion that men work for the family, women are in fact active and responsible agents of economic development.

### INTRODUCTION

Several studies established that within the category of internally displaced people (IDP), women are the vulnerable within the vulnerable. They face and resist all types of shocks, for example, conflict and natural disaster, among others. The studies account for displacement-related vulnerabilities such as access to employment, housing, land and property, and food (Majidi and Hennion, 2014). Refugee and displaced women put their children's welfare in the first place to provide them with better opportunities in the social, cultural, linguistic, economic, and political environment (Moreyra, 2020). Covid-19 pandemic, for instance, has brought a different level of stress and disorder between men and women. Vulnerability and resilience are shaped by gender in different ways (Rodriguez, 2021). As affirmed by Moreyra (2020), people who suffer marginalization and discrimination are the women who are most vulnerable to their negative impact.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Given challenging issues being encountered by women, this paper sheds light on their lives, experiences, and resilience strategies. Researches (Parlak, Cakiroglu, Gul, 2021; Luthar, Ebbert and Kumar, 2021) have exposed the strong personality of women, thus empowering them. This is further strengthened by the provision of the 1987 Constitution that recognizes the role of women in nation-building. The role of women and their capacity building deserve a scholarly attention especially now that a new

paradigm of thinking about women resilience, recover, and designing emergency management response have emerged. In light of strengthening women participation in governance, policies that empower women, known as the "Forward Looking Strategies to the Year 2000" were framed. Many of these policies were subsequently adopted to strengthen the role of women "towards sustainable and equitable development" (Naganag, 2014). Nonetheless, these policies were then promoted by various countries. In the Philippines, there is an increasing recognition on the role of women. This could be manifested by the country's Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Gender and Development (GAD) approach that deal with the relevant gender-responsive policies and programs in the forestry sector (USAID, 2014). However, despite these policies and programs, more actions need to be done. Meanwhile, many researches were framed from gender perspectives. While there is an increasing recognition and advocacy on the important role of women in researches, still most were just in the form of writing (Naganag, 2014). Putting the women in the mainstream necessitates effort, but paying attention on women who lost their jobs necessitates deeper understanding. Gendered imbalances could still be witnessed during pandemic due to vulnerabilities, capabilities, resources and social economic status. As the United Nations Development Program (UNDP, 2010) explains, "Gender determines what is expected, allowed and valued in a woman or a man in a given context. It determines opportunities, responsibilities

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and resources, as well as powers associated with being male and female. Gender also defines the relationships between women and men and girls and boys, as well as the relationships between women and those between men” (UNDP, 2010:1).

With the challenges and problems that were encountered, this paper aimed to explore on the lived experiences of young women who have lost during the pandemic. It further intended to analyze the recovery and resilience strategies by highlighting their experiences and work activities in order to help sustain the basic needs of their families. In the context of this study, the term resilience adopts that of Gantner (2012) who defined resilience as “people who have the ability to recover readily from illness, depression, defeat, or other kinds of adversity.” On the other hand, low skilled work refers to “works that require little or no experience or training to do, these positions do not require the workers to have obtained any post-secondary degree or credential” (NEDA, 2020).

This research was guided by gender lens as framework in studying women’s lived experiences especially in their conditions having lost their jobs amidst pandemic. The framework means “working to make gender visible in social phenomena; asking if, how, and why social processes standards, and opportunities differ systematically for men and women” (Howard *et al.*, 2019).

## METHOD

The study group consisted of young women aged 24-29 (students and non-students) and were previously part of a non-skilled work sector who have lost their jobs during the pandemic. For ethical considerations, pseudonyms were used to label each participant. A qualitative design of face-to face, in-depth interviews was employed. In a

semi-structured interview, the researcher made use of an interview guide with prepared themes and concepts that are to be asked to the respondents (Scott and Garner, 2013). One important characteristic of a semi-structured interview is that “it can reflect awareness that individuals understand the world in varying ways” (Berg and Lune, 2012). Since it is the aim to explore on the lived experiences of women, the main themes of the interview schedule highlight practices, activities and strategies of young women in the recovery from loss of job due to pandemic. To analyze the data, this study utilized interpretative phenomenological analysis. The patterns and variations of behavior were interpreted using the process of coding qualitative data. These data include field notes, audio recordings, and interview responses. In the process of analyzing, the data were organized according to “conceptual categories” and were classified in terms of its recurring themes and concepts (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The profile of the respondents showed that the age of the participants ranging from 24 years old to 29 implied that that they were at the beginning of their work path. It must be noted that in the Philippines, the legal age is 18, hence, citizens could only legally work at the age of 18. As such, it was the intent of this study to limit its focus on women who were as low-skilled workers due to the fact that these kinds of work did not give them the tenure of security. In this manner, it will open an avenue to assess the resiliency of women.

Table below shows the previous non-skilled works of the participants, pseudonyms were used for anonymity purposes.

**Table 1:** Previous non-skilled works of the participants

	Maria	Clara	Angela	Kristina	Diana
Age	24	29	24	25	25
Former Job	Cashier at Tutorial Learning Center	Call Center Agent	Salon Expert	Fast food Crew	School Cleaner
Studying	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

## Economic Resources

All of these young women affirmed that they could regularly buy the basic needs of the family. For instance, Clara who lived in Nueva Vizcaya, worked as call center agent in Baguio City (6-7-hour bus ride) affirmed that there were many opportunities before the pandemic. She had the opportunity to do part-time jobs when not in work. Her work has been a great help in the provision of the needs of her 1-year-old child, essentially for the milk and diaper. Other than the provision of food and daily needs, the rental of boarding house had also been a burden in their finances with her husband. However, she explained that despite all these financial obligations, they were able to sustain it with the help of her husband. As Clara explains “*sa pagtratrabho sa Baguio, iyong mga opportunities ay malaking tulong sa gastos lalo na sa aking anak*

*lalo at bata pa. Kaya malaking tulong na din iyon kasi nga di pa nakapababay.*” Even without the pandemic, Clara had already shown her strength and resilience as implied by the sacrifices of not being with her very young child just to provide food on the table.

Clara’s case is an illustration of women empowerment. She is a manifestation that woman can be emancipated from the society’s gender role. She was able to unbox the expected role that a woman has to care for the child at home. It does not however mean to disregard the role of motherhood. As such, being a mother can also mean being away from home. Meanwhile, Angela as salon expert, proudly expressed that before pandemic, the salon where she was working had many customers, hence, gaining adequate pay not to mention the “*rake*” outside of the salon. It includes her being organizer in wedding,

baptism, festival and any other occasions. Meanwhile, Kristina who was a fast-food crew claimed “*sapat na ang kinikita para sa pamilya*” with her husband and a five-year old daughter in the family.

Basically, their daily wages, together with their husbands, were allotted for the daily needs of the family. For the food, kitchen needs, milk and diaper of the children. On the other hand, one respondent, who is a breadwinner of the family, allotted her income for the education of her high school and college siblings. As such, the use of their daily income manifests the importance of economic resources for the wellbeing of the family.

### Women's Personality

The participants revealed that no one should have the right to complain this pandemic season. As Maria proudly claimed, “*hindi na uso ang maarte sa panabon ngayon.*” This implies that women are most likely to be fastidious in making a living because they are “women.” Instead, she further claimed that she would do anything that she could to help sustain the family's needs including the monthly electric bills. It was really hard for Clara especially that even the husband was laid-off from the department store where he was working. Further, she expressed her sadness and frustrations that they sometimes experienced not eating a meal.

Angela experienced the same thing. She came to a point that there was no food in the table. And that, she was grateful enough that there were canned goods and noodles given by the government, but still not enough. Such experience has in fact challenged and motivated her to be resourceful and determined. Just like what Carla expressed, Angela illustrated how resources, such as access to education and regular jobs, are important in the sustainability of basic needs. With the meager resources, her *sipag*, *tiyaga*, and *diskarte* connote resilience and strategies. Nevertheless, these are instrumentalities to recover from the loss of jobs.

### The Trends of Using Social Media

With the loss of job, Clara has tried every kind of work and strategies. Since the movement of people are restricted, it was she together with her husband who sold *ukay-ukay* (used clothes). She also made use of the social media (i.e., FB post and live) to sell her items. The use of social media, most particularly Facebook, is becoming more and more important. Prior to pandemic, FB pages were primarily used for entertainment but nowadays, it has become more of a necessity. Majority of the people used to have FB account since this is the most-friendly and most convenient social media platforms. At the onset of pandemic, other than FB's use of communicating people, it became a means to gain income. All of the respondents have made use of FB live to sell various kinds of products such used clothes, shoes, bags and even foods. Indeed, due to lockdowns where movement of the people has been restricted, social media platforms became essential for women who were at home doing both living and domestic chores.

### Social Capital

Social Capital, in general constitutes social networks of the individuals to collaborate and work efficiently with others in pursuit of collective goals. It entails the ideas of trust, mutuality and reciprocity which may eventually lead to the betterment of individuals, groups, and society (Carroll, 2001). The concept in this study focuses on the functions of social networks, mutual trust between individual and groups, and social norms such as obligation and willingness toward mutually beneficial collective action. In the context of this study, the main goal of the society is to recover and to address the daily needs of the family.

In times of pandemic, the worth of our families, neighbors and the community members as a whole is recognized. In fact, in one of the studies, sociologists have affirmed that people opted to seek assistance from their families, friends, and networks rather than asking support from the government and formal service providers (Australian Red Cross, 2012). Just like the respondents, they have seen the value of others. In her narrative, Diana the fast-food crew, accounted that her sister-in-law taught her how to sell a betel nut in their village and nearby barangays. Maria and Angela on the other hand, had also practiced the so-called RIPA. This is a term to a raffle game in exchange not of money but in a form of viand, usually meat or beef. The viand as prize indicates that food matters most than money. Mainly because, even if a person has money, establishments where he can spend the money were closed. Aside from the viand, household goods could also be the prize when winning the raffle. They went around their barangays and asked the community members to pay for their chosen number.

Lensing from the gender-sensitive to studying women's resilience strategies, this study has debunked the stereotypical knowledge about women. In fact, the findings showed that women are instrumental in putting order in the family especially in sustaining the daily needs. The result showed that COVID-19 pandemic has triggered the preconceived notion of gender roles. Productivity and sustainability have dwindled. Although challenged by work restrictions, they have shown different kinds of resilience and coping strategies to sustain the needs of the family especially of their children.

The finding exemplified economic resources as one of the leading factors affecting the resilient strategies of women. Logically, because they were displaced from their work due to pandemic. Nonetheless, this study has affirmed that access to resources, such as competences, assets, and opportunities, are likely to affect the vulnerability, resilience, and recovery strategies of women. The Covid-19 pandemic has tremendously affected much women specifically because they are one of the most vulnerable sectors in the society. Much more for those who have lost their jobs. However, although considered as vulnerable, the respondents have shown that they are resilient. All of them possess the strength and a positive outlook in life despite the challenges and losses they experience.



## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings of this study exemplified four important factors have emerged that affect women's resilience during the height of Covid-19, these are; first, the financial resources intensely affected the stress level of these young mothers who have lost their jobs. Second, the positive outlook of women, hence their perspectives about "*diskarte lang ang pubunan*" manifests women's personality as resilient. Third, the use of social media, especially the FB page was intensely realized to be significant mechanism for a living to sustain the basic needs of the family. During lockdowns and quarantines, social media has been the most convenient way of connecting with the people. And finally, social capital has also been an important instrument in women's resilience.

This research affirmed that women are truly resilient in times of pandemic. Traditionally, women were believed to be at home doing household chores and care-givers, playing the gender roles dictated by the society, hence, leading them to be more vulnerable during pandemic. This is not to say however, that women doing household chores are unacceptable since they play crucial roles in the recovery and response especially on the financial needs of the family. Although they were displaced from works, the narratives and experiences of women respondents showed that they also have the ability to mitigate the stress and recover by providing care, foods, health services, receiving reliefs materials and so on. Nowadays, women have been recognized to be agents of change. In fact, they can be leaders. Their skills, capabilities and active participation are being strengthened.

Women, nevertheless, are catalysts of change as they teach the members of the community the proper hygiene as a measure to avoid contracting and spreading of the corona virus disease. Women, as well, play various roles as front liners in the fight against COVID-19. Amidst confusion and chaos, women possess a strong voice to put things in order. Hence, the community becomes more peaceful and resilient. Although challenged by work restrictions, they have shown different kinds of resilience and coping strategies to pacify the conflict and confusions brought about by the pandemic. Women's strategies and mechanisms, therefore, have debunked the stereotypical knowledge about women. Unlike the notion that men work for the family, women are in fact active and responsible agents in providing the needs and security of the society in times of crisis.

However, promoting women's participation has yet to be strengthened. It should not be limited from policies and planning alone, instead it should be extended to the community levels, especially to those who are most vulnerable during pandemic. Gender mainstreaming in pandemic should not serve as an "add on" only to development. Rather, the government should ensure accountability, checks and balances and a long-term commitment to empowering the women's participation and representation. To eliminate the vulnerabilities of women and to strengthen their participation and

representation, the following policy recommendations should be taken into considerations by the government;

1. Incentivizing women's active and meaningful participation and leadership roles
2. Strengthening the capacities of women not only through trainings but as well as with timely livelihood projects and economic empowerment.
3. Integrating particular provisions for a more concrete and feasible activities.
4. Ensuring an "appropriate" budget for gender responsive activities.
5. Launching women's organizations and linkages to build stronger capacities through policy and programs.
6. Acknowledging the local knowledge and expertise of women; it should be formalized government plans both at local and national levels.

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