

# Philippines:10-year Post-Haiyan: LGBTQ+ Survivors Still Fight for Their Legal Rights

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**Nearly a decade after the Haiyan disaster, the LGBTQ+ community still faces hardships to be on the list of housing recipients in the Central Philippines. Even until today, they relentlessly fight for their legal protection.**

Tacloban City, Philippines—Even after almost ten years after the Typhoon Haiyan disaster, LGBTQ+ survivors remain invisible in their struggle for basic needs, including a place to live. This is due to the fact that the national government’s housing program for calamity victims excludes the queer community.

Arturo Golong (or Arthur), a displaced trans woman survivor, raised this issue in 2014 during the local government’s initial post-disaster response. She explains how the displaced LGBTQ+ survivors who were living alone, if not with their partners, can’t access the housing program because of one requirement: family.

The Philippine Family Code defines a family as a heterosexual married couple with children. “How about us, LGBTQ+ survivors, who were as affected?” says Arthur to New Naratif.

Arthur’s main concern as the breadwinner was to provide for her family, particularly her parents. For their livelihood, she ran a beauty parlour and a sari-sari store (a small neighbourhood shop for retailed basic goods) from her home near the airport.

Super typhoon Haiyan—locally known as Yolanda—happened in November 2013. A 15-plus-foot storm surge devoured the city’s densely populated low-lying coastlines, killing over 6,000 locals (including Arthur’s pregnant niece), destroying over a million houses within a 50-kilometre radius, and causing nearly 2,000 individuals to remain missing. With P95.5 billion pesos in damages (US\$2.2 billion), it is the country’s [costliest](#) extreme landfalling typhoon to date.

The National Housing Authority in Eastern Visayas (Region VIII) set a [general qualification](#) for the Yolanda Permanent Housing Program (YPHP): Yolanda survivors who live in the danger zone. The local chief executive, who also serves as the Chair of the Local Inter-Agency Committee (LIAC), established three main specific criteria for beneficiary selection based on a city ordinance: Tacloban residents living in the 35 high-risk zones; families or households living in equally dangerous areas outside the zones identified; and families affected by government Yolanda projects.

However, according to the Regional Development Council (RDC) resolution No. 38 (2020), the implementation is still inconsistent. The inconsistencies resulted in the “exclusion of deserving beneficiaries and contributing to the low number of housing units awarded”. Therefore, the RDC asked the NHA Region VIII to make “uniformed guidelines” or a code of policies on the beneficiary’s selection to be used by LIACs in Region VIII.

Roxanne Doron, founder of a gender- and rights-based organisation named Bisdak Pride, explains

how the non-gender inclusive housing policy further marginalises LGBTQ+ survivors like Arthur.

“It affects their immediate family, as many of them are breadwinners,” says Doron.

With same-sex marriage not allowed in the Philippines, it impacts any social service that set family as a main qualification and will be prohibitive for the LGBTQ+ community.

### **Yolanda Permanent Housing Program**

In August 2014, Arthur and her now deceased parents had moved to a government’s temporary resettlement site 17 kilometres outside the city centre, without potable water or power. Being there suggests you were already in line for permanent housing.

The City Housing and Community Development Office of Tacloban, under the LIAC, provided the three specific beneficiary selection criteria for the YPHP. However, according to the same RDC resolution, “the selection of beneficiaries has been highly politicised”. The City Housing Office declined to comment on this matter to New Naratif.

Arthur’s destroyed house, where she and her late parents lived, was located in Barangay 88, one of 35 barangays (the smallest administrative division in the Philippines) identified as danger zones. Nonetheless, they were forced to stay for nearly a year.

During that time, she embraced her new identity as a community leader. Her active participation in the early Haiyan disaster response has made her invest in issues she had previously ignored.

Based on the Yolanda permanent housing criteria, all “single individuals, except for house owners, without legal dependents”, are disqualified for the YPHP. Due to that reason, LGBTQ+ members who live alone are Arthur’s primary concern now.

She claims that by listing the 178 surviving families in her San Jose neighbourhood, they were the first to receive the government-provided shelter kit for rebuilding makeshift homes. “Relief aid providers, including non-government organisations, began to look for me as a contact person,” she says.

She also began to use her legal name Arthur instead of her post-transition name Jean because it was required for the list of relief aid recipients. “I left behind the name ‘Jean’, whose sense of responsibility didn’t go beyond herself and her family,” she said. Today, Arthur has spoken in Congress and at an international climate hearing, and now the village caretaker, while remaining firm on her non-negotiables.

This newfound purpose is one of the things that helped her manage her shock from the near-death experience. Other than that, some volunteer psychologists visited them after the disaster and helped them to process their trauma.

Arthur still remembers how she almost lost her life years ago. She survived the flood along with 12 other adults and two children by clinging to an uprooted banana plant and floating for hours until they were swept to safety. She was also relieved knowing that her parents survived at the evacuation site.

“I had a fighting spirit because I knew my parents were safe. If that hadn’t been the case, I wouldn’t have bothered surviving because they were my life,” she told the Commission on Human Rights as part of her testimony in 2018 for the [country’s landmark](#) international climate change case.

However, her memories of that event were still stuck in her mind, leading her to isolate herself. She avoided going outside for fear of a panic attack.

“I didn’t know what I was afraid of. I felt like [I was] going crazy,” she adds.

In 2015, Arthur settled in her permanent relocation as a housing recipient in Habitat Village, outside the city proper, north of Tacloban. According to her, she was named the recipient because she was the family breadwinner.

Now that she’s living alone and getting old, the panic attacks have returned.

The other stories come from Nelly Espino, 51, a lesbian who also moved to the transitory site from Barangay 37, also identified as a danger zone. She shared Arthur’s worries when she learned during meetings that family was among the main qualifications for housing beneficiaries.

“As an LGBTQ [and a] survivor who is a co-parent to [my] long-term partner’s adopted daughter, it concerns me,” she says.

She, her long-time partner Theresa Lacdao, and their daughter had been living in their store at the market where they sold crops, before moving to the transition site. Her family and the neighbours who sought refuge in their home during the deadly typhoon all survived, with their wet clothes left as their only belonging.

The strong wind caused the roof to become loose. A while later, they tried ripping off their house’s roof altogether to escape the wrath of the flood that was as high as a Talisay (Tropical Almond) tree. Lacdao remembered how each time the surge struck, Espino would scream, “Lord, have mercy!” while the children cried.

Espino and her family followed months later and have since run a sari-sari store. Both claim that if they had not intervened when local government officials were deciding who would receive housing assistance, processing it would’ve been more challenging for them.

Based on the RDC resolution (2020), only 70% or 25,293 of the 36,116 completed units have been awarded in the region as of 2020. Only 66% or 10,639 of 16,782 built units, including NGO-funded, have been occupied at the city level since August 2022.

## **Awareness Raised**

Arthur approached Henry Abawag, Oxfam Philippines’s Gender Officer at the time. It led to the first Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with displaced LGBTQ+ survivors. Concerns were raised given the said requirement, including about single LGBTQ+ survivors and those raising a family, such as Espino.

Those who do not meet the three main qualifications for Yolanda housing can apply several existing laws, such as the Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), the Solo Parent Act, and the Magna Carta of Women. However, there is no specific law for the LGBTQ+ community. The Philippine lawmakers have not yet ratified the SOGIESC Equality Bill that provides gender-based protection from discrimination because of one’s sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics.

Moreover, the National Housing Authority [specifies](#) “low and marginal-income/or informal settler families” as qualified beneficiaries for calamity housing. Even the National Disaster Risk Reduction Management Plan for 2011 to 2028 focuses on families affected by calamities.

The absence of legal protection for LGBTQ+ people is a huge emotional stressor for displaced typhoon survivors, according to Espino. Regardless of whether everyone was promised housing, she claims that “this violates [their] identity and right to form a family.”

At the FGD, Arthur also shared her prejudiced experiences, like when soldiers were doing life support training at the transitional site. They were teased when it was their turn. She claims that queer people are “treated as inferior.”

She also saw that available livelihoods for displaced survivors were centred on conventional binary gender roles, such as carpentry for men and baking for women. Oxfam’s FGD report said that “accessing below-standard amenities and low-paying livelihood opportunities is doubly difficult” for displaced LGBTQ+ survivors.

Abawag says they shared the FGD result with Jom Bagulaya, a trans woman and three-term city councillor who helped raise the issue in the city council. Bagulaya recalls in a Zoom interview with New Naratif that it prompted them to study the city’s social and developmental welfare standards, where they found similar issues for livelihood assistance.

“There was an instance that an LGBTQ son was the breadwinner, but the aid must go to the unemployed father because he was the family head,” she says.

For Espino and Arthur, the FGD resulted in invitations to speak at subsequent forums with city government officials, as well as in climate change hearings, especially since it compounds the vulnerabilities of underserved minorities like them in coastal communities.

Extreme weather events are becoming more common due to human-caused climate change. With the Philippines having the most occurrences in the last two decades among the [studied](#) Asian developing countries, having gender-inclusive social policies will prevent the same disasters for displaced LGBTQ+ survivors.

Meanwhile, both Arthur and Espino are proud to say that raising awareness worked because it was needed at the time. Being qualified beneficiaries did not prevent the two from advocating for the entire LGBTQ+ community, as their rights are still overlooked in social policies.

“What we benefited from isn’t enough if LGBTQ+ people don’t have legal rights,” says Arthur.

### **Demanding LGBTQ+ Legal Rights Now**

Bagulaya admits that laws like the Family Code are difficult to change. As the former chairperson of committees for children and women, and gender and development, she explains that “Local Government Units (LGUs) cannot create ordinances against the Constitution.”

She says what can be done locally is tackling these issues from a gender lens. One of the legislative tools that can support that goal is the City’s Gender and Development Code.

Every government agency and LGU—from provincial, city, and barangay levels—is mandated to devote 5% of its annual budget to a Gender and Development (GAD) plan and budget for gender empowerment and equality. She claims that this budget can be used to train barangay officials to draft anti-discrimination laws.

According to her, “There are more out transgender leaders in the barangay level now than ever before who can benefit from such training, especially since LGBTQ+ prejudices in rural communities

are rarely recognised.”

But while GAD is about gender mainstreaming, it focuses on equality between men and women as part of the Magna Carta of Women provisions.

Ateneo de Manila University sociology professor Jayeel Cornelio says the SOGIESC Equality Bill may force Filipinos to face the reality of LGBTQ+ discrimination. But he asks, “Doesn’t it seem sad that we still need this law to change Filipinos’ perspectives?”

According to him, disaster-hit rural areas are where a large concentration of Christian groups is. “You can only imagine the homophobic beliefs that they hold.” He finds it unfortunate that despite advances in biblical scholarship and theology in their understanding of queerness over time, “Filipinos’ sense of propriety in family life is still heavily influenced by their exposure to highly orthodox, fundamentalist readings of the Scriptures.”

Cornelio warns that the violence would continue in all possible ways, unless the society can “give respect, dignity, and legal recognition against LGBTQ+ discrimination.”

Efforts to eradicate these violations against LGBTQ+ also require legal protection, such as the SOGIESC Equality Bill. Both Arthur and Espino need legal rights today.

“We [the LGBTQ+] are here, and we need attention, especially legal protection for our rights,” asserts Arthur.

Espino’s 20-year partner, Theresa, says that being an LGBTQ+ couple in the Philippines can lead to a major legal issue. Due to that reason, Theresa has become the only legal parent to her adopted daughter. They are also aware that neither can decide on a seriously ill partner.

Still, Espino is hopeful for saying, “I hope same-sex marriage gets approved in the Philippines.”

Virgie Doque, a lesbian neighbour of Espino, says it stings when local officials imply that LGBTQ+ individuals are not a priority during disaster responses since they don’t have families.

Yan Yan Golong, who survived Yolanda at a young age, also shared how some village visitors would hurl obscenities at them, saying, “When [redacted] go outside, the rain and lightning will strike again because they bring misfortune.”

“Arthur, go change your [spaghetti-strapped] dress!” Such was a common request when a politician was in town to talk to her.

She would say no. “Why must I dress in a suit and tie to be taken seriously?” she asked. “We’re here like other human beings, so treat us as such.”

## **What’s Next?**

1. Sign this [petition](#) to support the SOGIESC Equality Bill becoming a law in the Philippines. It’s been two decades since the first versions were submitted. From 2017 to 2019, a slew of House and Senate bills were introduced, but the lawmakers failed to tackle the bill. In 2022, 19 senators recommended the passage of SB 1600 or the Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC) Equality Bill, which seeks to prohibit discrimination against SOGIESC. Likewise, the Commission on Human Rights urged the House of Representatives to have an open mind. For more information, visit this site: [Join the fight for equality and justice for the Filipino LGBTQIA+ community \(mmpride.org\)](#)

2. Even with the proposed eligibility criteria for uniformed Yolanda housing guidelines, LGBTQ+ remains invisible. The first requirement is: “Must be a Filipino citizen, of legal age, married, solo parent, or single but the head of the family.” Share this article to raise awareness about this issue.
  3. Bahaghari, the national alliance of LGBTQ+ advocates in the Philippines, has a signature campaign for the SOGIESC Equality Bill, and educational discussions, among others. You can [follow it here](#).
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**Mavic Conde** is a Filipino environmental journalist. Her bylines can be found in Bulatlat, Mongabay, and Rappler. She received an Earth Journalism Writing Grant as well as several fellowships, including a year-long fellowship at Solutions Journalism Network, where she commissioned and co-edited climate-solution stories from Asia.

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