

MORAL BLAME AND STRUCTURAL INJUSTICE IN IRIS MARION YOUNG'S POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE: THE CASE OF MUSLIM MINDANAO

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This paper attempts to appropriate Iris Marion Young's politics of difference to the problem of structural injustice in Muslim Mindanao. It has two motivations. The first intent is to discuss the meaning of responsibility in relation to the reality of oppression in the Bangsamoro. The second motive is to determine moral blame in order to assign responsibility in the struggle for equality. This study fuses difference politics with the dialectical method to understand the discrimination against the Indigenous Peoples and the Muslims in the region. The use of Young's perspective offers a critical stance in analyzing the problem of socio-political exclusion and poverty in Mindanao. I argue that whoever benefits from the prevailing unjust system should be held equally liable for any moral blame. Unless the moral, as well as the structural nature of the problem is recognized, democratic reforms in the Bangsamoro cannot effectively take place.

Keywords: Moral Liability, Muslim Mindanao, Oppression, Responsibility, Structural Injustice

INTRODUCTION

An important critique of the Rawlsian theory of justice comes from the critical theorist and feminist Iris Marion Young. She is famously known for her essay “The Five Faces of Oppression,” in which she discusses five different types of oppression: violence, exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism (Young 2002). Young (1990) looks into the reality of socio-economic policies, cultural hierarchies, and political structures in terms of how they reinforce the injustices against people. Young's approach, in contrast to the ahistorical method of an ideal theory that is found in John Rawls, is to consider the critical analysis of history and examine the effects, good and bad, of positional differences in societal structures. For Young, the problem of structural injustice points to the idea of a collective responsibility, one that is borne out of historical as well as institutional causal factors.

This study is an attempt to appropriate Young's politics of difference to the Bangsamoro problem. Rawls (1993) limits the idea of justice to political institutions. In analyzing the Rawlsian starting point, Young (1995) thinks that the principle of impartiality can undermine people who are disadvantaged by their circumstances. Rawls fails to fully account for the meaning of actual behavior and historical realities, which means that his theory would not be suitable in addressing structural issues. The emphasis on a universal reasonable behavior is problematic given the cultural and social diversity of people. Young's critique is meant to point out the constraints of the Rawlsian social contract. Young argues that those who are not initially a party to the social contract, or the ones that Rawls excludes, are also important as they represent a narrative of a group of people who deserve equal treatment in society (Young 2011).

Young's (1990) difference politics looks into the diverse situations of individuals. The theory analyzes how the same could impact the decisions a person makes in his life. The fact of the matter is that there are political and cultural impediments to the choices people have. The concept of the rule of law in the Bangsamoro, for instance, is a question of who has control of the political as well as the economic life of the people in the region. Powerful clans and dynasties dominate the local politics in Muslim Mindanao (Lara 2015). As a result, ordinary people simply submit themselves to the dictates of power players. Such reveals the perpetuation of a patronage system in which local political dynasties serve as the overlords of the population. The problem is not just a matter of political representation, as the state-centric approach to peace-building would like to suggest. It is about the lack of power of ordinary people in terms of the kind of government that they deserve. Beyond representation rights, the problem of the Bangsamoro is a question of democratic inclusion.

THE QUESTION OF STRUCTURAL INJUSTICE

Will Kymlicka (2007) explains that the issue of minority rights is rooted in the idea of the politics of identity. Identity politics is concerned with the recognition of people who are excluded on the basis of their characteristics or attributes. Minority groups such as indigenous tribes, gays and lesbians, and African Americans are discriminated against by the dominant societal culture due to historical bias and prejudice. Political exclusion is a result of people being judged as an outsider because they do not belong to the majority or dominant culture in society. Minority groups voice out the persistent injustices that they suffer from the majority culture by means of protests and other forms of activism instead of the formal channels of the basic structure because the latter does not give them the platform to do so. The interests of the ruling class influence and control important state decisions on matters concerning the general welfare of the people, oftentimes in the favor of the former, who would ensure that the prevailing system perpetuates their position.

Joshua Cohen (2014, 114) explains that "fair opportunity demands that people who are equally talented and motivated must have equal chances to attain desirable positions, regardless of their social background." In the Rawlsian concept of liberal

egalitarianism, everything depends on the availability of fair opportunity in society. Persons must be able to pursue their goals in life. However, one needs to consider the fact that to succeed in accomplishing a life in which a person can truly flourish, the socio-political condition of a society must not impede the freedoms of people. In this way, individuals should not be blamed for their difficult lives. The political reality controls the situation of people, and for this reason, their lack of opportunity is a result of the latent inequalities that are systemic in nature. The fact that people have no option except to elect their political overlords means that their basic liberties and political freedoms are actually compromised.

Young (2011, 52) explains that structural injustice happens when “social processes put large groups of people under systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop or exercise their capacities.” For Young, structural injustice is distinct from the moral wrong of individuals. It refers to a collective responsibility that can be found in processes or activities of individuals and even institutions that undermine the development of a human being. I will cite an example by means of a story. While going to the public market one morning, I saw a man carrying a sack of agricultural products. He looked pale and obviously burdened by the heavy load. Laborers like him earn less than two dollars a day. Meanwhile, someone who acts as a middle-man simply needs to convince a few bulk buyers of the agricultural goods to earn a huge sum of money. This scenario showcases how the market-driven economic system benefits the few while exploiting the poor, who cannot be blameworthy for their condition. It is greed that forces the powerless into harsh and inhumane conditions.

Young is aware that certain actors are blameworthy when it comes to the exploitation of people. For instance, factory owners and investors are informed of the situation in sweatshops in countries such as Bangladesh and Mexico and dangerous mines in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Bill Gates, the owner of Microsoft, was told of the situation of miners but appeared non-committal in helping them. The problem is that corporate actors operate within a system that also prevents them from deciding effectively on how to end such forms of exploitation. For instance, they need to deal with local officials who are corrupt and who are in absolute control of domestic laws. To address the problem, the right approach cannot be limited to technical considerations, which see the issue as something involving the lack of means on the part of the poor and powerless. The dialectical approach to the problem looks into the reality of historical as well as political injustices that have deprived people of their rightful share in the progress of human society. Poor governance, bad state policies, and unjust labor laws are problems that come from the absence of inclusive democratic participation. The system denies minority groups access to democratic platforms that allow citizens to express their concerns.

In the Rawlsian starting point, people enjoin themselves in social cooperation as free and equal (Rawls 1993). This requirement serves to guarantee that the parties to the agreement will be fair in their dealings. But, the same may not be the case in the actual realities of life because of the positional differences in the social and political structures. Young (2011, 67) defines a social structure as “the accumulated outcomes of the actions of the masses of individuals enacting their own projects, often uncoordinated with many others. This combination of actions affects the conditions of

the actions of others, often producing outcomes not intended by any of the participating agents.” Young is concerned about what she calls “institutional factors” that affect the lives of people. The poor, for instance, cannot do anything about policies that are inimical to their welfare. They cannot run for office nor grab power to change their life-situation. For the most part, it is the political and economic ruling class who dictate what is to become of human society.

According to Jude Browne (2024), there are two models of injustice in Young's theory – the liability model and the structural model. Young (2011, 66) explains that “it is important to distinguish moral principles and justice that apply to this basic structure from those that apply to actions and decisions of individual persons or individual organizations within the society.” The liability model is important in determining the level of personal guilt (Young 2011). Browne (2024) echoes Young's position by saying that it is wrong to impute the poverty of people on the basis of their being victims of misfortune. The harm that the agent causes, as with standard criminal law, should be linked to the “intentions, motives, and consequences of actions” (Young 2011, 98). When voters are being manipulated by politicians, it is not right to put the blame wholly on the political structure of a country. Politicians knowingly use their position to influence voters and control the outcomes of elections. Browne does not think that Young wants to put less importance on the liability model. She thinks that understanding the structural nature of the injustice simply seeks to recognize a wider range of injustices (Browne 2024).

POLITICAL DOMINATION AS STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

Structural violence is the harm caused by unjust structures (Young 1990). The patronage system in the Philippines, for instance, exacerbates the problem of poverty since it cripples the ability of the electorate to choose the right kind of leaders. According to Patricio Abinales and Donna Amoroso (2005, 2), “state weakness is due in part to a history of state capture by sectoral interests. The rural poor demand land reform – indeed, the country's productive capacity depends on it – but powerful landed elites oppose it.” For Young (1990), domination is about the unequal power of people in society. Structural injustice is that web of historically embedded hegemonic social, economic, and political relationships. Political domination is preceded by certain systemic pathologies that are sometimes beyond the capacities of the state to remedy. The EDSA People Power was a proof that people themselves can act through social and political movements in order to overthrow or end an unjust political order. The Bangsamoro struggle for justice is a result of many decades of political and economic exclusion. The same served as the impetus to finally come to the negotiating table and find a lasting solution to the decades-old armed conflict.

Going into the roots of the Bangsamoro problem means understanding that the issue is structural. It is about how people are being silenced by the system. Johann Galtung (1969) explains that structural violence appears quiet, but it has the same effect on people as their identity is shattered by oppressive forces. Charles Taylor (1995, 36) tells us that “the projection of an inferior or demeaning image on another can actually distort and oppress to the extent that the image is internalized.” The damage done to

the Muslim Filipino is the degradation of one's image as someone who is violent. This is the reason why Nur Misuari, the founder of the Moro National Liberation Front, would propose the Bangsamoro identity as distinct from 'Filipino' (Kamlian, October 20, 2012). He prefers the term Moro and the Bangsamoro is considered as the nation of his fellow Muslims. Misuari is reacting against the social bias and racial prejudice that are deeply entrenched in the condescending attitude of the majority in Philippine society.

Jennifer Pitts (2011, 21) argues that the Eurocentric model suggests that colonial societies are backward because indigenous peoples lack the capacity "to think of institutions and practices such as properties, contracts and treaties." Persons in the peripheries are forced into their harsh conditions in a deliberate attempt by the powers that be. Colonialism had a great impact on the lives of the people. According to Goran Collste (2015), colonized people often lose their sense of identity because they are demeaned. The white man considers as his burden the job to educate the natives, whom the dominant class labels as ignorant. The powerful people who make laws, design policies, and issue rules come from well-educated families, but they are the ones who usually look down upon people and see the latter as their inferior. Karl Gaspar (2021) writes about the demonization of indigenous practices by a chauvinistic religion that subjugated the natives when Spain conquered the Philippines. The exclusion of Mindanao and Bangsamoro in particular is a consequence of an unjust power dynamics (Abinales 2000; Hotchcroft and Rocamora 2003). This indicates the need for a new imperative for the public sphere, most especially for its civil society, to carry the moral burden of transforming the weak democratic institutions in the country and help make the same inclusive. The desire for self-determination of the leaders of the armed conflict in Muslim Mindanao is due to the fact that they don't feel accepted by the societal culture. This subtle type of injustice demeans their identity and dignity as a people who deserve equal respect and recognition.

To appropriate Young's theory to the problem of Muslim Mindanao, one needs to understand the power dynamics in the region. Young (1990) clarifies that structural injustice is a more fundamental problem in the issue of minority rights. More harm is inflicted, Young (1990) believes, by the presence of cultural injustice, which involves the continued threats of economic exploitation, marginalization, and violence faced by minorities due to the lack of recognition of their identities. Powerful clans control the region, which means that poor Muslims themselves are subservient to their political patrons. Political families control the economy of the Bangsamoro (Abinales 2010). As a result, powerless Muslim Filipinos are deprived of fair opportunities in life. Indigenous Peoples (IP) in Muslim Mindanao also continue to suffer from various forms of discrimination. Members of tribal groups are deprived of worthwhile social and life-enhancing activities. Without access to quality and life-changing education, tribal children in far-flung and mountainous areas are excluded from mainstream society and denied the chance to determine and advance their ambitions in life. While historically, IPs have ancestral rights to their lands, it is the dominant majority who exploit their natural resources by taking advantage of their lack of knowledge when it comes to the legal system.

The conflict in the region is a result of the resentment of Muslim Filipinos (Carlos 2010). At present, the region is undergoing a tedious peacebuilding process

after the signing of a Peace Agreement between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in 2018. The Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao is now defunct. The Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) has been implemented beginning in 2021, and the members of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority have been appointed with representation from various sectors, most especially from the MILF. Meanwhile, the administration of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. intends to postpone the regular elections in the region for the Bangsamoro Assembly because of the fear that political clans might derail the peacebuilding initiatives. The Bangsamoro government is a young democracy in which government leaders and new bureaucrats are being taught the principles of transparency and accountability. Corrupt dynasties can potentially tarnish the effort to build any democratic and just society.

Yet, while the reality of Muslim Filipinos reveals the character of structural injustice in the Bangsamoro, it is only one face of the truth of oppression. Another face of such happens to be the situation of the IPs, collectively called Lumad. In the Bangsamoro, the poor Lumad feels homeless due to the lack of voice. The same individual feels lost because of the discrimination that he suffers from the dominant culture within. The way of life of the Lumad is threatened (Gaspar 2021). The stigma from political alienation remains buried in the life stories of IPs because they have been unfairly judged by the majority as inferior and weak. There is a strong sentiment that in the Bangsamoro, the Lumad has no place in the affairs of governance. When it comes to Mindanao, the perception is that only Muslim Filipinos are excluded from the affairs of government, hence the struggle for autonomy. This hides the fact that within the region, IPs are also deprived of opportunities and victimized by an oppressive system.

STRUCTURAL INJUSTICE AND THE POLITICAL EXCLUSION OF MUSLIM MINDANAO

According to the eminent historian Renato Constantino (1974), the Spanish colonial regime excluded Mindanao by isolating it politically from the central government in Manila. Spain just accepted the fact that Mindanao could not be conquered due to the strong resistance of the Moros. When Spain left the Philippines, the American colonizers simply did not want to do anything with the Moro problem. The Americans, instead, exploited the mineral resources of the island, including its rich forests (Gaspar 2011). During the Great Migration of the 1920s, Mindanao was treated by the Commonwealth Government as a land resource (Abinales 2010). The history from the South reveals that Mindanao was a mere appendage to the plans of the central government in Manila, especially during the time of Ferdinand Marcos Sr., whose acts, specifically the one that led to the infamous Jabidah Massacre, caused Muslim Filipinos to rebel against the government (Gloria 2014). In the last 100 years of the history of the Philippines, only seven Muslims have been elected to the Senate, which implies that the region has not been well-represented when it comes to national issues.

The difficult situation in Muslim Mindanao was exacerbated by the All-Out War imposed by then-President Joseph Estrada at the start of the millennium (Abinales

2010). The approach of Estrada is typical of a reactionary government that is trying to use force in order to subjugate its own people. This attitude can be traced in the actions of past administrations that consider the Mindanao problem as a matter of religious conflict between Muslims and Christians instead of discerning the issues that actually bedevil the region. In truth, the problem of the Bangsamoro is a question of justice. Both Muslims and Lumads suffer from discrimination in Philippine society. According to Young (2011, 68), it is important to open up the subject of justice to include the reaction of groups to “practices and conventions that contribute to justice or injustice.” Young (2011) thinks that patterns in relations among people are a contributory factor to the formation of just or unjust social structures. She calls this the “social connection model”. The ultimate moral question, in this regard, is to determine whose responsibility justice is. Young (2011, 96) writes:

The social connection model of responsibility finds that all those who contribute by their actions to structural processes with some unjust outcomes share responsibility for the injustice. This responsibility is not primarily backward-looking, as the attribution of guilt or fault, but rather primarily forward-looking. Being responsible in relation to structural injustice means that one has an obligation to join with others who share that responsibility in order to transform the structural processes to make their outcomes less unjust.

Human beings cannot be separated from their historical and socio-political experiences. This is true for the Bangsamoro region. Muslim Mindanao cannot be abstracted away from the reality of cultural imperialism that affects its everyday life. Muslims are viewed as violent by the majority culture in the Philippines, while IPs or Lumads are judged as ignorant. State policy makers must consider relations of power in the state and society. The importance of this relational approach comes from the fact that “persons suffer injustice by virtue of structural inequality when their group social positioning means that the operation of diverse institutions and practices conspires to limit their opportunities to achieve well-being” (Young 2007, 63). Justice appears impossible in society because of the presence of conditions that favor the majority and restrict the freedoms of the minority. The question of justice involves what people feel about their government. The resentment felt by Muslim Filipinos is due to the neglect and exploitation that they suffer from in uneven structures. Young (2011, 100) tells us that “it is in the nature of such structural processes that their potentially harmful effects cannot be traced directly to any particular contributors to the process.”

At this point, one needs to pose the question – what is structural injustice? Young (2011, 52) outlines the concept of structural injustice based on the following: “the legal and social rules, social positions, the structures produced by individuals, and structural process with unintended consequences.” The conception of structural injustice can be seen as a collective matter. Persons are liable for certain injustices insofar as they have a moral and legal obligation to their fellow citizens and the state. There is a two-step approach to this. First, persons in authority are liable for violating the presumed just rules in the state. Since they are in positions of power, they have the moral obligation to enforce a just or egalitarian system. Second, the ordinary electorate also carries the

burden of prudent judgment in the exercise of their political power in choosing their leaders. After all, they have a huge stake in the actual design and moral ends of government. Our main concern is that this type of injustice is subtle. In the margins of society, underrepresented voices remain unheard. The domination of people in the peripheries has four forms: militaristic, economic, political, and cultural (Oca 2010).

For Seyla Benhabib (2004), democratic deliberation, anchored in the concept of equality, makes possible the contribution from various sectors, including informal ones, as opposed to liberal democracy's formal venues for public discussion within the halls of the legislature or Congress. Benhabib says that it is the essence of democratic dialogue. For him, "peoplehood is a dynamic and not a static reality" (Benhabib 2004, 96). Jurgen Habermas (1968) explains that communicative engagements are crucial in determining the public good. The pursuit of justice in society cannot be left to those who are in a position to dominate the dialogue. Limiting the idea of public reason mainly to the formal channels in the basic structure of government can deprive marginalized people of the opportunity to contribute to discussions that concern their well-being. Deliberative processes find their limitation in the manner by which the ruling or dominant class controls the affairs of the state when it comes to policies. In places where the rule of law is not upheld, the public sphere is treated as something personal. In this way, competition in the economy is absent, and the ideas of ordinary folks are not respected.

Indeed, inclusive democracy has nothing to do with great men or power players who are favored by the dominant system or history. The members of the ruling class think of themselves as the country's salvation, but an authentic democracy is about the empowerment of ordinary people. What this means is that democratic deliberation can go directly to the people who are directly affected by many government decisions. Civic organizations, schools, cultural movements, and online spaces where people debate issues are essential in will-formation and the understanding of public opinion. Partha Dasgupta (2007, 188), says that "in deliberating over distributions of wealth, we have to care about differences in individual talents to produce, worry about incentives and the concomitant notion of obligations (to honor agreements and not behave opportunistically, and so forth), consider people's needs and take into account the related matters of desert." Dasgupta (2007, 191) thinks that in real democratic societies, all "candidates standing for election represent public policies. So, in voting for a candidate one votes for a public policy, or more accurately, a set of probable policies." Running for office based on a policy advocacy is apparently not the case in the Bangsamoro and in Philippine society in general. People vote on the basis of their personal interests, which makes them susceptible to political machinations. In such a process, the ability of the electorate to form wise judgments is severely compromised. Traditional politicians do not want to do anything about it because it is to their advantage. They lack the principles and moral competence to guide them in choosing what is best for the country.

THE PROBLEM OF POVERTY AS STRUCTURAL

One of the issues hounding Muslim Mindanao is its shadow economy (Lara 2015). This means that the poorest of the poor in the region are forced to rely on politicians and clans for security and protection. Francisco Lara Jr. (2015, 122) says that “clans were seen as the most effective provider of protection in a context filled with violence and conflict.” Powerful clans possess the elements of being a mafia. They control the territory, they control the business, and they control the people. Corrupt politicians deprive the government of the vital resources that should have gone to the welfare of the poorest of the poor. Since they have a mafia-like rule, they also manipulate the results of elections. Lara (2015, 107) reveals the tapestry in the clan-based politics in Muslim Mindanao: “The hierarchy of the clans and the rule systems that determined the handling of violence and conflict were most traditional in nature, i.e., they were not part of the constitutional, civil or criminal laws, even though they reflected a formal structure recognized by clan members.”

According to Jeffrey Oca (2010), marginalized groups, impaired persons, women and homosexuals, Lumads, and the poorest of the poor are powerless in the actual scheme of things. The state, in its pursuit of justice and equality, is not immune to the abuses of those who are in positions of power. There is always a limit to what laws can do insofar as those at the top are the ones who are in control of the government. Since many leaders are beholden to their patrons in business, the vested interests of the powerful have become more important than prioritizing the basic needs of the people. In the Bangsamoro, the rule of clan-based politics influences the economic and social reality of the people, which, more often than not, results in exclusion and violence. In the past, powerful actors in the Bangsamoro control the movement of economic goods in the region, both legal and illegal. The National Government, since the time of President Manuel Quezon, simply ignored it because national leaders reduced Muslim Mindanao as a rich source of command votes.

A note on the dialectical approach is necessary. One of the ways of looking into poverty is by means of the technical method. In this view, poverty is seen as the lack of capacity of the people to earn an income. In looking for a solution, the government considers technical issues, which include redistributing resources by giving money to the poor. Backward economic systems are also modernized to enable the poor to compete with advanced mechanisms used in affluent countries. Poverty alleviation is seen as a matter of improving the standard of living of people. This has been the approach of the Philippine government for many decades but the gap between the rich and the poor has only widened. The reason, in fact, is that the technical perspective has failed to consider the reality of historical as well as structural injustice. The bias against Muslims prevents them from engaging fully in societal culture. The oligarchic nature of the Philippine economy means that wealth is concentrated in the hands of the economic elite, who control politicians, thus perpetuating an unjust system.

According to Martha Nussbaum (2011, xvi), “Young argues that the most helpful concept with which to approach structural injustice is that of shared responsibility. We turn away from the past and toward the future, accepting collectively the fact that as citizens, we bear responsibility for monitoring political institutions and ensuring that structural injustices do not arise within them or, if they

are already there, that they are ameliorated.” Nussbaum, who wrote the *Foreword* to Young’s *Responsibility for Justice*, asserts that the people should bear the moral burden toward justice. What this means is that as a society, every human individual needs to understand the collective obligation of creating and sustaining just structures. Such will require reforming the state as an apparatus of power. Nussbaum (2011, xviii) thinks that “the people who are the most affected, the victims of structural injustice, have a particularly strong interest in changing the situation, so they ought to take more responsibility than others for doing so.”

Young is critical of the idea that the individual must be solely responsible for his choices in life. While there is value in one’s capacity to make appropriate judgments, it is unfair to fully impute to the rational agent the reasons for his mistakes. One needs to trace the historical context behind an injustice in order to determine how the prevailing socio-economic schemes can be reformed. Young (2011, 5) believes that “one can describe poverty as rooted either in personal responsibility or in structural causation,” which, according to her, a thorough account of such may mean that “the sources of and cures for poverty must appeal to social structures.” For Young (2011), one cannot insist that the problem of poverty is solely a matter of individual agency and responsibility. This is true when it comes to the situation in the Bangsamoro. Young (2011, 5) says that “by insisting that individual needy people can move up the economic ladder if they try, it is assumed that background conditions within which poor people act are not unjust.”

According to Paul Hotchcroft and Joel Rocamora (2003), Philippine politics is about dividing spoils among the elite. Elite politics is about exclusion and exploitation. According to the historian Reynaldo Ileto (1979), the colonial client and patron relationship in the country’s lifeworld suggests that an elitist culture is being perpetuated in the social and political structures. The end result is the subjugation of the masses. Deprivation, in this regard, has a broader socio-historical context, which demands a sense of shared responsibility for justice. This means that the Moro problem is also a Filipino problem. Filipinos cannot disregard the problem of Muslim Mindanao. Whatever happens in Muslim Mindanao can have an impact in the future of the country. There must be fairness then in terms of the distribution of economic opportunities and resources. The reality of unfair competition is created by the hegemonic conditions in the socio-economic order of any society. Joshua Cohen (2004, 114) says that “fair opportunity demands that people who are equally talented and motivated must have equal chances to attain desirable positions, regardless of their social background.”

The problem of poverty concerns the absence of justice in society. It is due to systemic corruption and the abuse of power. But, it is a mistake to attribute the injustice solely to the failures of individuals. The dialectical approach to its analysis presents the reality of unjust structures and mechanisms that impede people from achieving a decent life. While the laborer I mentioned above might have committed wrong decisions when he was younger, the system must give him a chance to rectify his mistake. In the absence of such an opportunity, one’s well-being is severely affected. It should also be noted that people are affected by particular circumstances that are not of their making. Being born in a region where conflict is a reality hinders people from attending school, getting decent jobs, or even enjoying those things that people do in

normal situations. The presence of extremist groups, for instance, in Basilan, points to the impossibility of normalcy in the past. Young (2011, 10) argues that the “discourse of personal responsibility focuses only on the responsibility of poor people. Implicitly, it assumes that everyone else properly discharges their responsibilities and that the poor, in particular, act in deviant ways that unfairly force others to incur costs.”

Young rightly contends that “debates about welfare and poverty, personal responsibility has been identified with work and family and nothing else. To be personally responsible means that you work for subsistence rather than depend on others or on state largesse” (Young 2011, 10). What this means, according to Young (2011, 10), is that it “emphasizes that the worker and the family should be on their own.” But, the idea of ‘personal responsibility’ fails to capture the fact that an individual who suffers from hunger cannot be entirely due to the wrong judgments of this person. “Starvation,” Amartya Sen (1981, 10) says in *Poverty and Famines*, “is the characteristic of some people not having enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there being not enough food to eat.” Famines, Sen argues, are due to wrong state policies. Poverty, in this regard, is a result of policy failures. Young (2011, 11) writes:

Each does have the responsibility both to monitor the consequences of his or her actions to make sure that they do not wrongly affect others. If each lives sufficiently without depending on others, then they have discharged their personal responsibility. This discourse also thinks away large-scale social structural processes as relevant to assessing people’s responsibilities to others. In this very simple picture of society there exist only individuals and family units, who interact with one another now and then.

Understanding poverty adequately, according to Young (2011, 18), requires “considering at least two sides – the individual’s desires, perceptions, motives, and actions, as they interact with background structures in the social environment.” She maintains that “the structural account shows what kind of opportunity set persons similarly positioned have available to them; it says nothing about how any individual acts in response to that opportunity set” (Young 2011, 19-20). The basic idea in this sense is to be able to look into the problem in a broader way by considering not only the personal but more importantly, the structural and institutional causes of the problem of poverty. According to Young (2011, 47-48), “some policies, both public and private, and the actions of thousands of individuals acting according to normal rules and accepted practices contribute to producing these circumstances.” Young (2011, 55) explains:

Institutional and social rules constitute another stubbornly objective and difficult-to-change aspect of structural processes. Some are legal rules, enforced by state action enacted by public officials. Many others are more implicit rules that people follow through habit, or because they feel constrained to do so by others or because they perceive advantage to themselves by doing so.”

While every society often looks for the culprit for its failures, Young maintains that it is difficult to justify personal liability in the issue of structural injustice. The poorest of the poor cannot be blamed for their disadvantaged position in life. Cunning politicians control and exploit the powerless. The same is true when it comes to big corporations that exploit the country's natural resources and destroy the environment in the process. Oppressive structures, more than their personal judgments, cause injustice, which in the end means the sacrifice of the welfare of the people. Indeed, individuals cannot be held liable for unjust systems and structures, but they can be blamed for personal decisions that harm people, as in the case of corporate decision-makers and corrupt government officials who put their self-interest or personal good above all else. Young (2011, 100) explains that "the structures are produced and reproduced by large numbers of people acting according to normally accepted rules and practices, and it is in the nature of such structural processes that their potentially harmful effects cannot be traced directly to any particular contributors to the process." The reality of injustice points to the uneven structures that have denied people access to a quality of life that is deserved by every human being. But whoever benefits from the system or is exploiting the same for self-aggrandizement must be held equally liable for moral blame.

CONCLUSION

This study points to the reality of oppression as structural. Young's difference politics provides a perspective that allows one to analyze the problem beyond the interactional aspect. The problem of poverty is not just a matter of the wrong choices people make. The structural nature of the problem reveals that the injustice is hidden beneath unjust structures that impede the development of the lives of people. Young's concept of collective responsibility imputes the moral blame on institutions and structures and the prejudices that demean marginalized peoples. The Bangsamoro problem reveals the oppression suffered by both Muslims and Lumads. The dominant economic order prevents people from realizing their capacity to live decently. The fact of the matter is that the circumstances in Philippine politics and society deprive the Bangsamoro of the ability to chart the course of its own destiny for the longest time. Lumads and Muslims alike are forced into the peripheries by a dominant system. By understanding the problem in a dialectical way, people will realize that the issue encompasses the individuals who belong to the powers that be, the individuals who are at the periphery and operating within the rules set by those from the powers that be, and the interplay that their individual decisions make. However, while that is the case, persons who benefit from an unjust system are equally liable. They cannot be excused from their criminal and moral liabilities. Young is, therefore, not putting aside the concept of personal responsibility. By invoking the structural nature of the problem, she simply expands the scope of her analysis in order to present the dialectical nature of the needed solutions.

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