

OPINION: The poor shouldn't be blamed for their poverty

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The poverty experienced by many is not of their own making. Photo by JL JAVIER

Manila (CNN Philippines Life) — During one of President Duterte's recent late-night speeches, he [said](https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/4/16/Duterte-no-cash-aid-gambling-drinking-residents-lockdown.html?fbclid=IwAR2) (<https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/4/16/Duterte-no-cash-aid-gambling-drinking-residents-lockdown.html?fbclid=IwAR2>) that those taking part in gambling and cockfights should not be afforded with financial assistance in this time of crisis. "Kayong nagsasabong at inuman, ibig sabihin may pera kayo," the President said. "Do not expect any help from me. Sorry na lang."

His remarks sparked debate online with people making their sentiments known, going so far as saying that the 4Ps (Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program) of the Department of Social Welfare and Development should cease to exist. One Facebook commenter said that the 4Ps scheme just contributes to the indolence of Filipinos. Another added that many Filipinos just use the cash assistance for things like gambling, drinking, and drugs. One other user also said "it's so

that while people like him are obeying the quarantine, some remain irresponsible, including those regularly from the government. An anonymous user even commented that “now you’re slowly realizing what your crisis is coping with the alms being given to them, coming from our hard-earned taxes.”

(1) These sentiments are unsurprising. That the poor are lazy or to be blamed for their poverty is an age-old point of view, one that goes back to the Spaniards calling the Filipinos ‘indio’ (uncivilized) or ‘Juan Tamad’ (irresponsible). These Spanish-era identifiers have remained, only modified to fit present-day language. It’s not coincidental that this kind of sentiment is due to the damage of colonial rule, one that can be traced back as the root cause of incorrigible inequality, and in effect, persistent poverty, not just in the Philippines but across the globe.

Political scientist Wonik Kim has [argued](https://content.csbs.utah.edu/~mli/Economies%205430-6430/Kim-Origin%20of%20Developmental%20State%20in%20East%20Asia.pdf) (https://content.csbs.utah.edu/~mli/Economies%205430-6430/Kim-Origin%20of%20Developmental%20State%20in%20East%20Asia.pdf) that Southeast Asian countries like the Philippines inherited “extractive colonial institutions” that sustained income inequality. Kim said that in 1820, the Philippines was the richest country in East Asia while the poorest was Taiwan. Almost 200 years later, Taiwan now has a per capita income that is seven times higher than that of the Philippines. In his research, it showed that Taiwan, similar to other North Asian nations like Japan and South Korea, was able to undertake radical land reforms that equalized income in their societies, whereas the Philippines has not. The evolution of economic inequality is also [anchored on land inequality](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTDECINEQ/Resources/1149208-1147789289867/IIWB_Conference_ColonialOrigins_of_InequalityREVISED.pdf) (http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTDECINEQ/Resources/1149208-1147789289867/IIWB_Conference_ColonialOrigins_of_InequalityREVISED.pdf). The effects of this particular inequality, propped by its landowning elites, has resulted in a longstanding unequal distribution of income. The World Bank has [cited](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTDECINEQ/Resources/1149208-1147789289867/IIWB_Conference_ColonialOrigins_of_InequalityREVISED.pdf) (http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTDECINEQ/Resources/1149208-1147789289867/IIWB_Conference_ColonialOrigins_of_InequalityREVISED.pdf) Spanish colonies, such as countries in Latin America, to have had persistent high levels of income inequality precisely because of the colonial heritage of land inequality.

Added to this history of inequality is our cultural inclination to success stories perpetrated in telenovelas, noontime shows, our biggest celebrities and politicians. It is perhaps in the overly circulated rags-to-riches stories of “successful” Filipinos like Manny Pacquiao and Isko Moreno, that Filipinos are made to feel as though being poor is a choice; that maybe if a boy from Gen San could punch his way out of his circumstance or if a good-looking basurero can charm his way to a mayoral seat, then maybe they can too. The possibility is always there, but the reality can often reveal otherwise. For anyone to escape poverty, economist Peter Temnin [said](https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/04/economic-inequality/524610/) (https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/04/economic-inequality/524610/), one must have 20 years of almost nothing going wrong.

This means 20 years of an almost-perfect life for Marilen and Reynaldo Domagtoy, residents of a slum community in Taguig, who I [interviewed](https://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/2018/6/12/filipino-families-poverty-line.html) (https://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/2018/6/12/filipino-families-poverty-line.html) a few years ago. At that time, they had two children, ages 8 and 12. But all of them only rely on Reynaldo’s ₱13,000 salary as an aircon technician. Marilen had wanted to help earn for their family, but this meant having to hire a helper who can watch over their children. “Parang magkukuha din kami ng magbabayad, mag-aalaga sa [bata],” she said. “Mahirap kasi ‘pag hindi hatid-sundo eh. Ang daming nawawala kasi diyan na bata.”

Marilen shared that they only ate twice a day: in the morning and at night. They allot around ₱130 for food per day, ₱900 for water every month, and ₱1,495 for electricity per month. Reynaldo said that they usually borrow money before their children’s school would start because his salary simply wasn’t enough for all their needs. Marilen also added that because Reynaldo earned relatively more than their neighbors did, her family did not qualify for the 4Ps program, although she wished they were. “Kahit papano malaking tulong ‘yun kasi every three months nagpipindot sila ng ₱4,200,” she said.

Another resident in Taguig that I [interviewed](https://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/2018/6/12/filipino-families-poverty-line.html) (https://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/2018/6/12/filipino-families-poverty-line.html) was Bebelyn Miranday. Her household income was at ₱5,500 per month, an amount she would budget for all of her six children. During the time of the interview, she worked as a cleaner or a labandera for different homes in a subdivision near where she lives. She shared that she would get ₱500 for doing laundry, other times ₱1,500 for fetching her employer’s children from school. When I asked her if ₱5,500 is enough, she only said that she just had no choice but to make it enough for all of them. “Kung nandiyan sa kamay ko magkano lang, ‘yun lang din ang binubudget ko,” she said.



the insecurity of their future, Miranday remained grateful for DSWD's 4Ps program that has allowed his son to finish high school and enroll in a technical university. "Sabi ko, halimbawa, 'pag nakatapos ka, may trabaho, may pagpapalathala, may mga kapatid mo siyempre elementary pa, sana naman mapaaral mo din," she said. "Sabi niya, 'Nay wag ka mag-alala, papaaralin ko silang lahat."

Temnin [suggests](https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/04/economic-inequality/524610/) (https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/04/economic-inequality/524610/) that education is the best gateway out of poverty, but he also warns that this can easily be upended by structural breakdowns, such as budget cuts on education, health, and other social services. Take for example how our weak public health system affects the education of our children. Because our health system cannot properly support Filipinos, if a family member is diagnosed with an illness, this family can instantly be driven into poverty. In fact, every year, [one million Filipinos go into poverty](https://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/2019/4/22/government-health-workers-Philippines.html) (https://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/2019/4/22/government-health-workers-Philippines.html) because of a family member's illness. It is already a stretch for Filipinos like Miranday and Domagtoy to have to shell out even a peso for being sick. If you are already poor and a family member needs health treatment, more often than not, the children stop going to school and find ways to earn instead. Education is no longer a gateway; it becomes a pipe dream.

These complex structures and histories are important to know because it helps us understand that the poverty experienced by many is not of their own making. The people in slum communities, the 'no work, no pay' workers, the farmers, the fisherfolk, and the homeless, among many others, remain poor precisely because their circumstances are the product of years and years of exploitation. It is misplaced and ignorant to assume that poverty is within the control of an individual and not by how society has been shaped, or worse, designed to remain the same.

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