



# In Conversation with Professor Emma E. Porio

Interviewed by Gisela Redondo-Sama

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**Prof. Emma E. Porio** is professor of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, School of Social Sciences Ateneo de Manila University and Science Research Fellow, Manila Observatory. She is President of the Asia Pacific Sociological Association (2020-2023) and President of the Research Committee on Clinical Sociology (2019-2023) of the International Sociological Association (ISA). She is editor of the *Journal of Sustainable Cities Frontier* and the Principal Editorial Adviser of the *Environment and Urbanization (Asia Edition)*. Prof. Emma E. Porio is also Project Leader and Principal Investigator of the trans-disciplinary action research project, *Coastal Cities at Risk: Investing in Climate and Disaster Resilience in the Philippines (CCARPH)*. She co-directs the Master of Disaster Risk and Resilience (MDRR) at the Ateneo de Manila University. She is a member of the Climate Change Commission's (Phil) National Panel of Technical Experts.

**Gisela Redondo-Sama:** Thank you very much for the possibility to share with you this interview. We would like to know about your overall academic trajectory, your research interests and your current work.

**Prof. Emma E. Porio:** From the University of San Carlos in central Cebu City, I came to Manila to study Sociology and Anthropology. At that time, the Institute of Philippine Culture was the main research institute or organisation in the Philippines. I was involved in research methodologies training for social sciences researchers and out of that, they did a survey,

the National Survey of Developmental issues of the Philippines. I wrote the report of that national survey—the publication came out with the title “The Filipino Family, Community, and Nation, the Same Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow?”. After that, when I went for my MA (Demography) and PhD (Sociology, major in political economy) in the University of Hawaii(UH) Later, I did my dissertation on the political economy of educational reforms in the Philippines. There, I was involved as a member of the American Sociological Association (ASA) as well as organizing the Hawaii chapter of “Sociology in Women and Society” because I was teaching women studies courses at the UH Women Studies Programme. At that time, I was looking at Asian-American women, because Filipino migration to Hawaii at the turn of the century was male dominated— to supply labour to the Hawaii plantations. I was doing research also on gender and how basically the plantation economies did not allow Filipino laborers’ to bring their families because it is not very economical, right? Here, I was looking at the intersections of gender, ethnicity and class among migrant populations.

When I came back to the Philippines, after the EDA People Power Revolution in 1985, there was nobody interested on these kinds of work. They were more interested in doing policy work, solving the problems of the city, street children problems... and things like that. When I came back to the Institute of Philippine Culture (IPC), there was not much interest on studies on political economy. So, when UNICEF came to IPC regarding doing studies on street

children, my director said, just take this because this is sure money. So that is how I got involved in problems of urbanisation, street children, child labour, child poverty, women and social inequality and other social issues. In fact, if you see one of the first monographs I produced was “Partnership with Poor: The LRM Approach to Development”, which argued that you have to partner with vulnerable and marginal groups in order that programmes will work for the and with the people. Later, I was involved in a global research network, the Global Urban Research Initiative (GURI), which allowed me to pursue my interest in urban basic services and how it is not accessible nor adequate for the vulnerable groups in the city. You will see that in my volume “Urban Governance and Poverty Alleviation in Southeast Asia. Trends and Prospects”.

Why am I doing this work now on climate? In 2006, I was doing work on the displacement of the urban poor by large infrastructural projects like the Batangas Ports Development, or the South Reclamation Project in Cebu. Meanwhile, the Asian Developmental Bank and the Japan International Cooperation Agency were doing a work on climate change and asked me.. “what is the impact or what is the effect of climate change to the poor?” and that led me to do a survey of 25 informal settlements in Metro Manila which is located in three flood basins. My publication “Vulnerability, Adaptation and Resilience Among Marginal Riverine Communities in Metro Manila” got the award in my university for the most outstanding scholarly work with most social impact because we basically connected the knowledge produced to mobilising action on the ground.

Impacts and the poor with the International Development Research Centre. They funded four city projects on coastal cities at risk (Manila, Bangkok, Lagos, Vancouver). In Manila Observatory, they were mostly physical scientists; I was the only social scientist but the director, Ma. Antonia Yulo Loyzaga, I think, valued my input because they wanted to know what does these climate projections mean to people on the ground? I realised that as a social scientist, it is your duty to know how climate change is “impacting” people on the ground, specially the poor. That s how my

work on climate change really started. You can check our website, <https://resiliencetoolkit.ph>, with a resilience toolkit for city disaster risk reduction managers, professional/practitioners, and local government officials. This also contains three virtual exhibits related to our journey from risk to resilience in Coastal Cities at Risk in the Philippines: Investing in Climate and Disaster Resilience (CCARPH) project. The first exhibit we had is “Risk to Resilience” and it was really the product of our work with the Manila Observatory from 2012 to 2016. This exhibit in ARETE-Ateneo de Manila united the research initiatives of physical, social sciences and humanities, which was translated in 20 exhibit panels. The exhibit was organized along the IPCC formula for Risk as a function hazard (H), exposure (E), vulnerability (V) over capacity © equals resilience. The exhibit displayed the flood hazard and distribution in Metro Manila, identified “who are the vulnerable people to floods?” ; what are their capacities to respond to the flood impacts? The third section of the exhibit says “What can we do about it?”. Here, we showed how collaborative partnerships between science/academic, civil society organizations (CSOs), community-based organizations (CBOs) and the private sector can work together to solve “wicked problems” with scientific tools, and technologies that universities can provide. The artists in ARETE-ADMU summarized our work of five years in 20 panels! Isn’t that impressive! I believe now in transdisciplinary action research — where we co-produce knowledge with stakeholders, co-create our capacities as scientists with practitioners which leads to co-ownership and co-benefits of our collective engagements—is the WAY TO GO TOWARDS A RESILIENT AND SUSTAINABLE FUTURE. In this way, we are able to link the concepts, methods/approaches and insights of the physical and social sciences with the humanities/arts and with the larger world of policy and practice!

We have to produce knowledge that will inform how we shall live as decent human beings, with responsibility and accountability to the world that we have constructed with our social-political-economic and cultural relations. Our lives are all interconnected with climate change and global warming. We have to

link our science and tools to interrogate how our lives are interconnected with the ways we organize our resources in designing our lifeways/life strategies that is more inclusive, resilient and sustainable.

Last week, when we started the women's month, I read the news about Paris and its lady mayor who wanted to increase the air quality of the city by 2024; thus, they will not allow private cars into the city centre etc. I forwarded this to our University and Gender Development Office (UGDO) and said "Do you know that air quality is a gender and social inequality issue? Most people do not recognise the risk of air pollution or the greenhouse gas emission (GHGs), especially to vulnerable women, children, elderly, LGBTQTI and PWDs.

*Gisela Redondo-Sama:* Concerning the International Sociological Association, when and why did you join the ISA?

*Prof. Emma E. Porio:* I was a member before 2006 but not active in the organization. In 2006, I was presenting a paper on gender, overseas migration and the phenomenon of *global house holding* in the Asia Pacific Migration Research Network meeting in Phuket, Thailand and Christine Inglis, who was member of the Executive committee of the ISA, said to me... "I want to nominate you to the ISA" and I said but I am not active there and she said, "never mind, you are active in the region" and they nominated me from the floor during the Durban World Congress. To my surprise, Izabela told me that I had the most number of votes. We were given three or four minutes to talk about who we are, and what we want to do and I just said that if ISA had to be global, then it must recognize the voice of Asia— central Asia, east Asia, pacific Asia, south Asia.. and south-east Asia—and I think they never thought about it these Asian regions. They saw Asia as a block. I said that if I go to ISA, I would like the representation of people from the global south be recognized.

When I was there, Michelle Wieviorka made me chairman of the internal democracy procedures. Some people in the committees and research committees they stay there forever, with no opportunities for the

young people. I would say that that it was an achievement of the committee, that we were able to require that in the second day of our World Congress, the president and other candidates should present to the whole assembly, their plans and programmes and they give them two days to consult their constituencies before they cast their ballot. If we want to say we must be democratic and we must be open, we must practice it. This was the achievement of my internal democracy committee in the first term.

In the second term, I told that we have to think about the younger generation of sociologists. I was talking to Michael Burawoy about it in Goteborg; Burawoy as the new president of ISA created a committee for early careers sociologists. The first thing I did was to survey all the young sociologists (5 years after you finish your degree) and there were almost two thousand members of ISA under this category. I did my survey, and I reported that and I told the Executive Committee that young people want more participation.

Thus, in the Yokohama ISA World congress we had early careers sociologists session, and ten tables with young sociologists. Each table was hosted by a senior sociologist, but the facilitator was a young sociologist. When you organize these panels, I remember I wrote to Wallerstein, to Erik Olin Wright with the help of Michael Burawoy and they accepted right away their assignments! I can't never forget the Wallerstein table where he told the PhD candidates: "don't make a psychologist or therapist out of your advisor, you don't tell them your problems because they have their own problems. Just do the work"! What a magnificent advice to MA/PhD advisees. I also remembered Wallerstein when I was doing my PhD in Hawaii and the East West Center. In my department, when we have a visitor, usually the first day is the responsibility of the faculty. In the second day, graduate students must entertain. I said, let's take Wallerstein to a Thai restaurant. We brought them there, with Beatrice, his wife, driving a yellow rental car. When we got there, it was closed and will not open until six pm and Wallerstein said "let's go somewhere" and looking at my old beaten up car, Beatrice said "let me drive". Beatrice was driving up to Tantalus Mountains and looking at

the far blue Waikiki beach exclaimed, how beautiful! Wallerstein said, “Beatrice, keep your eyes on the road or there will be no more world system”. I thought for myself: “what a practical person!”.

I find that people who are brilliant, mature and have great acceptance of their own place in the academic world and in their personal lives, are also very kind, and generous with their support to young people, especially! My experience in ISA... I find that people who are really intellectually-emotionally secure, are also great people to work/live with. That is what ISA taught me, to appreciate those kinds of people, for example, Michael Burawoy. Both Burawoy and Margaret Abraham are very gracious, generous and supportive. When I was new to ISA, Izabela Barlinska, guided me in the submission of committee reports, etc. Izabela made my life in ISA very smooth and easy! I will always be grateful to her. When I applied for the Advanced Fulbright Research Fellowship in New York, I asked Margaret to be my host and she did everything for me and make my life in Hofstra University and New York very remarkable. What I am basically saying is that I am very grateful to the ISA, which allowed me to work with these people and to pursue what I think should be good for people, women of colour, early career sociologists from the global south—they face a lot of challenges in doing research and publication and I am quite happy that I was part of the ISA Executive Committee (2006-20014) that did a lot of innovative programs to support ISA members from the Global South.

*Gisela Redondo-Sama:* What is the role of Sociology in climate change research? Which are the main challenges we face in this field of knowledge?

*Prof. Emma E. Porio:* I would say love your work and love what sociology can do to your imagination and capacity to understand the world and create some meaningful changes in your midst. I tell people that I am so happy that I am a sociologist because it allows me to see the micro-meso-macro levels of life from my personal, professional and institutional positions. It is easy for me now to really understand that we need to integrate, vertically and horizontally our insights

to gain a greater perspective in our engagements. Recently, I was nominated by our university president to the National Panel of Technical Experts (NPTE) of Climate Change Commission of the Philippines. My principle in working with national institutions is we from Metro Manila, the center, must partner with the local scientists and work with their local government units (LGUs). Who shall produce the science for the local government? It should be the local scientists. I don't like this process where experts from the centre come as consultants and extract information/data from the local stakeholders. Consultants have no accountability to the locals; they come and ask a lot of questions and then give their report to the boss in the national/global capital. There is no capacity built among the local stakeholders. For me, capacity building is for everybody: for scientists to be able to work with people and to see the meaning of science, in terms of, what does it mean in terms of policies and programs that people can co-own and co-benefit? What does it mean in terms of programme design? I always say to the local officials, these poor people hit by the floods and typhoons did not contribute much to the warming of the earth but they bear the brunt of these extreme events.

In the new normal, we academics should follow the principles of transdisciplinary action research. Co-generation or co-production of knowledge with stakeholders: if you do that, you will also create your own capacities to communicate risks to the people. You advance your capacities as scientist as well as the capacities of practitioners to consume the knowledge and to apply the knowledge to their work and life practice. If you do these principles, it will lead to co-ownership of the knowledge products and both sides benefit from the research engagement. We must produce actionable science. I always tell people that if you ask me what I want to do, I just want to read, write, teach and have coffee with my family and friends but nobody pays you to do that. We have to work such that our knowledge products and structure/processes associated with it are empowering to all actors involved in the research enterprise.

We should train people who can translate our science, our technologies, to the people on the ground;

how they will mobilize it for their own good. *You don't research for the people, you research with the people without being condescending*, because a lot of people from the centre's or from the north's top research centres... they will just get your data and perhaps give you an acknowledgment or a footnote; I'd say this is the persistence of the post-colonial situation. I think in the post-modern world we try to be collegial/respectful and honour the dignity of all—whether researchers from the Global North or South.

I am very passionate; for me, democracy means equal opportunities regardless of gender, colour, ethnicity, etc. When I was deciding to come back to the Philippines after studying and teaching for 10 years in the US, one of my friends said, you can easily get a job here In the Us, you are female and “coloured”! And I said “I don't want to be hired just because I am a woman and I am coloured”.

It is very hard for women because it is only lately that women's rights have really advanced. If you look at Madame Curie and all these women scientist before us—they had to put up with sexism, double-standard employment processes, etc. For me, it is part of the historical unfolding of developmental patterns. My attitude is whatever you think of me is not my business but what I think I should be doing given the situation is my business!!

**Gisela Redondo-Sama:** You have participated in the NGOCSW Parallel Event in conjunction with the 66th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women this month. Which were the discussions underlying your participation in this event?

**Prof. Emma E. Porio:** I have to thank Jan Marie Fritz, ISA-Executive Committee and Rosemary Barberet because they were the ones who invited me to participate in NGOCSW panel. I basically talked about gender, equity and climate justice, because that's what I am doing now. I wanted to tell them “climate justice will never happen if procedural justice doesn't occur”. Women and the poor often do not enjoy procedural justice as they go through the system. We have so many issues about procedures involved I giving what is rightfully due to the poor, For example, we have the

citizens charter, and it is posted there, in the municipal hall about the rights of every citizen but you ask the poor women about their experience in claiming the Covid-19 pandemic assistance, they have many stories of denial of their claims. I am very passionate about these issues. When I was doing the research of my first book, *Partnership with the Poor*, I told the project leader, who was looking for indicators of project success: “if a poor farmer is able to go to the city hall, and tell the local chief executive or the Mayor about their agricultural problems and the kind of assistance that the government must deliver, I'd say that is a partial success!”. The state has always been an instrument of oppression as far as the poor are concerned so they will avoid those spaces if they can help it!! They fear going to those government buildings. For me, making sure that the procedures in implementing a policy or a law is fair and just is very important.

Procedural justice and recognition, I talked about that because I really feel that you have to look into the institutional procedures like who can open up spaces for women to be supported, their vulnerabilities reduced and their capacities are built? For me, the major problem Is that it is hard marginalized groups to trust with the local governments or other local institutions of power because the authorities have never been known to just and generous to the poor.

One of my research interests is about trust networks and social capital in disaster prone areas. After the May elections, I will conduct a survey about social capital and trust networks again as the election fever now is just crazy. I remember there was a world survey and I remember people in northern Europe, in the US and countries like Turkey, Philippines.. they were asked: do you trust the system? In places like Netherlands, Sweden... 70% of the people said “yes, I trust the system” but in countries like Turkey or Philippines, and Mexico there were only 10% who trust that the system will work for them! This is a problem—why the state is supposed to be the main protector of your rights but how can you protect your citizens if they don't trust you?

I think that we spend a lot of time and resources in our research. But can the local officials or the

people use it in crafting their adaptive strategies to the flooding in their area? Our research findings have implications on how resources are allocated but if not recognized an urgent issue by those in power and also by the people who can benefit from it the path to evidence-based decision-making is unclear. In fact, in the Philippines there is over three hundred cities/municipalities with no access to potable water but when we look at the priority investments of the government, the urgency to invest in this area is not palpable. Of course, people with no access to potable water are also living in vulnerable and marginalised communities. So you have your explanation why this is not a priority investment.

I still remember Wallerstein's (1979) questions: *Why is there hunger amidst plenty, and poverty amidst prosperity? Why the many who are afflicted do not rise up against the few who are privileged, and smite them?* I think these questions are timeless and timely! If you look at the figures on social inequality, it is really widening. If you look at the IPCC reports, there will

be a deepening of poverty, widening inequality, and the creation of new vulnerabilities. Thus, the climate crisis, and the social inequalities crisis, have been exacerbated by the Covid-10 pandemic.

More than ever, sociologists in the world, there is plenty of work to be done. There are new modalities, there are new relationships to be crafted and recrafted because of the fast unfolding of events/processes! We should ask why are these new relationships being crafted? Why and for what purpose? Who gets to be benefited by these innovations? What are the consequences of the social relationships and the structures that we have constructed? Excitement and engagement is so important now. We have to train people now from all the sciences to be vigilant, pro-creative and mutually supportive. We have to appreciate what the other is capable of creating for the public good. Every contribution is a worthwhile contribution for this world to become more kind, especially to those who need it most.