

30th October 2009, Philippines - 'Fifty pesos 'kada adlaw; ang beinte niana pamasaha' (I get an allowance of 50 pesos (about one U.S. dollar) a day, of which 20 pesos (40 U.S. cents) is for fare),' says 17-year-old Dana Jane Estrada.

The second-year college student in a state university in the suburbs of Davao City—a major metropolis in the southeastern part of Mindanao, the second largest island in the Philippines—is taking up Bachelor of Science in Community Development. She is the eldest of three siblings that mainly depend on their father, a passenger jeepney driver, and their mother, a cook for poultry farm workers.

The remaining 30 pesos (63 U.S. cents) is spent for lunch, afternoon snacks, photocopies, Internet fees, and expenses for field work, she says.

Her classmate Jean Batausa, 18, gets even less: 30 pesos. She manages to squeeze her budget by walking home after classes and thus spends only five pesos for a tricycle fare every day. 'I do that so I can save,' she says in the vernacular. The rest of her 'baon', or allowance, is spent on projects, school supplies, subject modules, and activity T-shirts.

She only rides the tricycle—a motorcycle with a sidecar, which is used for short distances and on smaller roads—to school in the morning when she is in a rush. But she admits there are times when she has to deny herself even such small luxury.

Batausa is the third in a family with four children, who all rely on the income of their father, a chainsaw operator. He only earns whenever somebody wants a tree cut, which is not every day. Her stay-at-home mother earns no income. So, whenever her father does not have work, they run to her aunt.

Both girls admit budget is tighter this year than in the past, although both cannot quantify just how stretched it is.

Batausa says her family 'spends only for what's really necessary' while Estrada says her family has had to forego going to the beach or mall together. The latter adds she has become used to

her budget, such that she even manages to save some of it. She has to, she says, because there are days when her school expenses exceed her daily allowance.

Despite the tight budget, both are determined to finish their studies. They have their families to help, they say.

'After graduation, we have to help our parents. Then after that, we'll help the community,' Batausa says. They intend to do that by sticking to the simple teenage life they know. 'We get by with a little music, conversations, bonding in some friend's house.'

With just a dollar a day—or less—and lots of school expense each day, these two girls are simply scraping by. Yet they are still better off.

Take Sunshine, for example.

'I'm so hungry, 'Ate' (a title that denotes kinship and literally means 'older sister'),' says the 13-year-old girl in her native Visayan dialect as she walks into the interview an hour late. At 10:30 a.m., she says she has yet to have a breakfast.

The staff at Tambayan Children's Center Inc., a drop-in center for street girls in the central business district of this city, offers her and four other girls a cup of hot chocolate and a cupcake each—hardly enough for her grumbling stomach, prompting her to step out looking for rice, the Philippines' staple food.

The girls, ages 13-16, belong to a gang in their community—reason enough why they asked to be identified only by their nicknames. While they get help and encouragement from Tambayan ('hangout' in Filipino) to remain in school, Alona, 15, says several of their peers have dropped out. 'They stopped because it's difficult to remain in school when you are hungry,' she says.

Those who manage to stay in school have to deal not just with incessant hunger but also the

constant worries of not meeting their school needs, what with school projects left and right.

'Each project per subject costs around 20 pesos (40 U.S. cents), and we have several subjects in a day,' Sunshine says.

Asked how they manage to deal with this extra expense, 15-year-old Leah says that most of the time they just appeal to the understanding of their teachers. 'But if you don't have a project, you still get low grades,' she says.

Like many other countries, especially in the world's poor regions, the Philippines has not been immune to the impact of the global economic crisis. As of January, there were 2.855 million jobless Filipinos, up from 2.675 million in the same month last year, according to the National Statistics Office (NSO). Often the worst hit in any financial crunch are the poor, who comprise a big chunk of the country's estimated population of 92 million, according to the NSO.

Poverty afflicts 27.9 million Filipinos or 4.7 million families, said Undersecretary Luwalhati Pablo of the Department of Social Welfare and Development during her presentation at the Third China-ASEAN Forum on Social Development and Poverty Reduction, held late last month in Vietnam. Thirty percent of the total population is unable to meet its basic food and non-food requirements, she added.

'We used to be able to buy two kilos of rice for the same amount that we are spending now for one and a half,' Alona, the eldest of in a brood of seven, says.

At the Centre, the girls look no different from one's average teen, rowdy and full of fun—wholesome fun, that is. But that is only because they must abide by its rules, foremost of which is the no smoking restriction.

Outside, in their communities, vices abound along with girl-boy relationships that have led to many teenage live-in relationships—a convoluted escape from their extreme hardship at home.

Then, too, there is the problem of prostitution. Alona claims she has seen an increase in the number of prostituted girls in and around her community. 'We can see them when we walk around with our gang; there are more of them these days,' she recounts.

But while she and others may openly speak of this social malady, some girls chose to keep mum about another societal ill.

'I no longer have a mother, and I do not live with my father,' Elsie, 17, says. She has been living with her 'barkada', or peers, for two years now.

Experts say domestic violence is an unspoken problem that girls like Elsie have to live with—or choose to escape from. Children, because of their age, are the most vulnerable sector in society, but they become even more vulnerable when placed in a situation of dire economic straits, says Carla Averilla-Canarias, supervising advocacy officer of Tambayan.

'First is the vulnerability of a child to be abused physically, because parents tend to be short-tempered when they don't have money and food,' she says. It is even worse for girls, she adds. 'There is sexual abuse and exploitation. They are prone to become victims of prostitution, trafficking and pornography, to become dropouts and be involved in drug and substance abuse.'

A study conducted by Tambayan, covering 255 girls in 2007, showed that all respondents experienced some form of abuse and that one of every two were involved in prostitution or at a high risk of being prostituted.

The rest of the findings were no less disconcerting: Four in every five were not in school, four out of every 10 experienced physical and emotional punishment at home, in school and in their communities; one in every five had been apprehended for curfew violation; involvement in gang riots, solvent sniffing, drugs, theft and snatching were not uncommon; and one in every 10 had sexually transmitted infections, with some having had early pregnancies.

As money becomes tighter, situations become worse, forcing children to leave home and yearn for the company of their peers, there being neither food nor solace in their homes.

Source: IPS