

Interview with Kasia Stręk

How was it to photograph the people in Metro Manila?

► I discovered the place while working on a different story in Malabon shantytown area, just a few days before leaving the Philippines. I was deeply moved by the kids I met there and after verifying if the community will agree to welcome me among them, I decided to come back the following day.

The issue is extremely complex. This is the community they live in. They do not have a different place to move to. As the government of the Philippines (according to the statistics one of the most corrupted in the World) does not provide any help or coverage, some kids do not even have their birth certificate. As the community is much smaller than the one in Tondo, not even NGO organisations come there, people are really left on their own without a way out. Unable to find better solutions they use materials found nearby and do as much as they can.

What was it like to be there? How did you feel?

► First time I came to the place I felt as if I was entering hell, if the hell on earth exists, this is how it looks like. Naked kids and skinny dogs running around on mountains of garbage, all covered with black smoke. The smoke that itches your eyes and stays on your skin for a long time after. Incredible heat of May, one of the hottest months in this climate, only emphasized by the heat generated from glowing fire volcanos around.

All together I spend 5 months in the Philippines, and about 2 months in Metro Manila. Filipinos are extremely generous; smiling and hospitable, no matter the conditions they live in. Regardless where I went, I was always warmly welcomed and greeted with a surprise that anyone from outside is interested in their problems. I spent a month working in the poor, urban community where even taxi drivers sometimes refuse to go and as I was introduced by community organizers there, everyone knew me and I started to know some inhabitants.

I was always amazed how kids find a playful universe in any circumstances and even covered with smoke they always wear a smile.

What do you want to tell the public with your photos? And why?

► I genuinely believe that some issues just need to be shown and seen as this is where every action starts. Even if the response will not create an immediate change in the lives of those who I photograph, raising awareness is necessary to make the public think about the situation of others but also question their own habits and lifestyle. In my work, I prefer to treat bigger environmental or social justice issues by concentrating on smaller, personal stories of everyday life. I wish to create a bond between my subject, their stories that I wish to emphasize and the public. It is easier to care for those with whom we might have some kind of emotional relationship.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that there are about 250 million economically active children (individuals below 18 years old) worldwide. 61% of these workers – roughly 153 million – are in Asia. Around half of the economically active children are working full time and 20–30% about 30 to 46 million – are in exploitative conditions or worse forms of child labor. South East Asia is by far the region where child labor is most thriving and culturally complex. According to the National Statistics Office of the Philippines around 5.5 million underage work illegally in the country.

Child labor is technically illegal but extremely widespread. As the enforcement of existing laws is inadequate, child labor practices happen widely and consistently. Driven by poverty, it is often parents who are forced to push their children into work at an early age. With no alternative help from the government, charcoal production remains the only way to survive for those living in the area. It is only one of possible income sources. Thousands live on scavenging, going through rubbish to collect scrap metal or even food that is later reused or resold. Many children do not have access to education and become trapped in low-skilled, low-pay work that further brings them into the cycle of poverty.

Is there something or someone you remember that/who left a big impression on you?

► The first girl I met there. Her name is Melba, she is 13 years old, the oldest of 5 siblings. We met just after her day at work, in the community resting area close to a sari-sari store. She was only wearing one shoe. Her curly reddish hair was covered with black smoke and so was her smiling face. She was wearing earrings and a necklace that she found in the garbage and lost the following day. She did not go to school for 3 years as her parents could only support the first 3 years of her education. She believed that it is due to the lack of proper

shoes and clothing that she stopped going to school, but in reality, daily schooling expenses are around 100 pesos, too much for a family of 7 that sometimes earn only 500 pesos in total per week.

How big is the Ullingan community?

► In Ullingan community in Malabon, which is only a part of Barangay Catmon about 100 families live in the area of charcoal production.

Where is the charcoal going to? Is it getting sold at the European market? Or is it only for the local market?

► Charcoal is the main source of energy for urban poor communities in the Philippines. It is much cheaper than gas or electricity; there is also no need for special equipment like a cook or even a gas bottle to use it. This Ullingan community is not the only one producing it. Those «factories» are always illegal, but the charcoal is sold to the local market only, so the one produced in the city of Malabon ends up on the Central Market of Malabon and is sold in small plastic bags by all kinds of vendors, from grocers to clothes vendors.

Why is the charcoal production based in Metro Manila?

► Slum area's residents in Metro Manila were always finding ways to support themselves with scavenging or reusing materials that were thrown away. As most dumpsites were closed and resettlements areas are built in the province with very few facilities and work possibilities, many turned into local businesses and community-based coal as it is the cheapest and most widely used source of energy among the urban poor in the Philippines. 👁

Wywiad powstał na potrzeby artykułu opublikowanego w holenderskim magazynie One World.

Kasia Stręk – Polish photojournalist based between Paris and Warsaw. After studying fine arts in Poland and France, she turned to photography and traveled for a scholarship to Brisbane in Australia where she studied documentary photography at Queensland College of Art. Her practice focuses on subjects related to social inequalities, the environmental issues and women rights. She has recently been selected as one of 30 Under 30 Women photographers for 2018. She divides her work between assignments for the press, NGOs and development of personal projects.

Her photos were published in: Time Magazine (US), Le Monde, Liberation, Paris Match, La Croix, Le Pelerin, La Vie, Famille Chretienne, Panorama (FR), Gazeta Wyborcza (PL), One World (NL), Blink (US), Polka Magazine (FR) and Twoj Styl (PL). She collaborates with Amnesty International France, Action Aid France, DCC, Greenpeace Philippines and The Climate Reality Project. Her work has also been presented several times in Poland and in Australia during individual and collective exhibitions.