

## WOMEN IN FISHERIES IN THE PHILIPPINES\*

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### *Abstract*

*Fishing has been identified as an occupation dominated by men because of the image that only men go out to sea in their fishing boats. For this reason, industry studies and statistical data are about men. Women who are also fisherfolk because they are engaged in pre- and post- catch activities are rendered invisible. This paper presents women's situation in and contribution to the fishing industry which has ranked the Philippines as the 11th amongst fish-producing countries.*

### **I. Overview of the Fisheries Sector**

The Philippines is an archipelagic country of 7,100 islands and is endowed with vast aquatic resources which is about seven times larger than its land area of 300,000 square kilometers. The country's marine resources of coral reefs, mangroves and fish stocks consist of 220 million hectares within the Exclusive Economic Zone. Of these, 26.6 million hectares are coastal and 193.4 million hectares are oceanic waters. The continental shelf area is about 18.46 million hectares. The length of the coastline is 17,460 kilometers.

The Philippines is a world-significant fish producer, ranking eleventh among the 80 fish-producing countries of the world (Philippine Fisheries Profile, 1992). The fishing in-

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dustry contributed 3.8% to total GDP (BFAR 1997) and 18.6% to GVA in the agriculture industry group, valued at 34 billion pesos (constant prices). The importance of this sector is further emphasized by the fact that fish is the major source of animal protein in the diet of the average Filipino, and constitutes 12% of total annual food intake.

Employment in the fisheries sector is approximately 990,872, about 5% of the country's labor force. Of these, 68% are employed by municipal fishing, 26% by aquaculture and 6% by commercial fishing. The 1995 census of population reports that 91.7% of those employed in fishing are male and 8.2% are female, indicating that fishing is a male dominated field. On the other hand, the aggregate employment proportions by sex in the rural population is 70% male and 30% female. However, as will be demonstrated in a later section and revealed by various studies, this participation rate of women in the fishing sector is an underestimation.

## **II. Social Demographic and Psychological Characteristics of Women in Fishing Households.**

Several studies looking at gender dimensions in fishing (de Castro et al. 1986; Hondrade & Rodriguez 1994; Illo & Polo 1990; Sobritchea 1994; Ardales 1997; Villacorta 1998) show that the majority of sample female respondents has completed on the average 4 to 6 years, or lower of education. Their level of schooling is not very different from that of their menfolk. While this figure is about similar to rural women in general, it is lower than the average among women in urban areas (6.9 years).

Accurate income data seem difficult to estimate, although in these same studies whenever there is household income

reported, the range has been from PhP13,740.00 (in 1991, or \$327 current exchange) to PhP37,000 (\$880). Data from 12 bays in the Philippines (PRIMEX-ANZDEC, 1996) report an average annual income of PhP25,426 (in 1992, or \$605). It is ironic that despite the importance of the fisheries sector to the national economy, the majority of those who engage in it as a livelihood earn average incomes way below the poverty threshold.

As a further backdrop to appreciating the situation of women in fishing communities, the following characteristics of these communities as reported on the 12 bays are revealing of the living conditions of fisher households:

- Average age of household head is 41 years.
- Average age of spouse is 37 years.
- Average family size is 5.1 (although the range reported in the studies cited above is from four to nine members.)
- 82% own their houses.
- 44% of houses are made of nipa and bamboo and 34% of nipa and wood.
- Only 40% own the lot where their houses stand.
- 51% have toilet facilities.
- 25% of households are members in community organization.
- 20% have availed of loans, of which 83% came from informal sources.

In five of the sites of the cited studies, the women alongside the men were members of the fisherfolk association in their locality. The other women were mainly active in homemaker type of organizations such as those for health and social welfare, which are extensions of their traditional reproductive roles of being caregivers. However they usually

represent their husbands in assemblies of fisher or farmer organizations which are male-dominated.

The attitudes of women regarding their roles (Hondrade & Rodriguez 1994) project the gender division of labor prevailing in most of Philippine society. Thus they believe that men are the "foundation and the head" of the household while women are the "light" of the household. The men should support the family financially, give strength to family living and handle the heavy work. On the other hand, women attend to all problems and needs of the family and household, safekeep and allocate the husband's meager earnings, and manage the household budget. The women view themselves more as supporters rather than leaders and are proud of the success of those they have assisted. They have a self-sacrificing attitude in pursuing their home obligations.

These beliefs about roles are manifested in the activities performed daily. Women's attention to family needs is encompassing and covers everything that reproduces the next generation of the family. This includes child-bearing, child-rearing and home maintenance tasks of cooking, food preparation, dishwashing, laundering, house-cleaning, vegetable gardening, fuel-gathering, and fetching water. An additional feature, which is typical in rural households, is the role of women in caring for domestic livestock. As a means to augment meager household incomes and to provide for family food needs, the women resort to backyard rearing of pig or poultry, the feeding and cleaning of which add to their multiple household chores.

Involvement of women in community decision-making and leadership is limited. Some serve as barangay (smallest political unit in Philippine governance system) captains, especially if they happen to belong to political parties associated with the higher income strata, the more educated, and usu-

ally the landed, and if it is more convenient that the woman rather than the man assumes the responsibility and authority. More often, however, the women assume less major positions such as secretary, treasurer, or "muse" of organizations, and become top officers only in all-women associations (Honrade & Rodriguez 1994). Women themselves believe that men are more decisive than they are. Such a perception reinforces the already male-dominated leadership and decision-making structures and processes. Despite these structures, it has been observed that more women than men regularly attend community meetings (Honrade & Rodriguez 1994; Abregana et al. 1996). Thus without realizing it women may actually have an active influence in the decision-making through their participation in these meetings.

### **III. Role of Women in Fisheries**

Fishing has been identified as an occupation dominated by men because of the image that only men go out to sea in their fishing boats. In most cases, women in fishing communities are not allowed to go with fishing vessels, but the reason is tied more to the need for them to remain within the premises of the household so they can attend to their designated responsibilities in the home. Because of this concern, their direct production participation involves less central fish capture activities, particularly, shell and fry gathering/gleaning, spearfishing in rivers, reef fishing using scoop nets, traps and fish baskets, all of which tend to be near-shore activities (Asong et al. 1998; Villacorta 1998, Lachapelle 1997). These activities nevertheless either contribute to household income or provide direct food for the table. Though less common, fishing villages in Davao (southern Philippines) have Muslim women who actually go on fishing expeditions with their

fisher husbands (Israel 1993). Women likewise are known to join their husbands in hauling nets and lines (de Castro 1986; Villacorta 1998) and installing and maintaining stationary gear (Rodriguez 1996a).

Fishing as an occupation is more than just fish production. The participation of women before and after the actual fish capture activities has been given little importance, leading to the near invisibility of women as contributors to this sector. However these pre- and post-production activities are significant in terms of their economic and social value. These include net-mending, sorting of fish upon landing, fish vending, trading and market retailing, and processing and preservation (salting, drying). It has been observed that men are involved in marketing activities mainly when dealing with middlemen and when the fish caught is of high commercial value (tuna, abalone); otherwise, women handle marketing when this is small scale and when involving the inexpensive fish variety. Fish processing and preservation is mainly the arena of women because it is associated with food preparation. Women engaged in postharvest fishing activities constitute 40% of such workers and substantially increase the total income of their households (Legaspi et al. 1991). The social value of such activities lies in the support and assistance wives give to their fisher husbands and in its reinforcement of relationships in the community, such as in dealing with their *suki* or favored buyer.

In seeking credit, while the men are the recognized borrowers by banking and other formal credit institutions, the women transact loans through informal community links such as from relatives and neighbors. When household incomes are inadequate the women take on the role of seeking such informal credit.

*Women's Participation in Community-Based Coastal Resources Management (CBCRM)*. Due to the steady decline in marine fish production and the alarming degradation of the marine environment, there has been a marked shift in development strategies in favor of management and sustainability of coastal resources through the involvement of different stakeholders. In the past decade such an emphasis has gained ground and it would be worthwhile to examine the extent to which women as a distinct group has been involved. The reports on experiences in CBCRM are only now just being published (Ferrer, de la Cruz & Domingo 1996; Pomeroy & Carlos 1996; Local Government Center 1996).

A perusal of these documents reveals that the gender issue is not reported as a distinct component in the discussion except in Rodriguez' article (Ferrer et al. 1996) which focuses on women's issues and gender roles in the project site in Batan, Panay Island. In this project, men, women and children were trained on tilapia cage culture — feeding, sampling, cage-cleaning and harvesting. The women were assigned to the tasks of financial recording and record keeping. Among the significant outcomes of the experience, aside from the generation of additional income, are the reinforcement of women's entrepreneurship inasmuch as they took care of vending the fish, the fostering of unity among cooperative members; training in leadership; and the appreciation and recognition by the men of women as partners at work and at home. This sensitivity to gender issues, which was part of the training in community organizing, has also resulted in men increasingly assuming some share of household chores.

The other reports make no distinction of who-does-what intervention in the CBCRM process. At most it mentions that women's groups are among those that have been established as part of the essential community organizing compo-

ment. Whether this neglect is only in the reporting may not be a trivial matter. Nevertheless the recommendations should have reflected a specific concern for women's issues.

Interviews with a few NGO personnel reveal that women issues are given some emphasis in their respective CBCRM programs as well as in a few others that they know of. However their experiences have not been captured in published literature, which is more a reflection of the relative lack of a publication culture in the country. This thus deprives the publics of needed information that would have been useful to foster the integration of women in fisheries development.

These interviews also reveal that women, more so than the men, serve as frontliners in enforcing fisheries regulation and confronting violators, e.g., use of illegal gear, use of dynamite in fishing, etc. This may be because women are better negotiators and are more level-headed in handling conflicts than men.

*Nonfishing-Related Economic Activities.* The participation of women in fishing activities takes place alongside their non-fishing production activities and their household responsibilities. Coastal communities engage in a combination of fishing and farming as a way of coping with the seasonal nature of these occupations. Table 1 drawn from Rodriguez (1996b) illustrates the gender-disaggregated profile of activities in fishing communities. The profile shows that women play multiple roles beyond that chiefly associated with reproduction and community maintenance. These other roles are productive in nature, usually attributed as men's work and for which women are not properly credited. Thus women play substantive roles in farming, aquatic production, marine production, copra gathering, nipa thatching and weaving.

It is not uncommon for women to engage in work outside the home, such as sewing, weaving, running sari-sari



(variety) stores, selling of beauty products, food peddling. Women have also been implementors and beneficiaries of livelihood projects offered by both government and non-governmental agencies.

Women are easily recruited as community volunteers and development workers especially in domains that seem to be an extension of their traditional roles. These are time-consuming basically unpaid work such as day care workers, nutrition scholars, barangay health workers, and church volunteers.

#### **IV. Problems/Issues involving Women's Sectoral Participation**

1. Poor access to credit which will improve women's capability to profit from their economic activities in the sector. Post-capture activities such as fish marketing and processing, which women have assumed, can be enhanced beyond being just survival or day-to-day enterprises that depend only on the husband's catch. However this will require capitalization that poor fishing households cannot afford. While credit programs for artisanal fishers have been made available, they are generally intended for the fisher's production activities, such as for gear improvement, construction of artificial reefs, fry gathering, crab-fattening, etc. Moreover such loans are made available primarily through the male-dominated fishermen cooperatives. Thus there is no credit facility primarily intended to respond to the needs of the women who sell fish or who process the catch. Such credit may be used to enter into a bigger processing operation by buying the catch of other fishers.

2. Technical assistance, training and extension have been designed to target only the male fisher, not mindful of the real situation in the sector where women are just as active in

many spheres of fish production. Women then do not learn of new technology nor are they able to consult on technical problems they may encounter in their productive activities. Usually their source of knowledge on such things is through their fisher husbands, who learn directly from fisheries technicians.

3. Reduction of post-harvest losses in fisheries and improved fish processing technology will be an important challenge for the future because fish stock exploitation may have reached maximum levels. Women participation is crucial because they are main actors in the post-harvest domain. In terms of training and support directed at processing, storage, packaging and distribution of fish and the management of their enterprises, women should be a major target group.

4. Fish marketing and trading activities are limited by the lack of mobility of the women who are expected to operate close to the domestic front. Thus information on prices and market trends are not available as these are usually directly observed in the central fish markets.

5. Low educational attainment and socio-cultural constraints hamper full participation of women in development activities of the sector. Their ability to use and access available information is certainly affected by their level of literacy. Their belief in their own lack of competence and ability, vis-a-vis their male counterpart, affects their self-confidence in independently pursuing projects.

6. Women's participation in income-generating activities and other development tasks, such as attendance at meetings and training, are observed to be short-lived, especially when monitoring by granting agencies cease. One reason for this is the time required from the women. Considering the multiple burden of regular domestic and productive activities, addi-

tional activities would be an imposition and take time away from these already-defined responsibilities. Unless provisions are made to deal with earlier time commitments, full involvement in development programs will not be sustained.

7. Sensitivity to gender issues is still low not only among the community but also among extension personnel who work with fisherfolk. Although the concern for gender has entered into the rhetoric of development efforts of both government and NGO's and even of laws passed (e.g., Agriculture and Fisheries Modernization Act of 1987), it is still a poorly-understood issue. An appreciation and analytical perspective of the gendered division of labor and its consequences on the relative status and perceived competencies of men and women are necessary to facilitate the integration of women's efforts into the full development of the fisheries sector.

8. Women's work is most disadvantaged and marginalized when coastal and marine resources are degraded and depleted. When reefs and mangrove areas are destroyed, women fishers who use simple gears are relegated to shell gathering or to vend produce of nearby fishponds (Rodriguez, 1996a). Younger women leave the fishing village to seek employment as either domestics or factory workers. The response of men, on the other hand, is to seek to acquire more powerful vessels to bring them farther to sea. These concerns highlight the need for the deliberate inclusion of women in CBCRM, as they are significant stakeholders.

9. There is no research program that systematically tackles gender issues and women's participation and integration in fisheries development. Corollary to this, data bases which are sex disaggregated and which may be used in more effective plan-ning and implementation in this sector, hardly exist.

## **V. Recommendations**

1. Extension programs intended for fisheries should incorporate gender concerns into the planning and design of the activities. This may manifest itself in interventions that consider the existing and accepted positions of men and women in society but at the same time opening up avenues for new or expanded roles and responsibilities for women. For example, opening up of credit packages which are more realistic of the conditions women find themselves in.

2. On the same vein, technical assistance for improved fish processing technology, a major domain of fisher's wives, should be instituted. This may go beyond the traditional sun-drying and salting processes and into newer technologies, but with adequate support in equipment and related facilities.

3. Training for entrepreneurship should be another priority. Women are already engaged in small trading enterprises but which enterprises could benefit from inputs on risk-taking, better business practices and financial management.

4. An improved market information system will benefit fishers' decision on fish prices and make them less dependent on prices offered by middlemen. The object is to increase the fisher household's profit margins.

5. Development activities should not add to the burden of women who already have multiple work burdens both production and reproduction spheres. While interventions intended to benefit women in the sector are desirable, these should be accompanied by provisions that will free up time for them to attend to these added activities. For example day care services, child minding centers, possible pooling of cooking responsibilities.

6. There should be stronger advocacy and actual conduct of gender sensitivity training for both men and women

in the communities. This will aim, among others, to sensitize the community on the issues brought on by the culturally constructed gender division of labor, the relative valuing of men's and women's works, gender stereotypes and to lead them toward more gender-fair and gender-sensitive interactions. This can likewise surface and address issues on domestic violence and reproductive health and rights (Rodriguez, 1996a), which affect women in general and which if adequately addressed will definitely improve women's status and participation in the fisheries sector.

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