

LIFE HISTORY

ONE WOMAN'S WAY: HOUSEWORK AND HOMEWORK

Jenny Llaguno

Fe is from Ifugao province. She is the only girl in a family of seven children. Her six brothers are all married now. They're mostly engaged in agricultural work. Her parents are still in the village.

It takes two days on foot to reach her home in Ifugao on heavily rainy days when no vehicle would venture to go that way because of its slippery, muddy roads. By truck is the only means of transportation on good-weather days, costing passengers 45-50 pesos each, one way.

When Fe was a little girl in the elementary school she almost had to stop studying because she was already engaged to be married at such a tender age. That was the fate of most young girls in her village after a few years of schooling, because there were no schools for a continuous education in the village.

After finishing Grade IV, Fe found a teacher who agreed to take her to another village where the teacher's parents lived, and where Fe could go on to Grades V and VI. In exchange for her board and lodging, she did housework. She had to do this because the school was some distance from her home village and it would not be possible for her to go home everyday.

After she finished grade school, the same teacher (who helped her continue studying) offered to support her through high school because her parents had no means for her further education, on the condition that she changed her name. She didn't think this was nice and she did not agree.

She had to go to another part of the province, the Kiangan, to attend high school. There, she found another family to serve while attending the first year of high school. The following year, she tried to live on her own by paying her lodgings from her earnings but she had to go home to her village for her food; the trips home exhausted her and she became ill.

Fe went on to third year high school but she stopped commuting, deciding instead to try to stay in a dormitory. As soon as school was out on Friday afternoon, she accepted washing and ironing jobs in people's homes, or other odd jobs required by whoever employed her, even working in the field, treshing, harvesting. She did this throughout the weekend. When she returned to the dorm, she turned over her wages to pay for her food.

It was at this time that Fe had a fateful encounter with Rosario, an anthropologist from one of the universities in Manila. Rosario asked the sisters in the dormitory to help her find someone who would want to go back to Manila with her. Fe volunteered; this was how she got to the capital and also how she left high school.

Fe was sixteen when she worked as a helper in the house of Rosario's aunt. After a while she got sick and moved to Rosario's house, leaving a co-worker to stay on with the Aunt. Rosario did not know whether Fe wanted to stay permanently in Manila so she asked her after two months if she was going back to Kiangon. Fe responded that she wanted to continue working in Manila. But she knew that she would have to neglect her schooling.

When Fe agreed to come to Manila, her plan was to earn enough money to enable her to finish high school. But since she did not want to return two months later, she had to stop studying.

Three years later, Fe began to realize what she had missed of school and upon Rosario's suggestion, she went back to Ifugao to obtain her school documents so she could attend the fourth year of high school in Manila. She talked about life being hard, meaning by this that she had already turned 19 then and still had not finished high school.

Fe went to a school in San Juan, Rizal for her last year of high school. She and another helper took turns at their housework while either one went to school.

Aida, Rosario's housemate, suggested that Fe start operating a sari-sari store in order to generate some funds for her school expenses. She agreed and Aida borrowed money for her so she could open the store. The store financed the two helpers' tuition fees, school transportation and pocket money.

Fe also attended vocational school at Maryknoll College where she first learned to sew and where she obtained skills in tailoring. Rosario bought a sewing machine for her afterwards. She graduated from high school in 1973. Soon after, Rosario put up Pinangga, a retail garment shop on Cortada St. in Ermita, which Fe tended in the afternoon. Later, she assumed a bigger responsibility by managing the shop, living there, taking care of it while still being the salesperson. She did the purchasing, only sometimes did Rosario come along. She took care of the merchandise, cleaning them, checking for quality control. There were too many heart-

aches, she discovered, especially because she had a certain standard of sewing; she wanted quality. Fe temporarily left Pinangga and moved to Angeles in Pampanga for six months where there was an opportunity to deal with something familiar to her: the tribal arts of Ifugao.

She eventually came back to live with Rosario in Kamuning and got involved again with Pinangga now operating through a network that was developing in Bulacan. This was in 1979-80. This was followed by the period when she started to produce embroidered shirts on her own, while living in an apartment on North Road in Cubao, partly as its caretaker.

Sometime after she met an exporter and she produced shirts for her. Later, when Rosario made designs for Suntrade, a manufacturer and exporter of leather crafts, Fe also got involved in production in her own limited way. Fe's way has always been limited by the fact that she has always worked alone, moving from house to house as a tenant while she continued to produce embroidered shirts.

Fe was determined to get an education. She was also bent on learning a skill. And when she got them, she felt that she had moved away from having to serve in people's houses, achieving a form of autonomy that assures her of subsistence, at the very least, but also of freedom in determining her destiny.

Fe is a single parent; she has two daughters, aged 15 and eight. Abigail, nicknamed Bagan, her eldest child now lives in the same dormitory and convent school which Fe attended in Kiangan. The difference is that her daughter is not a child worker. She pays for her lodging, she buys her own food and prepares it, and she goes to school. Fe sends money for all these. Rina, the younger one, lives with Fe's parents in her native village where she attends primary school.

Fe has earned a living through her hand-embroidered blouses and t-shirts, doing everything by herself, from purchasing the cloth in Divisoria to cutting the material, sewing them into finished garments, hand embroidering the design drawn on to them and finally retailing and marketing them in various ways.

She was generally alone in all this. However, though she frequently did all the sewing and the designs there were women who did the laundry for her: the blouses and t-shirts would have to be washed and ironed before they were sold. Later, she even involved women in her community, subcontracting some of the embroidery to them. After this, she also engaged three more women in Cainta. In the middle of 1990, she entered into a partnership with a Frenchwoman married to a Filipino, and together they put up Silangan Needle Crafts. With this enterprise, her community of women workers increased to 14, including live-in workers like Salvacion and Miriam, while retaining two families in Cainta to continue doing work. There is also

one family in Caloocan who does work for Silangan. The entire family is involved; one brother designs, another family member sews, the mother does the embroidery.

The women workers are paid by the piece. She, as partner, gets a fixed wage of P170.00 a day on a six-day work week. They all get paid at the end of the week.

Her biggest problem is the constant threat of not being able to sell the shirts. Since her only source of income is the money from sales it is a kind of livelihood that does not guarantee stability.

She feels that a solution might be found if the factory were to standardize, although she really does not feel that they have any problems with sizing. She says that perhaps they should talk with other entrepreneurs with similar experiences and problems in selling their products, especially those with experiences in exporting since it is so easy to make a mistake when one has no experience.

She feels that it is a mistake to put emphasis on their livelihood as an activity for the poor, as an assistance to the unemployed, as helping the needy, because sometimes the clientele is really interested in this aspect of the enterprise. Instead, she wants to give more publicity to the description of the products, what is up for sale. Nevertheless she gets calls from people who ask where they can buy the shirts. She makes the decisions about which applicants should become embroiderers. She tests them, giving them a handkerchief first, so that errors would be limited to the area of the handkerchief, where a damaged portion could be easily checked. If she sees that the applicant's stitches are okay, she decides that her embroidery could be good and she tries her out on a shirt. Eventually, she takes her in.

The amount of time it takes for a shirt to be hand-embroidered depends on the embroiderer. She might want to get it done right away in which case she brings it back in one or two days. And yet, even if she does because perhaps she's badly in need of cash, a sick child at home, for instance, would compel to put her work aside, and only work on the shirt when the child is asleep. Then it might take her four days to a week to finish embroidering the shirt.

Fe, herself, if she works on a shirt straight for eight hours, doing nothing but embroider except for the few minutes it takes to eat or go to the bathroom, can finish a simple design in a full day's time; a complicated design will take a day and a half.

There are three sewing machines in Fe's workplace. They have electric motors but they are not high-speed. She does not think there is any need for a high-speed sewing machine because what takes time in her line of work is not the sewing but the embroidery.

Her living space used to be much smaller because some of it was

rented out to a student boarder. But when he left, she decided to occupy the entire house for herself and her co-workers. She pays P500.00 monthly for rent but she shares the rental fee with her partner. She agrees that the rent is not cheap, but that it is better to pay it than live in less desirable quarters. The neighborhood is pleasant; the street below is cemented and therefore it does not get muddy when it rains.

Silangan has had opportunities to sell quite a lot during March, because it is women's month, and a number of women's organizations have invited them to put up stands or to participate in the *tiangge* (flea market). They have been able to sell in this manner at Forbes Park and in Philippine Plaza. They also have their shirts on consignment in boutiques.

There is no explaining why there are times when a return in sales of P50,000.00 would happen in just a few days while at other times, sales would be unbearably low and slow.

The circumstances surrounding these trading periods are not always the same, says Fe. For instance, they do not always get invitations to sell and also people do not buy all the time. So it's only when they make big turnovers that they earn a little more.

She regards the marketing of their goods as a singular problem. She longs for a well-located shop that could be rented at a low price where they would have an outlet for all their finished products, and thus be assured of a daily income. She has no idea where such a shop could be found.

For the shirts that they sell on consignment, 10-20% of their stated price is marked off for the store. The consignee first deducts 20% off the tag, then increases the original price to an amount that is decided by the consignee thus making the product more expensive than Silangan would want it to be, and therefore harder to sell. So the consignee's profit goes up and Silangan gets less.

Fe's current group of women homeworkers in the Silangan partnership had a party in Fe's house last Christmas, and they had fun. Even if they had only worked together for six months, they all came when invited, and they had a happy time together. After the party, other women came to apply as embroiderers. Fe says that maybe it got around what a happy group they are. For sure it is so, Fe muses, as they get to know each other, and see that here is work, a kind of work that is good for the women because it is intended to help them, even if it's only a little help. They realize this and so they come back for more work, and bring other women as well, and that is how the number of embroiderers have increased, especially after the holiday get-together.