

## BOOK REVIEWS

FISHERS, TRADERS, FARMERS, WIVES - The Life Stories of Ten Women in a Fishing Village  
by Jeanne Frances I. Illo and Jaime B Polo.  
Quezon City: Institute of Philippine Culture,  
Ateneo de Manila University, 1990.

There are many ways of knowing.

Traditional research has prescribed a certain way: objective, measured, cut-and-dried, static, frozen in time, deprived of feeling and context, mirroring the values and realities of the dominant class and the superior gender.

Feminists everywhere are challenging this tradition and are proving that there is another way of knowing: one which unifies subject and object, places researcher and researched in an interactive process, captures the dynamism and complexity of life, sees the present as mere part of an ever unfolding continuum linking past and future, creates sympathy and empathy, and gives form and voice to the values and realities of the invisible, the silenced and the disempowered.

The history of research on, for and by women in the Philippines has followed a distinct course towards surfacing the invisible, making the silent speak, and empowering the disempowered. **Farmers, Traders, Farmers, Wives** is the latest milestone in a trek stretching decades, for which the authors should be congratulated and appreciated. One of them, Jeanne Illo, has been a byword in the last 15 years or so in women's research, her own output reflecting an exciting if not perilous journey from the impersonal world of economics, the discipline she originated from, to the deeply personal destination which is feminist scholarship.

Barbara Du Bois, whom the authors quote in their chapter on "perspectives", has a more colorful phrase: "passionate scholarship," or within the context of a well entrenched patriarchal order, "necessary heresy." She explains this quite simply as learning to see: "to see what is **there**; not what we've been taught is there, not even what we might wish to find, but what is." What follows after seeing is naming, for "naming defines the quality and value of that

which is named--and it also denies reality and value to that which is never named, never uttered. That which has no name, that for which we have no words or concepts, is rendered mute and invisible: powerless to inform or transform our consciousness of our experience, our understanding, our vision; powerless to claim its own existence."<sup>1</sup>

The authors gave the women subjects of their book four names: fishers, traders, farmers, wives, for they are all these. "Apart from the reproductive and nurturant roles ascribed to them as females, they also fished, farmed and traded. They moved from one activity to another in response to needs and opportunities." Thus, as the authors stress, people's work and household survival in fishing communities is multidimensional. This is an important insight because it necessitates "development action that transcends single interests, services, or resources as well as one that reconciles with a world inhabited by females and males."

Illo's and Polo's work is also worth noting because it embodies a distinctive feature of feminist research: "that it generates its problematics from the perspective of women's experiences." More than this, it addresses women's experiences in their own terms, making them tell their stories through the use of life histories sympathetically but rigorously elicited, recorded, transcribed, drafted, edited and reconstructed in a dynamic interaction between researcher and research.

Research, Harding maintains, should not only "add women" to the existing body of knowledge, or emphasize women's contributions to it, but must make women the focus, take a "bottom-up" perspective, adopt the vantage point of the "underclass" and "examine critically the sources of social power" at the top.<sup>2</sup> In the case of Illo's and Polo's book, they focused on poor women, on the nature of their work, and "how this figures in the overall survival scheme of Philippine households." Questions of power and power relations in terms of class and gender are placed in the context of nation—through a description of the Philippine fishery sector; community—through a profile of Bantigue as a coastal fishing village; and family—through the life histories which touch on both natal and conjugal ties. The specifics are contained in the following topics which each life history covers:

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<sup>1</sup>Du Bois, B. "Passionate scholarship: notes on values, knowing and method in feminist social science". *Theories of Women's Studies*. Ed. by G. Bowles and R. D. Klein. London and N. Y.: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983.

<sup>2</sup>S. Harding. "Feminism and Methodology." *Social Science Issues*, Indiana University Press, 1987, pp. 1-14.

“asset or resource accumulation, including investment on their children’s education; residential patterns, life cycle, and living arrangements, including child rearing; household production arrangements, and financing of production and consumption requirements; work patterns, deployment of female and male labor, female and male contributions to the generation of goods and income, and migration; allocation of household resources, including food, among female and male household members; and relationships which the family maintains with blood and affinal kin groups and other nonhousehold members, and the roles women and men play in establishing and maintaining these ties.”

**Fishers, Traders, Farmers, Wives** may also be appreciated from the perspective of the feminist research process which Aino Saarinen describes as one of deconstruction and reconstruction: deconstructing the maleness or androcentricity of traditional research, and constructing “a new paradigm” in which new questions are formulated concerning women’s experiences “from the point of view of women’s own sphere of life”. This paradigm opens new perspectives whereby women could be “regarded not only in terms of subordination and victimization, but also seen as active subjects who play an independent and creative role in the development of culture.” Saarinen traces the development of feminist research and describes a significant turning point in the late 1960s, when the focus shifted from exceptional women to “ordinary women” -- the majority of women whose daily life not only in production but also in reproduction had to be described, named, and valued.<sup>3</sup>

The “ordinary women” in Ilo’s and Polo’s work initially protested against being interviewed, wondering why their “ordinary lives” would interest anyone, much less researchers. But the richness and variations in their stories, which covered “easy topics” like work and their feelings about their work situation as well as “complex topics” like sexuality, sexual relationships, or sexual experience “belied the women’s initial claims about the ordinariness of their lives,” the authors claim. On the other hand, “the common grounds covered by the stories indicated the shared fates and destinies of women.”

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<sup>3</sup>Saarinen, A. “Feminist Research: In Search of a New Paradigm?” in *Acta Sociologica* 1988 (31), pp. 35-51.

But are these "shared fates and destinies" necessarily universal?

Non-western feminists engaged in research and advocacy have been wrestling with this age-old problem. According to Uma Narayan, "they have a double struggle in trying to find their own voice: they have to learn to articulate their differences, not only from their own traditional contexts but also from western feminism." Although she agrees that oppressed groups like poor women from the Third World "may derive an 'epistemic advantage' from having knowledge of the practices of both their own contexts and those of their oppressors," she cautions against the "dark side of this 'double vision'." As she explains, an oppressed woman may not necessarily take a critical stance toward her oppressors, "may try to reject the practices of her own context and try to be as much as possible like members of the dominant group," and may even try to dichotomize her life so as to be part of both worlds.<sup>4</sup>

The work of Ilo and Polo is concretely localized and deals with the specificities of a Philippine coastal fishing village as the authors see these. Although the authors cite concepts and perspectives articulated by Western feminists, they use these merely as a starting point for a pioneering journey which is completely anchored on what they see, hear, and feel. The fact that their research forms part of a regional program--a comparative study on women's work and family strategies in South and Southeast Asia put together by Asian feminist researchers--gives it a distinctively Third World flavor.

The problem inherent in the "double vision" of the oppressed, although not put in these terms by the authors, surfaces in **Farmers, Traders, Fishers, Wives** in the way "the question of personal autonomy or independence, of control of one's life" so dear to every feminist's heart is subsumed due to the "centrality of the family" and "the integration of individual interests with that of the group." In other words, "the self took second place." Women accepted the notion that it is men who earned a living and headed households; despite their "very diverse livelihood package," they conceived of themselves primarily as housewives, and of their work as helping their spouses support the family. Only those with a "clearly separate livelihood" thought of themselves as earners and could be confident in dealing with a spouse and his vices. Even when the women asserted their wishes as regards mobility, em-

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<sup>4</sup>Narayan, U. "The Project of Feminist Epistemology: Perspectives from a Non-western Feminist."

ployment, choice of marital partner, sharing of housework and childcare, or change in a husband's negative behavior vis-a-vis the men in their lives, their assertions were cut short or were later submerged within the larger interests of the family's survival.

How can these women be truly empowered? Merely getting their life histories is not enough. Consciousness of their "shared fates and destinies" needs to be nurtured within the context of an organized collectivity. Research must lead to action.

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