

# Applying the Feminist Research Methodology in the Study of Women's Livelihood Practices

Nathalie A. Verceles

---

## Abstract

This paper chronicles how the researcher, in her dissertation entitled "Livelihood Practices of Women in the Informal Economy: Forging Pathways Towards a Feminist Solidarity Economy," utilized the feminist research methodology to contribute to a continuing analysis of women's condition and position, to highlight organized women's efforts and achievements in ameliorating their situation through individual and group enterprise projects, and to identify further avenues of transformation. It demonstrates how feminist research values and principles were adhered to in choosing the research topic, the formulation of the research problem and objectives, the selection of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, the choice of the data-gathering methods, the crafting of the research instruments, and the processes of data-gathering, data analysis and validation.

## INTRODUCTION

The feminist research methodology locates women at the center of the study as a subject rather than the object of the research, and they are respected as the experts of their own lives. In my research, I strove to privilege and capture women's lived experiences, shifts in consciousness, attitudes, and behavior, as they themselves perceive and express them. Feminist research also recognizes and values women's agency, their capacity to analyze their situation and effect the transformations they deem imperative in their lives.

This paper is an account of how I applied the feminist research methodology in my doctoral dissertation entitled "Livelihood Practices of Women in the Informal Economy: Forging Pathways Towards a Feminist Solidarity Economy." To establish the context, it begins with an overview of the research and the presentation of its main findings. This is followed by a discussion of the salient principles of the feminist research methodology that guided the study, the data-gathering methods, and the research instruments. The paper then segues to how I operationalized the principles of feminist research during the processes of data-gathering, data analysis and validation.

## OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

My dissertation focuses on women in the informal economy, specifically self-employed/own-account micro-entrepreneurs and sub-contracted workers. My keen interest in and concern about the plight of women informal workers began when I did my MA field work requirement with the women of the *Pambansang Kalipunan ng mga Manggagawa sa Impormal na Ekonomiya* (PATAMABA) Balingasa, Quezon City chapter almost thirteen years ago. This entailed long hours of immersion in the community, which resulted in not only intimate knowledge about the women's personal and working lives, but also friendships that last to this day.

I chose the solidarity economy as a dissertation topic because I have been seduced by its possibilities as an alternative to the neoliberal globalization. The solidarity economy is defined as:

a socio-economic order and new way of life that deliberately chooses serving the needs of people and ecological sustainability as the goal of economic activity rather than maximization of profits under the unfettered rule of the market. It places economic and technological development at the service of social and human development rather than the pursuit of narrow, individual self-interest. (Quinones, 2008, p. 3)

Realistically, I see the solidarity economy as not supplanting neoliberal globalization, but existing alongside it, and markedly, with a critical mass of participants.

My dissertation investigated how and to what extent participation in solidarity livelihood projects addresses the systematic subordination experienced by women in the informal economy in reproduction and production, within the institutional settings of the household, community, and the market, and with respect to the state. It identified how these projects could potentially advance the attainment by low-income women of their strategic gender interests of gender equity, gender equality, and women's empowerment through the feminist solidarity economy.

Feminist solidarity economics is an acceptance of solidarity economics as a viable alternative to the orthodox economics that has served as the theoretical basis of and justification for neoliberal globalization—but only if it duly and fully incorporates feminist perspectives on gender and the economy and redresses women's adverse gender-specific experiences of mainstream economic processes. The transformation of unequal gender and class relations must clearly be on the agenda for action. This requires the promotion of shared power and decision-making between women and men, greater access to and control over economic and social resources by women, and support for women's participation and empowerment across the institutions of the state, the market, the community, and the household.

Through a gender analysis using Naila Kabeer's (1994) Social Relations Approach combined with Bina Agarwal's (1992) Feminist Environmentalism, the research strove for a deeper understanding of the persistent nature and simultaneity of women's subordination and marginalization in reproduction and production (Institutional Analysis 1). Another gender analysis was conducted, this time of the solidarity initiatives, with the intent of examining how they are able to address and rectify the subordination of women informal workers through their own practices (Institutional Analysis 2). This was supplemented by an analysis of the supply chains within which the production activities of the solidarity enterprises are embedded in order to determine the extent to which the segments are animated by solidarity principles. Lastly, the effects of participation in the solidarity livelihood projects on the situation of the women within the household, community, market, and on their relations with the state/local government were investigated (Institutional Analysis 3).

For this project, I accomplished three case studies in three field sites, and these covered, in each of the field sites, the livelihood enterprise, its women participants, and the supply chain within which production is embedded. The field sites—located in Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao—are KILUS Foundation Environmental Multi-Purpose Cooperative (KILUS) in Pasig City, Metro Manila, the *Pambansang Kalipunan ng mga Manggagawang Impormal sa Pilipinas* (PATAMABA) in Sta. Barbara, Iloilo, and the Cooperative of Women in Health and Development (COWHED), in Lake Sebu, South Cotabato. The study utilized the research methods of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focused group discussions.

The solidarity initiatives covered by the case studies were benchmarked against a vision of a feminist solidarity economy in order to identify areas of improvement and provide recommendations towards the practice of a more explicitly feminist solidarity economy.

This research showed that low-income women remain principally responsible for reproductive work, and are found performing productive and community work deemed suitable for them as women. The resources made available to them by the state and local governments relate to these roles. The domains they enter into in market work, most commonly in the informal economy, are indicative of the options available to them in a neoliberal regime and given their socially-conditioned capabilities and the limitations posed by bearing the principal responsibility of reproductive work. Participation in decision-making at the city, municipal, and barangay levels continues to remain limited.

Within their organizations, women are considered capable as productive workers and able to contribute markedly to total household income. While the spheres of activity and the tasks supported by their organizations are feminine, as members of women's organizations, there is no exclusion. The sense of inclusivity is apparent in the resources made available to all the women: a production center with equipment, training, marketing assistance, materials, loans, and cash advances. Further, as women who have bonded together in an organization to meet their individual and collective needs, there are intangible resources that have accrued to them: respect and recognition of their organizations by oth-

ers; strength as an organization; group cooperation; organizations they can turn to for assistance in times of need; and dedicated and committed leaders.

The solidarity livelihood projects of the three case studies impact positively on women's situation in the household, community, market and the state. Across the three case studies, at the household level, the paramount response was framed in terms of increased income and expenditures. The other shared responses were increased respect and appreciation from husbands as a result of the women's contributions to the household income and greater assistance from them with the household chores. At the level of the community, the women have experienced higher regard from co-residents as members of their respective organizations. They are also, as an organization, able to secure support from their barangay officials for organizational needs. Even in the larger social sphere of the municipality and city, these organizations command the respect of their local government officials, again allowing them to lobby for assistance for their programs and services. Membership in the organizations also assists the women immeasurably in terms of their participation in the market.

In all three case studies, in terms of personal changes, the recurring themes were related to having own employment and income, enhanced confidence, self-improvement, the broadening of social spheres and improved relations with others. Also mentioned were knowledge and skills learned, improved, and shared; new experiences; pride in the organization and their work; social empowerment; psychic benefits from helping others; and greater self-awareness and freedom. It was interesting to surface that individual assessments of personal changes also foregrounded outcomes that were relational within their organizations and in harmony with the ethos of solidarity economics.

The case study organizations are solidarity organizations because they prioritize meeting the needs of low-income women over the maximization of profits, with cooperative effort and reciprocal assistance as guiding principles. Further, as evinced by the articulations of the women, the organizations are animated by solidarity principles, specifically in their organizational culture and in the personal characteristics of their leaders. The three organiza-

tions also promote ecologically-responsive production, which is in line with the environmentally-sustainable ethos of solidarity economics. The financial policies set in place by the organizations address low-income women's exigent need for low-interest rate loans, cash advances, and emergency monetary assistance. Capability-building exercises provide opportunities for low-income women to broaden their knowledge and enhance their skills, which benefit them not only as productive and reproductive workers, but also as individuals. Marketing assistance from the organizations addresses low-income women's common weakness of the inability to find markets for their products. As solidarity enterprises, the collective interest of all the members prevails over individual interests, and the continued sustainability of the organization is prioritized in order for it to continue to provide succor to low-income women.

The production of the three case study organizations is currently embedded in what may also be considered solidarity supply chains. The participants in the supply chain are not all members of the social sector such as non-government organizations; they include government agencies and economic actors from the private sector. This attests that it is possible to "recruit" participants from the market and the state into the solidarity economy and that their presence in the solidarity supply chains can be auspicious for the low-income workers this economy seeks to assist.

### **The use of the feminist methodology**

As an MA graduate of the Department of Women and Development Studies and a feminist, the choice of undertaking a feminist research for my dissertation was an obvious one. My research is qualitative and was guided by "feminist beliefs and concerns" (Brayton, 1997) with the aim of "transforming and empowering women" (Guerrero, 1997, p. 2). Like all feminist research, it endeavored to "generate knowledge about women that will contribute to their liberation and empowerment..." (Guerrero, 1997, p. 2), "improve women's daily lives and influence public policies and opinion" (Maguire, 1987, p. 121 as cited in Guerrero, 1997, p. 3).

The study adhered to the following tenets of feminist research:

1. The starting point is women's perspectives, situations, concerns and experiences with the acknowledgement that they are the authority on these (Brayton, 1997). Feminist research "embodies women's experiences in the social world from their own interpretation and using their language" (Brayton, 1997). The research participants are regarded as actors and critical thinkers "of the social world" who "are conscious and aware of the patterns of social relationships that can impact upon their own lived realities" (Brayton, 1997) and are engaged in challenging and changing the circumstances of their oppression (Ralph, 1998, as cited in Brayton, 1997).
2. There is a "connected relationship between researcher and researched, between knower and known" (Thomson, 1992, p. 10 as cited in Guerrero, 2002, p. 20). There are active attempts to equalize the relationship between the research subject and the researcher, and knowledge generated is collectively owned (Brayton, 1997). The non-hierarchical nature of this relationship also requires "maintaining the originality and authenticity of how the participants give meaning to their experiences" (Brayton, 1997) and "relating to women in subjective ways on their own terms" (Edwards, 1990, p. 489, as cited in Brayton, 1997).
3. There is a respect for "women's ways of knowing," which consists of the "mingling of reason and emotion, intuition and analytic thought" (Thomson, 1992, p. 10, as cited in Guerrero, 2002, p. 20).
4. Realities are understood through "reflexivity and consciousness-raising" (Guerrero, 2002, p. 20). "Knowers" are called upon to "reflect on their own thoughts, moods and desires, and judgements," to "pose questions to themselves and push at the boundaries of their self-awareness," and to seek the "revelation of aspects of their lives that might otherwise remain hidden" (Guerrero, 2002, p. 20). Research participants are provided "the space to question and critically assess their experiences" (Brayton, 1997), and "their recognition of the connections and links be-

tween events in their lives as well as connections to the social world" is acknowledged (Kasper, 1994, p. 273, as cited in Brayton, 1997). This facilitates the process of empowerment (Brayton, 1997).

5. The end is not "knowledge generation" but to "engage in action for change" (Guerrero, 2002, p. 20). The research is impelled by the political intent of addressing social inequality, of "serving the interests of women...and working towards societal change...in the form of recommendations for policy" (Brayton, 1997). Mies (1983, as cited in Brayton, 1997) emphasized that "the change of the status quo becomes the starting point for a scientific quest" (p. 135). Both "research and action cannot be separated" (Brayton, 1997).
6. There is a recognition that the researcher's own persuasions influence the research (Harding, 1987 in Brayton, 1997). The social categories the researcher belongs to, her "own experiences and history," "shapes the research process" (Brayton, 1997).
7. There is a concern for accuracy in representing women's realities, thus finalized data is verified with the participants (Brayton, 1997).

## **Data-gathering Methods**

The research utilized the case study method. It was deemed most appropriate in achieving the research objectives because of "its ability to examine, in-depth, a 'case' within its 'real-life' context" (Yin, 2004, p. 1). It is most suited to "understanding complex social phenomena" (Yin, 2003, p. 2) within "contextual conditions...highly pertinent to the phenomena under study" (Yin, 2003, p. 13). In the research, the social phenomena studied were—the subordination of women in the informal economy, the solidarity livelihood projects they have initiated as a response to this, the supply chains which the projects are part of, and the effects of participation in these projects on the women's situation. The study used the multiple-case design (Yin, 2003, p. 46) with case studies conducted in three field sites selected by criterion sampling. Embedded sub-cases were also used in each of the field sites, with the



**Table 1. Data collection and participants**

DATA	PARTICIPANTS
Organizational Profile	COWHED: general manager, one member of the board, marketing staff PATAMABA: regional coordinator KILUS: chairperson/president, general manager
Supply Chain Analysis	COWHED: two marketing staff PATAMABA: regional coordinator KILUS: general manager
Institutional Analyses	<i>semi-structured interviews</i> COWHED: two marketing staff interviewed for the supply chain analysis, eight other members PATAMABA: regional coordinator, nine other members KILUS: ten members <i>focused group discussions</i> COWHED: three interviewed previously, four other members PATAMABA: ten members, all interviewed previously KILUS: six members, not interviewed previously

solidarity initiative and its women participants as the units of analysis (Yin, 2004, p. 5).

In the dissertation proposal, the suggested criteria for the selection of the case studies were:

1. Each of the three field sites has a successful livelihood project operated and managed by grassroots women.
2. The project adheres to solidarity values and principles.
3. Ideally, at least one of the projects is by indigenous women.
4. All the participants of the project are women in the informal economy, specifically own-account/self-employed and subcontracted workers.

At the outset, it seemed that the selection criteria for the case studies were simple enough and that finding organizations that would meet them would be straightforward and uncomplicated. Experience, however, proved otherwise. The criteria prioritized were that the projects had to be owned by grassroots women, successful, and adhere to solidarity values and principles. Fulfilling even these was a challenge, more so when the additional criterion of an indigenous women's project was included.

The search for the case study organizations entailed contacting women's organizations known to support grassroots women's livelihood, meeting with their leaders, making mobile phone calls to leaders based in the rural areas, and requesting for referrals from feminist development worker colleagues. For the indigenous women's organization, colleagues and friends who have worked with indigenous peoples were sounded out and also asked for referrals. It took almost two and a half months to identify the last two case study organizations (COWHED and KILUS), although I had already completed the data-gathering on the first (PATAMABA) by this time.

Eventually, three field sites—located in Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao – were selected. One is urban, the KILUS Foundation Environmental Multi-Purpose Cooperative (KILUS) in Pasig City, Metro Manila and two are rural, the Cooperative of Women in Health and Development (COWHED), in Lake Sebu, South Cotabato and the *Pambansang Kalipunan ng mga Manggagawang Impormal sa Pilipinas* (PATAMABA) in Sta. Barbara, Iloilo. COWHED, comprised almost entirely of tribal women, is the indigenous case study. I relied to a large extent on the assessment of feminists who have worked with the case study organizations with respect to how they fit the selection criteria. At the same time, I

gathered all available online data on the organizations that could buttress, or possibly, refute the recommendations.

Except for the case of PATAMABA, criteria one and four were not completely adhered to. The general manager of COWHED is a member of the cooperative, but non-tribal and not an informal worker, though a management team comprised of T'boli own-account workers who make handicrafts outside of office hours assists her. Further, all the members of the board of directors of COWHED are T'boli and produce handicrafts, albeit for some of them, only irregularly. During the data validation and sharing of findings in COWHED, however, I learned that the general manager had resigned and will be replaced by the program officer of the microfinance program, who is part of the current management team, is both T'boli and an own-account worker, and was one of the research participants. The board of directors, management, supervisors, and waged workers of KILUS, though they are all also members of the cooperative, are not own-account workers, except for one board member who is a home-based sewer. COWHED and KILUS, however, serve members who are home-based workers.

The primary methods that were used in this research were semi-structured in-depth interviews, focused group discussions (FGDs), and participant observation. The general manager and a board member of COWHED, the Region 6 Coordinator of PATAMABA, and the chairperson/president and the general manager of KILUS were interviewed for the organizational profile. The marketing staff of COWHED also contributed data for their organizational profile. Of the leaders, it is only the regional coordinator of PATAMABA who is currently an own-account worker. The data on the organizations' respective supply chains were gathered from the marketing staff of COWHED, the regional coordinator of PATAMABA, and the general manager of KILUS. In the presentation of data, these were augmented by the responses of the PATAMABA and KILUS members to questions from Institutional Analysis 2.

To collect the data needed for the three institutional analyses, ten semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in each of the field sites. For COWHED, these interviews included the two marketing staff previously interviewed for data on their sup-

ply chain, and for PATAMABA, the regional coordinator previously interviewed for the organizational profile and supply chain. For KILUS, all the interviewees for the institutional analyses had not been interviewed beforehand. There were six to ten participants for each of the single focused group discussions conducted in the three field sites, which in the case of COWHED, included three participants of the semi-structured interviews. In PATAMABA, all the participants of the semi-structured interviews were also part of the FGD. All the FGD participants of KILUS were not part of the semi-structured interviews. Table 1 presents in matrix form the data collected and their sources.

The research subjects were selected based on the criterion of active participation in the solidarity livelihood project and include new and old members of various ages. The leaders' assistance was sought in the selection of the research participants. All the interviewees and FGD participants from COWHED and PATAMABA for the institutional analyses are own-account workers. While all six focus group discussion participants of KILUS and one interviewee of KILUS are own-account workers, nine of the research participants of KILUS are waged workers based in their center. As workers who are paid below the minimum daily wage, however, this specific condition of work is characteristic of informal work. For the assignment of the research participants, the researcher was entirely dependent on the managers of KILUS. The center-based workers were more accessible and could be interviewed in turn without too much disruption in their work, as opposed to the home-based workers, who would each have to be scheduled for appearance in the center for the interviews. The request to interview home-based workers in their own homes was not accommodated by the organization.

The workers of COWHED and PATAMABA, and KILUS are considered informal economy workers, even if the COWHED and KILUS workers are members of a cooperative. Cooperatives can be located in the continuum between the informal economy and the solidarity economy, and while these are organizational responses to redress the conditions of insecure work, low income, poor working conditions, limited or no social security of informal workers, it is also recognized that advancements in these continue to be a work in progress.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted to provide for flexibility and space for both the researcher and the research subject to go in directions related to the research questions/objectives and to stay open to possibilities that are not directly covered by the interview questions. In investigating a complex phenomenon such as the intersectionality of women's subordination, women's individual and organizational endeavors to address this, and the effects of the latter on women's situation in different institutional sites, the interview process must leave room for what cannot be anticipated in advance via structured interview questions.

To ensure minimum disruption in the reproductive and productive activities of the research participants, the researcher relied on the leaders to set the time and venues for the interviews. In the COWHED case, the interview with the board member was conducted at the municipal building, with the general manager and the two members of the marketing staff at the COWHED center, and with the rest of the women in their homes. In the PATAMABA case, the interviews were accomplished in the homes of two members in Barangay Barasan Oeste, where some of the interviewees converged, and at the production center. All the interviews of KILUS were done at their office/showroom.

The interviews were conducted in Filipino and the participants were comfortable with the dialect, even the participants from PATAMABA whose primary language is Kinaray-a, and the participants from COWHED whose primary language is T'boli. Only one research participant from PATAMABA and two research participants from COWHED required the full assistance of an interpreter. The interpreters for COWHED were the members of the marketing staff, who were present one at a time during the interviews in case they were needed, and who accompanied the researcher to all the homes of the research participants. For PATAMABA, the interpreter was Primar Jardeleza, who is Vice-President of PATAMABA National and who accompanied the researcher to Sta. Barbara, Iloilo.

The focused group discussions were conducted after the interviews to "deepen or analyze in more depth" data previously collected and "to bring to the surface community attitudes and perceptions" (Kintanar, 1997, p. 72). This included "knowledge,

beliefs, attitudes, values, and perceptions prevalent in the community" (Kintanar, 1997, p. 72). The FGD participants were allowed to "talk freely and spontaneously" (Kintanar, 1997, p. 73) on the topics prepared beforehand. In the process of conducting the FGDs, the facilitator/researcher was mindful of "women's communication patterns, including non-verbal communication;" "self-aware...of her biases and prejudices that could affect" the facilitation role; truly "listened" to them, with "sensitivity to their choice of words...silences and hesitations;" "encouraged maximum interaction;" "allowed the participants to help set the pace and rhythm of the discussion;" and "was willing to self-disclose" (Kintanar, 1997, pp. 77-79).

The FGDs contributed not only to the research and feminist theorizing but also to the research participants themselves by "validating their experience" and its shared nature, "allowing them to speak for themselves and enhancing communication," "promoting a sense of solidarity and connectedness among" them, and "helping to raise consciousness and...work towards empowerment" (Kintanar, 2007, pp. 82-84).

All the FGDs were conducted in Filipino and took place at the respective centers/offices/showrooms of the case study organizations. The researcher and FGD participants were seated on mats laid on the floor of the COWHED center, on chairs in a circular formation at the PATAMABA center, and around a rectangular table at the KILUS office/showroom.

The data from participant observation was meant to enrich the data collected from the interviews and focused group discussions. It involved "paying attention, watching, and listening carefully" to "details" that may be significant in the research (Neuman, 2007, pp. 287-288). These details were found in the "physical surroundings...people and their actions...aspects of physical appearance...behavior...nonverbal communication" (Neuman, 2007, pp. 287-288). The data from the participant observation were recorded in field notes by the researcher.

## Research Instruments

A major portion of data collected in the field sites was based on the tools of the Kabeer's (1994) Social Relations Approach combined with Agarwal's (1992) Feminist environmentalism (Institutional Analyses 1 and 2). The rest were comprised of data on the organizational profiles, the projects' respective supply chains, and the effects of participation in the solidarity livelihood project on the research participants' relations in the different institutional realms (Institutional Analysis 3). All of the aforementioned required primary data collection, which was accomplished entirely by the researcher and the research participants. For the community profiles and to establish the socio-economic and political contexts of the case studies, secondary data were collected from the municipal offices of Sta. Barbara, Iloilo and Lake Sebu, South Cotabato and from online sources and books by the researcher.

The research instruments for the institutional analyses—the guide questions for the semi-structured interviews and FGDs—were pilot-tested and refined prior to the actual data collection with three members of *Sangkamay*, an organization of women from the informal economy based in Bagong Silang, Caloocan organized by women from PATAMABA National Capital Region. All the interviews and FGDs were recorded on a voice recorder. Permission to participate in the research was acquired through the use of informed consent forms, the contents of which were discussed thoroughly with the participants. These included a background on the research and the its objectives, the research methods, the benefits of participation in the research and the absence of any perceived risks, my name, institutional affiliation, and contact details with the advice that they could contact me anytime about any questions or apprehensions about their participation in the research. The informed consent form also included portions on assent to the interviews and discussions being recorded with myself only as listener for the purposes of the research, on their freedom to withdraw from the research at any time, and the assurance of confidentiality in the written output.

Institutional Analysis 1 determined the nature and simultaneity of women's subordination and marginalization in reproduction and production across the institutions of the state/local government, market, community, and household. Institutional Analy-

sis 2 examined how solidarity livelihood projects address and rectify this subordination and marginalization through their practices. Institutional Analysis 3 determined how participation in the projects affects the women's relations with others in the milieus of the state/local government, market, community, and household.

For Institutional Analysis 2 and 3, and the focused group discussions, which reprised some of the questions from Institutional Analyses 1, 2, and 3, interview questions guided by the spirit of the appreciative inquiry method were included. Cooperider and Whitney (2007) define appreciative inquiry as:

the cooperative, coevolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations and communities, and the world around them. It involves systematic discovery of what gives "life" to an organization or community when it is most effective, and most capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI assumes that every organization or community has many 'untapped and rich accounts of the positive'—what people talk about as past, present, and future capacities—the positive core. (p. 75)

The questions used were, for Institutional Analysis 2, "What positive aspects of yourself have you discovered as a result of participation in this project?" (*Ano po ang mga positibong aspeto ng inyong sarili ang nadiskubri ninyo dahil sa partisipasyon sa proyektong ito?*), "What practices of the project have proven beneficial for you?" (*Ano po ang mga magagandang pamamaraan ng proyekto na nakatulong sa inyo?*), for Institutional Analysis 3 and the FGDs, "How has participation in the project helped improve your situation at the household, community, market, and state levels?" (*Paano po nakakatulong ang partisipasyon ninyo sa proyekto sa inyong katayuan sa bahay, komunidad, merkado, at lokal na pamahalaan?*), and additionally for the FGDs, "What have you learned from joining the organization?" (*Ano po ang inyong natutunan sa pagsapi sa organisasyon?*).

The motive behind including these questions was to stir the research subjects to ruminate and appreciate not only what is best in themselves and their organizations, but also how their organizations have been instrumental in effecting positive changes in themselves and in their relations with others in various institutional settings. These questions were framed so as to



accentuate the constructive and affirmative in the participants and the case study organizations, with the hope that these will be used as springboards towards more successes. The women's responses to the queries provided the research its heart and a soul, and unveiled the most genuine and auspicious possibilities of the feminist solidarity economy.

### Data-gathering process

The use of the feminist methodology is tricky because it entails establishing not only a non-hierarchical relationship but also a connection with the research subject. I introduced myself to the research participants only as a doctoral candidate and assistant professor at the University of the Philippines, and until they had warmed up to me, provided only the other personal information they asked. The mere mention of the connection to the University of the Philippines alone, however, was intimidating to some of the research participants. I made up for this by entering and inhabiting the research situation with humility, respect, and gratitude for being accommodated—which I genuinely felt – both in actions and in words.

Immersing myself among the women also entailed doing things as they did, sharing in their activities, and showing appreciation for the effort and time they were expending through participation in the research. In Sta. Barbara I traveled by tricycle, and in Lake Sebu by *habal-habal* (motorcycle), to the far-flung barangays, even if my dissertation adviser gently warned me about the dangers of the latter. I ate everything I was offered, even if I was satiated from being offered food constantly. I contributed to the purchase of meals and snacks, when they allowed me. Fully aware that transportation to the PATAMABA production center entailed costs, I shouldered these for the women. In the KILUS center, I huddled with the women as they took their *merienda* (snacks) during breaks, counted the "beads" for the accessories maker, and chatted with the workers. In the PATAMABA and COWHED centers, in between data-gathering tasks, I sat around and relaxed with the women, exchanging stories with them. While the women worked, I engaged them in conversation. I asked one of the PATAMABA sewers, above the din of the electric sewing machine, "*Anong iniisip mo kapag nagtatahi ka?*" (What do you

think about when you sew?). She smiled and answered, "*Iniiisip ko na gusto ko lang makatapos.*" (I think about wanting to finish what I have to.)

In Barangay Barasan Oeste, Sta. Barbara, out of curiosity, I worked the water pump, lifted the water container, and tried to walk with it, much to the amusement of the women. I managed only a few meters, and told them that while I lift weights in the gym regularly, this was beyond the capacity of my muscles. One of the PATAMABA women proceeded to show me her well-developed biceps. After I expressed surprise about the need for pig pens to be cleaned regularly for the pigs to grow properly, I asked, "*Di ba baboy nga sila?*" (But aren't they pigs?), and the women chuckled because of my ignorance. In COWHED, we held a pictorial wherein all of us were decked in full T'boli regalia. They chose the most beautiful pieces for me and excitedly assisted me as I put on the long skirt, the fully beaded blouse, the brass belt, and the headdress. We took formal and wacky photographs, and they taught me the traditional T'boli dance. One of the women, commenting on my arm movements, shouted "Ballet!" and made all of us laugh. I had shown them a video of myself doing a contemporary ballet piece and they already knew I loved to dance. I made the research participants laugh constantly with my comments and antics. When I asked one of the COWHED women how much she received as her bride price and she replied in terms of the number of horses and carabaos, I exclaimed, "*Ang mahal mo!*" (You're so expensive!), and the group burst into laughter.

I also showed interest in and admiration for the products they made. I inspected all of them, tried on the KILUS and PATAMABA bags and the COWHED accessories one after another, and gushed sincerely about how beautiful and well made they are. To show support for their livelihood, I purchased several items that I told them were for myself and to be given to others as gifts. When I asked one of the COWHED members about the price of a bangle she created through brass casting, she replied, "One hundred thirty pesos" (P130). I said to her, "*Hindi ba puedeng P150 na lang?*" (Can we not make it one hundred fifty pesos (P150) instead?), which again, made everyone laugh. I purchased the entire lot at one hundred fifty pesos (P150) a piece.

I was received very warmly in the research sites. In Sta. Barbara, Iloilo, I was accompanied by Primar Jardeleza, the Vice-President of PATAMABA, who introduced me as a friend of the organization. I ventured to Lake Sebu, South Cotabato alone and I believe the confidence that this manifested in the COWHED women made them look after me so well throughout my stay. They ensured that the data-gathering went smoothly and that I had all the data I needed, accompanied me to the women's homes for the interviews, and selected the best *habal-habal* driver for me. In KILUS, requests for information to fill my data gaps are quickly accommodated, with the general manager herself personally assisting me in contacting the research participants. I am certain that I established excellent rapport with at least the research participants of COWHED and PATAMABA, having spent more and continuous time with them vis-à-vis those of KILUS. There were tears when I left and the women continue to send me text messages, asking me how I am doing and when I will return, saying that I am missed.

Before we began the interviews, some of the research participants asked, with reference to the questions, "*Mahirap ba?*" (Are they difficult?). Repeatedly, I assured the interviewees that they are the experts of their experiences and lives, not I, otherwise I would not be there interviewing them. I always added that there are no wrong answers, and even their non-responses are valuable data for me. I also commenced the interview situation by making the participants comfortable through small talk and levity, by behaving warmly towards them, which is my nature. I segued to the informed consent form, explaining what the research is about, what my advocacy is, why I feel so strongly about women's economic empowerment, and conveying that they were contributing to this through their participation. I believe that doing these convinced them that I am an ally, that I sincerely want to help low-income Filipino women through my research.

I had full respect for the processes through which the research participants acquired the knowledge and felt experiences they so generously shared with me, processes that are theirs alone and will never be mine. What they know, and how they came to know what they know, is beyond the realms of my own knowledge and experiences, no matter how much literature I had read or research I had done. I truly believed they were the experts, and I had a

keen interest in their responses to the interview and FGD questions. I am so full of admiration for the tenacity of these women, how they work so hard to improve their lives and that of their families. I believe this was apparent in the manner by which I interacted with them.

During the interviews and the FGDs, I was constantly on the look out for opportunities to interpose questions and comments that would allow the women to make a reassessment of their situation. When it seemed that the research participants were resigned to the state not providing adequate social services for them, I asked them if they did not think that it was the state's responsibility to do so and that it was within their rights to require these from the state. Many of them were not aware of the gender and development (GAD) budget policy and it was enlightening for them to learn that they could make claims on this from their barangay and municipal officials. I raised the issue of greater participation by them in decision-making at the community level, of them making their voices heard collectively. When there appeared to be submission to the unequal gender division of labor in reproductive chores, I pointed out that they too, like their husbands, were productive workers contributing to the family income. They responded by saying that it was not feasible for the men to take on a larger portion of domestic tasks during week days due to the nature of some of their jobs which took them away from home for the most part (e.g. tricycle/*habal-habal* driver, security guard, salesman, fishpond caretaker). I joked with them by saying that they should leave the laundry and cleaning undone for the men to accomplish when they get home, but not their children unfed. Their response made me think too, as feminists have a tendency to assume that a more equitable gender division of labor at the household level can be simply accomplished through negotiations between husband and wife, without taking into consideration the circumstances that can or cannot allow it. Alleviating women's reproductive burdens clearly demands more than mere domestic reforms towards their redistribution.

After the data-gathering was completed, I did things for the women that go beyond our researcher-research participant relationship. I invited some of the COWHED staff and members of their family for a boat ride around Lake Sebu and lunch afterwards. For the younger children, this is the first time they had

ever done that. I have been helping the daughter of one member of COWHED who is a student in UP Diliman. I assisted the niece of another member who was about to enter high school and did not have the capacity to purchase her school needs. She lives with one of the members, and together with her young male cousin and the general manager's dog, accompanied me during my daily morning walks. As an act of solidarity, I made financial contributions to COWHED and PATAMABA for their production.

I was mindful throughout the research process that I carried with me frames of reference that were shaped by my distinct history and experiences. As a glaring example, I cried quiet tears after I had completed my data-gathering in PATAMABA Sta. Barbara, which was the first I had done for this research. It was from repeatedly hearing stories of hardship and valiant struggles to surmount these hardships. I realized that I was assessing their lives from the perspective of the comforts of my own life. The research participants did not go about their lives with sorrow, and they were grateful for what they had, as little as these seemed to me. When I arrived in Manila, I showed photographs to and shared my feelings with our *kasambahay* (household help). One of them, who is from a rural area in the Visayas region, revealingly pointed out to me, "*Ayan lang ang buhay na alam nila*" (That is the only life they know).

## Data Analysis

The units of analysis of the research were, one, the solidarity livelihood project and two, the individual women members of the project.

For Institutional Analyses 1 (determining the systematic nature of the subordination of women in the informal economy) and 2 (determining how the solidarity economy livelihood projects counters the subordination of women in the informal economy through its own practices), the data was arrayed in matrices and the process of data analysis was guided by the research's theoretical framework. This was accomplished not without flexibility, as the process was open to the identification of emergent themes in the narratives and the classification of data under these themes. The supply chain analysis was included in Institutional Analysis 2

to deepen the examination of the solidarity livelihood projects and identify the extent to which the activities in each segment of the chain conform to the values and principles of solidarity economics. Utilizing the research's conceptual frameworks and data from Institutional Analyses 2 and 3, the research's contribution to conceptions of a feminist solidarity enterprise and the feminist solidarity economy was crystallized and the gaps to be bridged by the case study organizations identified.

The data from Institutional Analysis 3 (determining how the solidarity economy livelihood project affects relations within the household, community, market, and with the state) were also arrayed in a matrix and analyzed. Responses to an affirmative inquiry question used in Institutional Analysis 2 yielded data on personal changes and empowerment that were presented and analyzed in this section. Institutional Analyses 2 and 3 were used in the creation of a schematic/mental model that illustrates the possibilities of feminist solidarity enterprises.

The data from the interviews, FGDs, and participant observation were used in this research to accomplish methodological triangulation. The responses from the interviews were cross-checked with the information revealed during the FGDs for inconsistencies. The researcher also used participant observation, where possible, to verify the claims of the research participants.

The data from the semi-structured interviews, found in the appendices of the dissertation, are in the first person to best depict the images of the women, surface their voices, and capture their individual characters. I would like them to be as real to the readers as I encountered them.

## **Data Validation**

In the Department of Women and Development Studies, UP CSWCD, where I belong, we are very careful in ensuring that our researches are not extractive. We do not simply enter a research site, collect our data, and then leave. Data validation and the sharing of our research findings are crucial components of our research process. I was so happy to do this, because I had earlier promised the research participants of COWHED and PATAMABA that I would return. Because they were located far from Metro

Manila, my return trips were special for all of us. When I returned to Lake Sebu, South Cotabato and Sta. Barbara, Iloilo, I was welcomed like a long lost sister. Getting to KILUS in Pasig City was uncomplicated, it was making the appointment to do the data validation and sharing of findings, like with the interviews and focused group discussions, that seemed like an imposition because of the disruption this would again pose to their work. The sharing of findings was well-received by all the research participants, and their keen interest was palpable in their rapt and focused attention.

The data was validated with the research participants to ensure that their realities were captured and presented faithfully and veraciously. The research findings were also shared to enrich their consciousness of their situation, to elicit critiques from their specific vantage points, and to seek contributions to the recommendations. This entailed making return trips to Lake Sebu, South Cotabato and Sta. Barbara, Iloilo after the first dissertation draft had been submitted to and reviewed by the dissertation adviser, and after the revisions to be accomplished were discussed. The third case study site was in Pasig City, which could be reached with ease. To facilitate the data validation and sharing of findings, the researcher used meta cards to structure the presentation.

For the data validation and sharing of findings with COWHED, the general manager, six of the ten interviewees, and six of the seven FGD participants were in attendance. The daughter of one of the research participants, a student who is on leave from the University of the Philippines Diliman, assisted by translating entire portions of the findings. In PATAMABA, nine of the ten research participants were in attendance, including the regional coordinator. In KILUS, nine of the ten research participants for the interviews were present.

## CONCLUSION

As a feminist researcher, I made every effort to ensure that my research was informed by the values and principles feminist methodology at every stage. The choice of topic is overtly feminist, it foregrounds livelihood undertakings proactively initiated by women in order to surface and cull their best practices. The inten-

tion is to provide examples of what can be reproduced by other women's formations towards the empowerment of their members and the improvement of their relations within the household, community, market, and with the state. The starting point was the situation of the research participants as women and workers in different institutional realms. The feminist solidarity economy, which was also the subject of the research, was put forward as a socio-economic development strategy that can contribute to the emancipation of low-income women from the discrimination, exploitation, marginalization, and subordination that they experience within the institutional realms. After examining the positive, the women's organizations were also considered more critically, with the objective of identifying how they could better contribute to the feminist project of gender and class equality and equity, and women's empowerment through a feminist solidarity economy.

The impetus that led me to work in the field of gender and development is to make meaningful and material contributions towards ameliorating the lives of low-income women in the Philippines. This was as pre-eminent in my entire dissertation process as it is in my other undertakings as a gender specialist, and I accomplished all the tasks required driven by this imperative. Through my dissertation research, I hope to contribute to the advocacy of solidarity economics and the feminist solidarity economy, an advocacy to which I will remain committed. It is with much eagerness that I look forward to the possibilities that it can unfold for low-income women in the Philippines.

As an affirmation of solidarity, I ended my dissertation with this message for my research participants:

We are mothers, grandmothers, daughters, wives, aunts, workers ...differentiated by class, ethnicity, language, religion, education, geographical location...

But here, in this most precious of moments, and always, in the gentle and sweeping landscape of our hearts, we are sisters.

To the research participants from COWHED, PATAMABA, and KILUS, for the kindness, support, care, and love you have so generously and warmly extended to this very grateful researcher, "*Tey Tey Bong S'lamat,*" "*Duro gid nga salamat!*" and "*Maraming, maraming salamat po!*"



---

**REFERENCES**

- Agarwal, B. (1992). The gender and environment debate: Lessons from India. *Feminist Studies*, 18(1): 119–158. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/233181220?accountid=141440>
- Brayton, J. (1997). *What makes feminist research feminist? The structure of feminist research within the social sciences*. Retrieved from <http://www.unb.ca/PAR-L/win/feminmethod.htm>
- Cooperider, D. L., & Whitney, D. (2007). *Appreciative Inquiry: A positive revolution in change*. In P. Holman, T. Devane & S. Cady (eds.), *The change handbook: The definitive resource on today's best methods for engaging whole systems* (pp. 73–88). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. Retrieved from <http://www.bkpxetranet.com/wulf/changehandbook.pdf>
- Edwards, R. (1990). Connecting method and epistemology: A white woman interviewing black women. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 13(5): 477–490. In Brayton, J. (1997).
- Guerrero, S. H. (1997). Introduction. In S. H. Guerrero (ed.), *Feminist research experiences: A casebook* (pp. 1–6). Quezon City: University of the Philippines Center for Women's Studies.
- Guerrero, S. H. (2002). What if feminist research? In S. Guerrero (ed.), *Gender sensitive and feminist methodologies: A handbook for health and social researchers*. Quezon City: UP Press, pp. 15–22.
- Harding, S. (1987). Is there a feminist method. In Harding, S. (ed.), *Feminism and methodology* (pp. 1–14). Bloomington: Indiana University Press. In Brayton, J. (1997).
- Kabeer, N. (1994). *Reversed realities: Gender hierarchies in development thought*. London and New York: Verso.
- Kasper, A. (1994). A feminist, qualitative methodology: A study of women with breast cancer. *Qualitative Sociology*, 17(3): 263–281. In Brayton, J. (2007).
- Kintanar, T. B. (1997). Focus group discussion (FGD) as a feminist research method. In S. H. Guerrero (ed.), *Feminist research experiences: A casebook* (pp. 72–87). Quezon City: University of the Philippines Center for Women's Studies.
- Maguire, P. (1987). *Doing participatory research, a feminist approach*. MA: The Center for International Education. In Guerrero, S. H. (1997).
- Mies, M. (1983). Towards a methodology for feminist research. In G. Bowles, & R. D. Klein (eds.), *Theories of Women's Studies* (pp. 117–139). Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul. In Brayton, J. (1997).
- Neuman, W. L. (2007). *Basics of social research: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Boston and New York: Pearson.

- Quiñones Jr., B. R. (2008). Facets of Solidarity Economy. Retrieved from <http://www.a4se.com/downloads/FACETS%20OF%20SOLIDARITY%20ECONOMY.pdf>
- Ralph, D. (1988). Researching from the Bottom: Lesson of Participatory Research for Feminists. In D. Currie (ed.), *From the margins to the centre: Selected essays in women's studies research* (pp. 134–141). Saskatchewan: The Women's Studies Research Unit, University of Saskatchewan. In Brayton, J. (1997).
- Thomson, L. (1992). Feminist methodology for family studies. *Journal of Marriage and The Family* 54(1), 3–18. In Guerrero, S.H. (2002).
- Verceles, N. (2014). Livelihood practices of women in the informal economy: Forging pathways towards a feminist solidarity economy. Unpublished manuscript, University of the Philippines.
- Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research design and methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. Retrieved from <http://www.scribd.com/doc/3289743/Yin-Case-study-research-3rd>
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2004). *Case study methods*. Retrieved from <http://www.scribd.com/doc/57386619/Robert-Yin-Case-Study-Research>