

Voices of Older Women by the Sea: Reflections on My Research Experience

Ira G. Pahila

Abstract

This study presents my experience in the conduct of my study on the life situations of older women in one coastal community and my reflections on the research process in relation to the theoretical approaches. Standpoint feminism, the empowerment approach and the care and capability approach work hand in hand with feminist group work and in-depth interviews to present older women's plight and aspirations in relation to social protection.

RATIONALE

To give voice to the silenced is a form of empowerment. To look into overlooked gender issues is one way of addressing social inequities. This paper looks into the plight of a sector confined in many layers of marginalization: older women small-scale fisher folk. From the margins their voices expressing their social contributions and needs shall be placed at the center of this development-oriented research. Whenever I get nourishment from or enjoy eating harvests from the sea, I used to think about the "fisher-men" before, whose role has been in the center. But now with a feminist lens and deeper reflection, I ponder about how women especially many of those who have aged provided nourishment and needs of the greater population. These are the women fish traders, processors and those involved in pre-capture. Much later, I met some older women very actively involved in the seaweed industry and also those who have been and continue to be active in environmental protection (particularly, in mangrove reforestation). Their mul-

multiple roles and social contributions often remain unrecognized; therefore, the entitlements they deserve especially in line with social protection are set in the peripheries. Moreover, other than those residing in fishing communities there are many older women who share similar issues. These are the older women we often encounter in the streets, marketplace, in many households and some relatives who have been close to us, whose subsistence and that of their families rely on the continuing roles they engage in. Having barely enough resources for subsistence or survival, older women badly need social protection. It is from their voices in which their aspirations are heard in line with this. Surfacing their voices to reveal their aspirations and their strategic interests not only for themselves but for the many women in the informal sector is the aim of the research.

BACKGROUND

A patriarchal system dominates the lives of the residents in coastal communities in the Philippines. This dominance can be attributed to men's task in capture fishing (Tanchuling, 1999). Where "fisher-men", especially the able-bodied are often regarded as breadwinners of households because of their productive roles, women's contributions, especially of the older ones, often remain unrecognized. As the fisher-men take control of the sea and its resources, the roles of the so called "fishwives" are believed limited to the peripheries of the coasts (pre-capture, post harvest, gleaning, household management and community activities). Because of this, men oftentimes have the access to, and control of, opportunities and resources, while women are marginalized.

Standards are set on a macro (global) and meso (national level) based on the social construction of aging which myopically considers only the plight of individuals in the formal labor force. One of these standards is how old age is defined and its implications on social protection especially for those in the informal economy and particularly the older women in fishing communities. From the international to the national level, the beginning of aging is set at 60 years old, which is the retirement age in many occupations. In this study on the lives of older women in a coastal community, I aim for what Barbara du Bois called a "woman-centered scholar-

ship" which tries to "discover and uncover the actual facts of women's lives and experience, facts that have been hidden, inaccessible, suppressed, distorted, misunderstood, ignored" (du Bois, 1979).

In this paper, voices of older women in the coastal community of Barangay Suclaran in San Lorenzo, Guimaras Island are heard. These voices speak of life-long struggles, capabilities, multiple roles and burden performed in both the private and public spheres, as well as their aspirations in their later years especially in line with social protection measures. This study aims to present the state of older women in one coastal community: perspectives on aging coming from their own point of view, looking into the significance of their triple roles, an analysis of their socioeconomic situation, existing social services and actual needs in old age.

The following are the research questions:

- How is aging perceived by women in a coastal community in connection with the quality of life vis-a-vis the impact of existing social protection?
- What are the triple roles performed by the older women in a coastal community to contribute to the local economy and in environmental protection?
- How do they view themselves then and now?
- What are their aspirations in terms of equity and better social protection strategies as they face the effects of climate change and environmental degradation?
- What are their strategic interests in line with care and capability?
- How do they view empowerment?

These questions touch on views on aging and its onset, triple roles of women (covering feminist environmentalism, care and capability), state of being, existing social services and program vis-à-vis their aspirations on it based on older women's actual and specific needs (practical needs and strategic gender interests), equity and empowerment.

THE RESEARCH APPROACH

Qualitative research provides a detailed view of women's lives through free flowing conversations in which statistical data and quantitative analysis may not be able to draw. Open ended questions give space for the subjects whether in a group interview or in individual in-depth interviews to freely express their thoughts on the matter without being somehow "programmed" to choose from a range of given answers coming from the researcher. Hierarchy in the researcher-subject power relations is also minimized in this case because the subject has more control over the answers.

Equipped with academic knowledge and background on theoretical (often presumably "superior" western-based) approaches, researchers come from a privileged position compared to the subjects in this light. It cannot be disregarded that even in woman-to-woman interviews, "a powerful woman asks the questions and a less powerful woman gives the answers" (Wadsworth, 2001). But since feminist scholarship is on, for, by and with women (Hesse-Biber and Leavy), this kind of research must place the subjects' voices or discourse in the limelight. The manner of asking questions must never be authoritative since the study concerns the subjects' own lives, the researcher should never impose certain intellectual baggage.

Consciousness-raising and emancipation start with the research questions. At this point, realizations are made as the subjects or research participants internalize the questions given. Initially, they would give boxed and socially constructed responses as standardized by controlling institutions. For instance, answers on question about aging were based on standard definitions. Knee-jerk responses tell that the start of aging is at 60 when one becomes officially a "senior citizen". Realizations are made when I, as the researcher-facilitator, requested that they present their own experience of it. And so, subjective truths came out. Answers to this question tell that for those who were or still are into hard labor experience the onset of aging comes at an earlier age, which can be at 50. Yet, despite these they still expressed that older women in the fishing village continue with their multiple roles in both the private and public spheres. Empowerment is felt with realizations on one's part – it comes from within at the start. Rosa Luxem-

bourg expressed that "those who do not move do not notice their chains". This applies to the case of the marginalized. When questions are brought forward, one's worth and the need to claim entitlements are realized coming from an individual's point of view to a collective agency of the subjects. This brings forth the development goal of this feminist research.

Derived from the standpoint of the research subjects and participants vis-à-vis an analysis of existing social protection programs, the recommendations in my study/thesis are development oriented especially in line with policy formulation and implementation. The recommendations span concerns from the individual to the economic, environmental and social. In order to address individual issues, health programs, financial management and organizing can be done. Social insurance, social pensions, product marketing and housing are seen to address economic issues faced by older women in coastal communities. These economic issues are rooted in risks which include underemployment, environmental hazards and lack of financial safety nets. Considering the vulnerabilities posed by natural hazards and declining marine harvests faced by coastal dwellers, environmental protection, coastal resource management and gender-responsive disaster risk reduction and management strategies are possible interventions to mitigate the effects of calamities on older women in fishing communities. This pertains to the condition that declining fish catch as a result of climate change and environmental damage, lesser capability as a result of declining physical conditions, as well as inflation, pose greater insecurities for older women small-scale fishers. Leisure, enhancement of creativity, effective consultations and equitable strategies in aid distribution can also address issues faced by women, which can provide greater social impact.

Specific Theoretical Approaches

Standpoint feminism, Jo Rowland's framework on empowerment, feminist environmentalism, and Martha Nussbaum's care and capability approach, compose the framework in this research on aging and women in fisheries. These approaches give importance to the situated experiences of older women in coastal com-

munities who face multiple marginalization. This also makes them assert their aspirations especially in line with equity and care, such as entitlements to better gender and age specific social protection programs and services.

Standpoint feminism highlights and values women's knowledge based on their actual experiences. Specific concerns from the personal towards a political agenda are accounted in the life histories of older women living in a coastal community. This theory makes way for knowledge production based on "socially situated perspectives" (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006), thus, creating a bottom-up approach to development goals especially in policy formulation. Based on the concepts of proponents like Sandra Harding, Nancy Hartsock, Patricia Hill Collins and Dorothy Smith, standpoint feminism looks into power dynamics and social relations, epistemic relativism, privileging and knowledge production, the "God trick" or a God's eye view of the world as Donna Haraway termed it (Crasnow, 2006), and agency towards achieving empowerment. The subjects of my research were able to gain a better understanding of their personal situations through an assessment of their state of being in relations to how is this affected by the political economy, and by this making them act in order to achieve better social situations.

The empowerment framework of Jo Rowlands supports standpoint feminism in the process of achieving agency considering individual empowerment/power within, relational empowerment/power to and collective empowerment/power with. "Power within" implies the realization of one's personal worth and capabilities. Through a recollection of their life-long struggles, the value of their work and social contributions is realized in the research process. "Power to" is about the capability to do and to achieve goals with others, like women helping fellow women and through of sharing of valuable resources (seeds and knowledge sharing, for instance) and the acknowledgement of the capabilities of other older women (such as household tasks and skills). "Power with" is about collective empowerment/agency which can help bring about social change. Voicing out their strategic interests in connection with social protection is a form of empowerment, with the output of this research as a medium in formulating possible community-based policy implications. The development goal of this research is to provide policy recommendations with a femi-

nist lens based on the actual experiences and strategic interests of the subjects of this research. In line with this, the collective voice of older women in fishing communities can create impacts on policy formulation and implementation which can positively affect their lives in consideration of their gender specific needs. A feminist standpoint is an achievement that transcends perspectivalism, not an automatic entitlement and comes with a socio-political analysis in relation to women's life situations (Crasnow, 2006).

In this paper, specific concerns of older women living in coastal communities, political economy and social protection are analyzed. Findings reveal that the onset of aging for those involved in hard labor, such as those in the fishing industry, occurs at an earlier age. For the older women of Suclaran, signs show at 50 years old when one's physical condition starts to deteriorate. Despite this fact, they continue with their productive, reproductive and community roles for personal, family and survival of the bigger community. These older women in the fishing community are active not only in gleaning and salt production but also in pre-capture and post-harvest activities (fish trading, dried fish production and shrimp paste production), while there are some who have actually gone capture fishing together with the husband. In addition to these fishing activities, non-fishing activities are done to augment a household's financial resources (these non-fishing activities include livestock raising, farming, craft, food processing, handicraft and nipa thatch making). On top of these productive roles are older women's reproductive roles and care work in the private sphere which include not only taking care of children, but also of ailing husbands and much older parents and in laws. Care work, highlighting feminist environmentalism, is also extended in the larger sphere of the community through mangrove reforestation, participation in meetings and community events, coastal clean-up and by serving as coastal caretakers/watchpersons. In view of this, the age for indigent to receive social pension needs to be lowered down from 70 to 50 and the amount given for social pensions also needs to be increased in order to give older persons especially those with lesser economic means to have a better quality of life and even be more active in their social contributions such as in environmental protection and in being less dependent to family members who also have their own concerns.

As social gerontologists categorized people into the young-old (ages 65–74), the middle-ole (ages 75–84) and the oldest-old (age 85 and above), women in the fishing village of Suclaran, categorized aging into “*may edad*” (starting to age) as those from 50–59 years old who are easily exhausted, start to feel ailments and become quite forgetful, the “*tigulang*” (old) as those from 60–69 years old who at times deny being very old for still being capable of work, and the “*mal-am*” who are the very old age 70 and above who stoop and need assistance. In the local dialect, “*mal-am*” also connotes being wise or learned.

Despite these multiple burden, their access to social protection measures is limited. Although the national government and the local government unit of Guimaras extend services in health care (Phil Health and Guimaras Health Insurance Program), and the Expanded Senior Citizens Act gives support to the aging citizens age 60 and above, means of support for older persons is largely reliant on the family. Health issues are often addressed through alternative means due to the exorbitant cost of health care.

Martha Nussbaum's approach on care and capability approach takes note of women's capabilities vis-à-vis certain given conditions such as available resources. In this particular fishing community capabilities cover triple roles, in which care and feminist environmentalism comes in. On one hand, care covers that which is performed by women as part of their roles (reproductive and community roles), and on the other, that which they need as they age (care from the family and from larger units of society, such as the community and the government). Care extended by older women does not only cover reproductive roles in the private sphere but also covers care work for the protection of the environment. The relationship of care and capability is also stressed in the fact that the need for social protection and security increases as one's age increase and one's capabilities decrease.

The Research Experience

Suclaran, located along the coastline, is one of the 12 barangays of San Lorenzo in the Province of Guimaras. Its four sitios cover 483 hectares. Its total barangay population as of 2013 is 2, 107 (males: 1,083; females: 1, 024). Females already outnumber males

in the age group comprising those 40 years old and above. Fishing related economic activities include harvest of crustaceans, gleaning, fishing using long line, bottom gill net and scissors net, backyard shrimp paste and dried fish production, aquaculture, fish trading and salt production.

Mornings were for knowing the community better – the area, the residents and local practices (occupations, habits, way of living, etc.). It is also a time to know the way they live through immersion. Group and individual interviews were conducted in the afternoon when women have relatively less to do. My host family was very helpful in the whole conduct of the data gathering process. Evenings allowed me to have a closer bond with my host family composed of three generations of women. I set aside working on the transcriptions to allow me to spend time with them like I am part of the family and not a mere parachuting researcher or one who is into “social voyeurism/data raid/spectator knowledge (according to Maslow)” (Wadsworth, 2001) who is just looking into the way they live from a distance I have set. I lived their lives. I went there not only to observe how they go through in terms of their multiple roles, but to experience the most that I can in relation to these roles. I did chores – helping with the cooking, the dishes, fetched water and spent leisure time playing *pangingue* (a card game). My host and I went gleaning, at times went to the wharf to see the day's catch and converse with the fisher and visited the mangroves Nang Inang (one of the life story subjects) is taking care of. I tried to live the lives of the women I am writing about.

I used triangulation in gathering primary data. Focus group discussions generated information coming from a collective, life story interviews provide a deeper understanding of women's lives, and key informant interviews tells of older women's situations from a different perspective and its implications.

As part of the ethical considerations in conducting research courtesy calls were done at the municipal and barangay level. Informed consent forms and research questions for life story interviews were in English and Hiligaynon. I am at an advantage since I speak the same language with my subjects. Because of this I am also able to understand the nuances of the language. Full transcripts of the interviews were given to them

to check the accuracy and to filter what they wish to include in the research output. "Participating women will decide whether deeply personal revelations should be taped, transcribed and written up" (Wadsworth, 2001). As a researcher, I find myself a critical chronicler of women's lives with a feminist lens.

Focus Group Discussion and Feminist Group Work

The first Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted in the house of my host family. Initially, commonalities and differences in individual situations can be derived from this method – their occupations, daily tasks, state of the natural environment, health concerns, capabilities and existing support systems.

Twelve women aged 49–69 years old and one 90 year old participated. Almost two-thirds of them are married, almost one third are widows and one is a single parent. The initial FGD was conducted in order to know about actual experiences on aging of a marginalized group of older women, their state of being in their community. Realities reflect situations of these older women. If they are widows, they have to struggle alone in taking care of the family (children, grandchildren and parents) doing triple roles all at once. If they are married, older women often have to take care of their ailing husbands whose health deteriorate at a much earlier age due to exposure to extreme conditions such as the weather and hard labor. The next FGD is a validation of data conducted at the barangay hall with the barangay officials. FGDs aim in "strengthening women as a group from within and examining all existing knowledge with a view to constructing new knowledge in women's interests" (Wadsworth, 2001).

Afterwards, perspectives and concerns on aging are gathered. To draw out their perspectives, I explained to them that they present what their subjective experiences in relation to aging, disregarding standards imposed by larger social structures such as the government. As part of the informal economy, they are not part of the labor force which has a prescribed age for retirement with implications on aging, care and capability. Sharing of experiences on aging with a small group of women gave them a better picture of one another's experiences. It is also a venue for empathy. Gaining the confidence of the group, some were able to tell concerns they have been keeping. Health concerns and the exor-

bitant cost of medical care were brought forward by some participants in the FGD.

Collective empowerment is gained by claiming epistemic privilege by virtue of gender and age specific situated experiences and knowledge. It is also a means to establish solidarity among older women and empower them. They must not come only for fisher folk issues in general, but to discuss older women's specific concerns in a venue they are comfortable in. Knowing one another's experiences and state of being is part of awareness building. Empathy from the group of women was felt. This can be the start of solidarity. Indeed as Thelma Kintanar (1997) said, "one could see the very process of confidence-building among the participants as they derived support from the presence of other women who had had similar experiences and were willing to talk about them" (page 78).

However, FGDs need to be managed well because strong personalities may dominate the discussion or it is only the more vocal ones who are more likely to speak and express their concerns. Some, who are quite shy, can be less expressive than others. This can be self-defeating if the standpoint of the collective is to be achieved. Making sure each one is given the chance to answer each question one by one from one's own perspective and situated experience is the strategy used. This also makes sure that everyone in the group listens to one another and process what each one says. I was fortunate that the more vocal group members helped me encourage less vocal ones to speak. Being a lone researcher proved to be challenging by having to be both facilitator and rapporteur to the discussion. Points must be noted down well, which includes gestures and emotions. It is a great advantage to share the same language with the subjects because it gives them more confidence and empowerment, and a deeper understanding is forged between the researcher and the members of the group. Thus, rapport is easily established. At some point in the discussion, some have been emotional due to a recollection of their conditions, especially about their health. If there are many research questions, it must be made sure that answers are brief but substantial. If the group interviews drag on, some of the participants may exit before the end of the discussion, as they also have to tend to their responsibilities. Women's multiple

burden must always be put in mind. A child also "came" to the interview with one of the grandmothers and was once in awhile given attention. At the end of the interview, they hurried home for several tasks to be done. I gave out chocolate tableas for their morning cups by the shore.

Life stories

"We tell our own individual histories, and from there
we tell that our individual struggles have social causes" —
Maria Mies

The life cycle approach presents the full history of an individual's life. Since my study focuses on the lives of older women, narrative gerontology is used to particularly look more into one's situation in later years and to look back into how past experiences affect life at present. In this case, narrative gerontology is used with a feminist lens to look into care and capability in studying the lives of older women in coastal communities.

As it was expressed in the FGD, the onset of aging for the women in Suclaran is at 50 when ailments and other physiological changes start to occur. Four subjects (Nang Inang, Nang Luz, Nang Nory and Nang Mary Jean) were identified and interviewed in this research with the aid of this method. Their ages range from 54–60 years old. These subjects agreed that their real names will be used. They were also chosen for their accessibility and for their amenability to the demands in-depth interviews. Nang Inang is an organic advocate of feminist environmentalism by being a conscious caretaker of the natural environment. Nang Luz needs to address a certain concern and be empowered in order to achieve this. Nang Nory needs to realize that she is more than just being an adjunct to her fisher husband. And Nang Mary Jean expressed her own empowering experiences and rise from her plight and struggles.

A pre-test was done with 90-year old Lola Flording (a member of my host family and one of the oldest women in the community). The pre-test was actually fruitful. Lola Flor gave vivid descriptions of Suclaran more than half a century ago—its landscape, economy and people's way of life. Listening to women as old as Lola Flording give views of what can be learned from how

people lived their lives in the past such as people's relationships with the natural environment.

I went to the houses of Nang Inang, Nang Luz and Nang Mary Jean for the in-depth interviews, and for Nang Nory, I interviewed her in a shack by the sea shore where the fishers in her family prepare for their work at sea. I listened to them in those venues or in spaces where their stories come from.

The voice of the life stories is in the first person because it is the women who speak for themselves on how they see the world and their situations. The women subjects let their stories flow from their stream of consciousness. The concrete experiences they describe are in relation to struggles and challenges in view of their childhood, married life and being grandmothers, the changes they observed in their natural and social environments and daily activities. It then gives greater focus to their lives in their later years, especially in line with care and capability. I tried to interweave use of narrative gerontology with the life history method.

Narrative gerontology studies the phenomenon of aging based on life stories and asserts that the subjects are not mere narrators but are the stories themselves molded from certain contextual realities such as social and political factors and power relations (Kenyon, Ruth, & Mader, 1999). Narrative gerontology is a life history method which focuses more on the experiences on aging and what it implies.

Summaries of the English translation of the life stories presenting the highlights of their lives in line with the research questions were included in the major chapters of my thesis to see the similarities and differences in their lives and the way they live it. The Hiligaynon transcripts with English translations are found in the appendix of my thesis.

The following are shortened narratives on the lives of four older women in the fishing community of Suclaran rendered in the subjects' own voices.

Nang Inang

I am called Inang. My real name is Margiolina Gajeto. I am 60 years old and was born here in San Lorenzo. My father worked in a fish corral, where he later got drowned. My mother did not have 'work', made charcoal and mats, and chopped wood to be sold. She also brought us along all over Guimaras and in Iloilo during farm harvests. I only finished elementary school here in Suclaran, and we went to school intermittently. I wove baskets, native mats and bags, and also planted squash and pigeon peas to sell.

I first got married when I was 16 years old and I experienced all hardships. My first husband and I worked hand-in-hand during farm harvests, charcoal making and sometimes in capture fishing. I also helped mend nets, prepare bait and peddle the catch, on top of my duties as a wife and mother, like nursing our children and preparing meals. I continued to do these even during the times I was pregnant. My mother helped us take care of the children. Life at sea is hard, there is bad luck and there are storms. We used to stay up late at night. We had 11 children who helped when they were a little older. All six of my sons are now fishers, and two of them almost lost their lives at sea. In our house along the coast, we have to deal the scarcity of fresh water. Later my first husband became an Iloilo-Negros and vice versa passenger boat captain. I went with him in the trips in order to sell fruits from Guimaras to Negros. I then had surgery due to myoma. My first husband died when I was 52 due to cardiac arrest. We plunged deep in poverty for there was no one to depend on at that time, and it seems the children did not know how to work anymore. I then worked as a house help in Iloilo.

I got married again at 54 to a widower who is 18 years my senior. He asked for my hand in marriage for me to take care of him. I did not want to at first, but then I felt compassion. We now live in a lot owned by his three sons. Our children from both sides help take care of our needs such as food and medicine.

Way back, there were plenty of mangroves along the shore. However, about almost a kilometer of the coast has been washed out. The shoreline is almost near the fields now. I get alarmed during typhoons. We evacuate in the barangay hall in case there are huge waves. Gleaning is also different now. Catch is hard. Commodities are expen-

sive. I keep telling people to plant trees and crops in order not to starve and to shield us from the unbearable heat. But the present generation does not know about work. Our world now is different. The air is polluted and the fishes die when silt from the rivers go to the sea. Humans are the ones creating calamities. When the oil spill happened, we suffered for a long time for cannot fish or glean at that time.

Now, I can do anything. I sell fish or barter it with rice, make dried fish, shrimp paste and oysters in brine, and cook viand to sell. I also do macramé using polypropelene (PP) cord and weave mats which I also sell. We got trained by TESDA for the macramé. I take care of my ailing husband who has been on catheter for two years already and a grandchild who was left under my care when my son died from an accident. I plant and take care of mangroves to protect the coastline. But I was also paid by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources because of this. There is an improvement now.

I get sick from time to time. But my children do not forsake me. Since I have been a laborer, I almost surrendered but then I will starve. At the age of 55, I felt body pains but I have to bear it. I feel depressed if I only have to say put. Older women like us who are no longer capable need financial help especially for our medicines. Livelihood can help but when one is old, one is barely capable. Feeding swine and poultry is okay. It is hard for older persons to be in poverty.

Nang Luz

I am Ma.Luz Garganera, 59 years old. I was only able to reach grade six in elementary school. My parents and siblings were fishers. I got used to the sea. In 1972, my sister and I went to Manila to work as house help, but escaped from our employer who did not allow us to go home when our father got sick. I met my future husband in the same year. He used to mend nets but his hand now suffers from spasms. He went fishing when we got married. We have four sons and three daughters.

We used to catch plenty when we go gleaning back then. There were plenty of crabs. Now it is scarce. And commodities are all expensive. And the younger generation no longer respect the older ones.

My husband and I go gleaning, salt making, shrimp-paste making, farming and livestock raising. I used to help him with gill net fishing and sell the catch, but now I cannot assist him anymore. I take care of my grandchild whose mother, my daughter, has a new family. I also plant vegetables for our consumption because we do not have cash sometimes. We also attend barangay gatherings and joined some mothers during the clean-up.

I have a prolapsed uterus, which may be due to hard labor, I was told. I told my condition to a friend who suggested I ask help from a private media network. But I went to a folk healer once. And also consulted a doctor in San Lorenzo. We barely have enough. I felt many ailments and cannot work hard when I turned 50. But I have to strive for there is no one else to depend on. My husband and I also often argued because he is now quite deaf.

There is PhilHealth, but no one guided me, and I have not asked the barangay regarding that. If you do not know how to speak well, they will not entertain you. Pensions are given only to those above 70 years old who already stoop. I want to be given medical care for my health condition. I do not know where to ask for help, and even if surgery will be free of charge, there are other expenses. And I have to take care of my grandson. We need support such as food for we barely have enough. If it is in line with livelihood, I want to do gardening for I can no longer stand making salt."

Nang Nory

I am Nory Gargaceran, 57 years old. I only finished elementary school, as I then worked for the aunt of my future husband here in Suclaran. I used to sell shrimp paste and pots in order to bring home rice and money. Married life was simple but there were difficulties within the home and with our loans. We have five children. I helped my husband at sea when our children were still small and there was no one to assist him. We are happy if we have caught plenty. Our children only got to high school. I wanted them to study so that they do not have to fish for a living. Two of my children became fishers. One of them almost drowned.

There were plenty of mangroves back then, but other people chop them. There is also less catch when one goes gleaning, unlike before when there were a lot of shrimp

and shellfish. Before, fish was also abundant. After the oil spill incident, there is scarcity. Because everything is expensive, we live on a hand to mouth existence. When there are strong winds, income is also poor. I help fix the gill net or the hook and line gear, and prepare the bait. I also make shrimp paste, plant and harvest rice, do laundry for others and make nipa thatch for a living. We planted mangroves in the 90s. I call the attention of those who dig the rocks, spray poison and chop wood.

I am okay except for my hypertension, eye problem and a weak heart. I do not have a doctor now because of poverty. I go to the folk healer instead. I do not expect anything much. The future depends on what you do that has a future. None of my children have studies, so they do not have a future. What future can I expect in fishing than to sell our catch for our family to eat? We reprimand those who destroy the corals for the crabs and fish to increase in numbers.

Old age is around 60 or 85 because they are senior citizens, their eyesight is blurry, they have become childish, senile, forgetful, bad tempered and impatient. I am still young who is strong enough for work and not yet a senior citizen. Back then I was beautiful but not anymore as I have white hair and have no teeth. I was mild mannered but now I am irritable. People our age seem happy and go to dances. What makes me happy is to laugh and tell stories about our lives. It is okay in the house with my husband."

We have loans, senior citizen benefits, PhilHealth and pensions also. The government procedure is very difficult now. What else others can give to old people here? Nothing at all. I do not expect for what is not there. What gives me assistance is my own livelihood. Financial assistance from the government can help us in our occupation. The Department of Labor and Employment gave us gill net as part of the oil spill relief. One's concerns can be expressed in gatherings such as price control.

Nan Mary Jean

I am Mary Jean Gagante also called Neneng. I was born in 1960. Our life was very miserable when we were very young. Father was into fishing while mother was into farming. We help them in both occupations. Because my siblings and I went to school intermittently, I was able to

finish elementary at the age of 15. I went to Manila to work as a house help. I went back to school here later until I was able to spend a year in college and got married at 24 years old. I practice birth control by using injectables and by also going to a hilot. Since my husband was a drunkard, the early part of my marriage was difficult. But now he is okay. He used to drive a passenger jeepney and now a tricycle. We make use of our loans to purchase a motorcycle for us to earn from it. We used to trade fish together but stopped as we cannot maintain the business for some people do not pay their debts. We go gleaning and spear fishing for our food. Before there was a lot of fish and shell fish but there is scarcity now. There was the oil spill and also overfishing which affects us. It is hard now to look for shellfish, where the oysters grow. There is little income and food is expensive. If one can have catch, it is for consumption. Some improvements than can be seen here is the imposed waste segregation and use of less plastic so that it will be rarely washed ashore. My husband and I are also into farming and livestock-raising. In his absence I handle the farm. I also plant vegetables.

I want to live in comfort but we still have loans. Our house here was built out of the proceeds from the cows and swine sold. It is a good thing to have fixed monthly income. But ours is uncertain.

We take care of my 85-year old mother-in-law who lives with us. Soon I need to take care of my nephew. I attend seminars in the cooperative. I also help clean the shore by removing garbage, call the attention of those who poison the fish and have planted mangroves. We must also campaign against illegal fishing and more village watch persons are needed for such. My friends around here are willing to help protect our natural resources.

When one starts to age and is less capable, one should prepare for old age for medicines, milk and food. One's preparation and what one's children can provide can make one live a comfortable life. Just as in the case of buildings, people also depreciate. At 53, it will only be some few years to reach 80 years old. I will just eat and sleep. One must try to be energetic. I do not want to be called old because I can still walk and capable of all kinds of work.

We have a senior citizens office here and they have discos. Doctor's fees are also waived and they also give

support to the families of those who died. Our PhilHealth should continue and should be prioritized. And now medicines are no longer provided in the barangay. If people do not have money, they need to borrow in order to buy medicines. Their illnesses worsen. Distribution needs to be controlled so that there will be enough. Assistance for food and vitamins is needed. The market is growing for our macramé but financial assistance is needed to help them sell in volumes.

I expect a future that has sustainable development for the natural environment. We also need vegetable seeds. The government can also provide fish traps and new gears to replace the old ones.

Key Informants Interview

I conducted two types of Key Informants Interview: 1) A formal and recorded interview with the Chair of the Women and Family Committee of the Barangay; and 2) Informal unrecorded discussions with my host, who is the Barangay Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Management Council Chair.

The formal interview with an authority figure in the barangay in terms of official duties yielded data which is different from the actual realities of the main subjects of the research. Presumptively, this could be due to a different perspective in relation to her position in the barangay. While the main subjects of this research told of their actual aging experience in relation to their ill-health and insufficient social support measures, the formal key informant told only more about the positive aspects of aging in the community such as having no bent over persons in the community and that they are enjoying their lives as there is support from the government through health insurance systems and pensions and welfare support from private individuals.

Reflections

Research gives one wider perspectives and deeper analysis on how things are.

I am about two decades younger than my research subjects, but I will soon inevitably feel and experience what they have at

their age. I am inspired by their resilience and I value their wisdom. I have also learned from them many things including how to survive with meager resources. How they stayed afloat in times of constant struggle throughout a lifetime. My concern is for the long term, not only to their sector, to on wider scale, to other women and older persons in the informal economy.

The marginalized, disempowered and the unaware often just accept what is given from the top—perspectives, policies and entitlements are among these. The voices of these older women small-scale fishers still remain in the bottom, while patriarchal ideologies in the mainstream take control. This is one realization I have after spending weeks as a researcher in the fishing village of Suclaran. Empowerment comes from within, from oneself and extends in bigger ripples through collective action. But often the process of empowerment is quiet.

Reflecting on the research process and results, I was faced with the formal KII outcome that instead of having facts validated for accuracy it yielded a different result concerning how the state of older women is perceived by those in local government positions. I therefore thought that the deeper realities on the plight of older women as revealed by their voices could have been unheard in the barangay as they may not have been empowered enough. I was thinking this study could be a medium for that, for their collective voices to be heard though this written form and as praxis for me. As I was writing my thesis I was reflecting on how this has made an impact on the lives of the women I interviewed. The process will take time, but somehow I hope this has really empowered them enough.

Starting with this, I ponder on how to look into the life stories of other marginalized women with a feminist lens. More women in the peripheries need to speak of their lives, too, as well as their standpoint and strategic interests. Recognizing voices is one way of empowering those in the margins— older women, in particular. Narrative gerontology will be very useful in looking into their lives in the context of the political economy and social realities and also of those women in fisheries and the environment in different age groups. How are they now compared to the women belonging to a generation before them? Who will be the future

women in fisheries and what does the future hold for them in a world where resources are dwindling?

But it is also in working on this study that I realize that in line with care and social protection, claim to entitlements and responsibility are the two sides of the coin. Social protection cannot only be limited to policy, services and economic safety nets, but it also involves the sustained protection of the environment, which is a strategic need or a long term goal for future generations in many communities. This is feminist environmentalism in the case of the older women living by the sea.

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