

# WOMEN IN FISHERIES IN THE PHILIPPINES

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## Overview of the fisheries sector

The Philippines is an archipelagic country of 7,100 islands and is endowed with vast aquatic resources. Its sea area is about seven times larger than its land area of 300,000 km<sup>2</sup>. The country's marine resources of coral reefs, mangroves, and fish stocks, consist of 220 million ha within the Exclusive Economic Zone. Of these, 26.6 million ha are coastal and 193.4 million ha are oceanic waters. The continental shelf area is about 18.46 million ha. The length of the coastline is 17,460 km.

The Philippines is a world-significant fish producer, ranking eleventh among the 80 fish-producing countries of the world. The fishing industry contributed 3.8% to total GDP and 18.6% to GVA in the agriculture industry group, valued at P34 billion (constant prices). The importance of this sector is further emphasized by the fact that fish is the major source of animal protein in the diet of the average Filipino, and constitutes 12% of total annual food intake.

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

## Social, demographic, and psychological characteristics of women in fishing households

Several studies on gender dimensions in fisheries (de Castro et al., 1986; Hondrade and Rodriguez, 1994; Illo and Polo, 1990; Israel-Sobritchea, 1994; Ardales, 1997; Villacorta, 1998) show that the majority of female respondents have completed an average of 4 to 6 years or less of education. Their level of education is not very different from that of the men. While this figure is similar to rural women in general, it is lower than the average among women in urban areas (6.9 years).

Accurate income data are difficult to obtain, although in the above studies when household income is reported, the range has been from P13,740.00 (USD327.00) to P37,000 (USD880.00) in 1991. Data from the 12 bays in the Philippines (PRIMEX-ANZDEC, 1996) reported an average annual income of P25,426 (USD605.00) in 1992. Therefore, despite the importance of the fisheries sector to the national economy, the majority of those who engage in it as a livelihood earn average incomes way below the poverty threshold.

The following characteristics of the communities reported in the 12 bay studies (PRIMEX-ANZDEC 1996) reveal the living conditions of fisher households:

- Average age of household head is 41 years.
- Average age of spouse is 37 years.
- Average family size is 5.1 (although the range reported in the studies cited above is from four to nine members).
- Eighty-two per cent own their houses.
- Forty-four per cent of houses are made of nipa and bamboo, and 34% of nipa and wood.
- Forty per cent own the lot where their house stands.
- Fifty-one per cent have toilet facilities.
- Twenty-five per cent of households are members of community organizations.
- Twenty per cent have used loans, 83% of which came from informal sources.

In the five study sites, both the women and men were members of the local fisher folk association. The other women were mainly active in homemaker types of organizations such as those for health and social welfare. However, they usually represented their husbands in assemblies of fisher or farmer organizations, which are male-dominated.

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

These beliefs about roles are manifested in the activities performed daily. They include childbearing, child rearing, dishwashing, laundering, house cleaning, vegetable gardening, fuel and water gathering. An additional feature, which is typical in rural households, is the case of domestic livestock. As a means to augment meager household incomes and to provide for family food needs, the women resort to rearing pigs or poultry in their backyards. Feeding and cleaning livestock adds to their multiple household chores.

Women's involvement in community decision-making and leadership is limited. Some serve as barangay (smallest political unit in the Philippines' governance system) captains, especially if they happen to belong to political parties associated with the higher income strata, the more educated, and usually the landed, and if it is more convenient that the woman rather than the man assumes the responsibility and authority. More often however, the women assume lesser positions such as secretary, treasurer, or "muse" of organizations, and become top officers only in all-women associations (Hondrade and Rodriguez, 1994). Women themselves believe that men are more decisive than they are. Such a perception reinforces the already male-dominated leadership and decision-making structures and processes. Despite

these structures, it has been observed that more women than men regularly attend community meetings (Hondrade and Rodriguez, 1994; Abregana et al., 1996). Thus, without realizing it women may actually have an active influence in the decision-making through their participation in these meetings.

#### Role of women in fisheries

Fishing is an occupation dominated by men because of the image that only men go to sea in their fishing boats. In most cases, women in fishing communities are not allowed to go with the fishing vessels, but this prohibition is tied mostly to the need for them to remain within the premises of the household so they can attend to their designated responsibilities in the home. Due to this, they have little direct involvement in fish capture. However they are involved in shell and fry gathering/gleaning, spear fishing in rivers, reef fishing using scoop nets, traps and fish baskets, all of which tend to be near-shore activities (Villacorta, 1998, Lachapelle, 1997). These activities nevertheless either contribute to household income or provide direct food for the table. Though less common, Muslim women in fishing villages in Davao (southern Philippines) go on fishing expeditions with their fisher husbands (Israel, 1993). Women likewise are known to join their husbands in hauling nets and lines (de Castro, 1986; Villacorta, 1998) and installing and maintaining stationary gear (Lopez-Rodriguez, 1996a).

Fishing as an occupation is more than just fish production. The participation of women before and after fish capture has been given little importance, leading to the near invisibility of women as contributors to this sector. However, these pre- and post-production activities are significant in terms of their economic and social value. These include net mending, sorting fish upon landing, fish vending, trading and market retailing, and processing and preservation (salting or drying). It has been observed that men are involved in marketing activities mainly when dealing with intermediaries and the fish caught is of high commercial value (tuna, abalone). Otherwise, women handle the small scale marketing that involves inexpensive fish varieties. Fish processing and preservation is mainly the arena of women because it is associated with food preparation. Women engaged in post-harvest fishing activities constitute 40% of such workers and substantially increase the total income of their households (Legaspi, 1995). The social value of such activities lies in the support and assistance wives give to their fisher husbands, and in its reinforcement of relationships within the community, such as in dealing with their *suki* or favored buyer.

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

#### Women's participation in

##### Community-based Coastal Resources Management (CBCRM)

Due to the steady decline in marine fish production and the alarming degradation of the marine environment, there has been a marked shift towards developing strategies in favor of managing and sustaining coastal resources through the involvement of different stakeholders. In the past decade, such an emphasis has gained ground and it would be worthwhile to

examine the extent to which women as a distinct group have been involved. Several reports on experiences in CBCRM have been published e.g. (Lopez-Rodriguez, 1996a).

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

The other reports make no distinction of who-does-what in interventions in the CBCRM process. At most, they mention that women's groups are among those that have been established as part of the essential community-organization component. Whether this neglect is only in the reporting may not be a trivial matter. Nevertheless, the recommendations should have reflected a specific concern for women's issues.

Interviews with a few NGO personnel reveal that women's issues are given some emphasis in their respective CBCRM programs. However, their experiences are not published, which reflects the lack of a publication culture in the country. This deprives the public of needed information that would have been useful in fostering the integration of women in fisheries development.

These interviews also reveal that women, more so than men, serve on the front line in enforcing fisheries regulations and confronting violators regarding, for example, the use of illegal gear, use of dynamite in fishing, etc. The women are seen as better negotiators and more level-headed in handling conflicts than men.

#### Non-fishing related activities

The participation of women in fishing activities takes place alongside their non-fishing production activities and household responsibilities. Coastal communities engage in a combination of fishing and farming as a way of coping with the seasonal nature of these occupations. Table 1 drawn from Rodriguez (1996b) illustrates the gender-desegregated profile of activities in fishing communities. The profile shows that women play multiple roles beyond the child-bearing and community maintenance ones with which they are mainly associated.

Table 1. Activity profile: Camaligan, Lalab, Magpag-ong, 1993 Source:Lopez-Rodriguez 1996b. The Fishers of Talangban. In Ferrer et al. Seeds of hope

Activity	Adult Male	Young Male	Adult Female	Young Female
<b>A. Household</b>				
Cooking			***	***
Washing dishes			***	***
House cleaning			***	***
Fuel gathering		***	***	***
Water gathering	***	***	***	***
<b>B. Aquaculture Production</b>				
<b>1. Pond Preparation</b>				
Cleaning of pond	***			
Drainage/drying	***			
Fertilizing	***			
Filling of pond	***			
<b>2. Releasing of Fingerlings</b>				
3. Harvesting	***	***	***	***
<b>C. Marine Fisheries Production</b>				
Letting down the nets	***	***		
Raising of nets	***	***		
Mending of nets	***		***	
Processing of catch	***		***	
Selling of catch			***	
Shell gathering		***	***	***
<b>D. Community Activities</b>				
Local government	***			
Church activities	***	***	***	***
Social dances	***	***		***
Market days	***		***	
Cockfights	***			
Athletics	***	***		***
<b>E. Farming</b>				
<b>1. Land Preparation</b>				
Plowing	***	***		
Harrowing	***	***		
Dike repair	***	***		
<b>2. Planting</b>				
Seedling preparation	***	***	***	***
Transplanting	***	***	***	***

Activity	Adult Male	Young Male	Adult Female	Young Female
3. Maintenance				
Fertilizing	***			
Pesticide application	***			
Herbicide application	***			
Weeding	***	***	***	***
4. Harvesting				
Cutting	***	***		
Threshing	***	***	***	
Drying	***		***	
5. Poultry/Livestock Raising			***	
6. Home Gardening			***	
F. Copra Gathering				
Gathering of coconuts	***	***		
Halving of nuts	***	***		
Preliminary drying	***	***		***
Extraction of meat	***	***		***
Drying of meat	***	***		***
G. Nipa Thatching				
Cutting of nipa stalks	***			
Slicing leaves from stalks	***	***		
Bundling	***	***	***	
Transporting	***			
Pipis sewing			***	
Selling	***		***	
H. Daet Weaving				
Acquisition of buntal			***	
Fibre extraction	***	***	***	***
Pagkiskis			***	***
Combing			***	***
Washing			***	***
Boiling			***	***
Solar drying			***	***
Connecting fibers			***	***
Sabungon			***	***
Subponon			***	***
Eikison			***	***
Weaving			***	***

It is common for women to engage in work outside the home, such as sewing, weaving, running sari-sari (variety) stores, selling beauty products, and food peddling. Women have also been implementers and beneficiaries of livelihood projects offered by both government and non-government agencies.

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

Problems/Issues involving women's sectoral participation

Post-capture activities, such as fish marketing and processing which women have assumed, can be enhanced beyond being day-to-day enterprises that depend only on the husband's catch. However, this will require capitalization that poor fishing households cannot afford. While credit programs for artisanal fishers exist, these are generally intended for the fisher's production activities, such as for gear improvement, construction of artificial reefs, fry gathering, crab-fattening, etc. Moreover, such loans are made available primarily through the male-dominated fishermen's cooperatives. Thus, there is no credit facility primarily intended to respond to the needs of the women who sell fish or process the catch. Such credit may be used to buy the catch of other fishers for bigger processing operations.

Technical assistance, training, and extension have been designed to target only the male fisher, not mindful of the real situation in the sector where women are just as active in many spheres of fish production. Women do not learn new technology nor are they consulted on technical problems they may encounter in their productive activities. Usually their source of knowledge on such things is through their fisher husbands, who learn directly from the fisheries technicians.

Reduction of post-harvest losses in fisheries and improved fish processing technology will be an important challenge for the future because fish stock exploitation may have reached maximum levels. Women's participation is crucial because they play an important part in the post-harvest domain. In training and support with regards to processing, storage, packaging and distribution of fish, and the management of their enterprises, women should be a major target group.

Fish marketing and trading activities are limited as women are less mobile and are expected to operate close to the domestic front. Thus, information on prices and market trends are not available as these are usually available only in the central fish markets.

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

Women's participation in income-generating activities and other development tasks, such as attendance at meetings and training courses, are observed to be short-lived, especially when monitoring by granting agencies ceases. One reason for this is the time required from women. Considering the multiple burdens of regular domestic and productive activities, additional activities would be an imposition. Unless provisions are made to deal with other commitments, full involvement in development programs will not be sustained.

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

There is no research program that systematically tackles gender issues, women's participation and integration in fisheries development. Database which are sex disaggregated and which may be used in more effective planning and implementation in this sector hardly exist.

#### Recommendations

Extension programs intended for fisheries should incorporate gender concerns into the planning and design of the activities. This may manifest itself in interventions to assist the traditional roles of men and women in society, and at the same time open up avenues for new or expanded roles and responsibilities for women. For example, the opening up of credit packages more suitable to women.

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

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

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

Development activities should not add to women's work burdens. While interventions intended to benefit women in the sector are desirable, provisions to provide them with some time to attend to these added activities should be included. For example day care services, child-minding centres, and possible pooling of cooking responsibilities.

There should be stronger advocacy and actual conduct of gender sensitivity training for both men and women in the communities. This will aim to sensitize the community to the issues brought on by the culturally constructed gender division of labor, the relative valuing of

men's and women's works, gender stereotypes, and to lead them toward gender-fair and gender-sensitive interactions. This can likewise surface and address issues on domestic violence and reproductive health and rights (Lopez - Rodriguez, 1996a), which affect women in general, and if adequately addressed will definitely improve women's status and participation in the fisheries sector.

Research programs that will systematically examine women's participation and impact in coastal resource management should be pursued. Action research which tests the workability of new roles and new responsibilities for women, for example as information disseminators, or as recipients of formal credit for entrepreneurial activities, should be carried out in order to identify factors influencing the effectiveness of these role changes.

Interventions to strengthen and formalize women's role in CBCRM and other community development initiatives should be instituted. Gender perspectives in environmental issues and resource management should be incorporated into training programs and management structures.

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