

STRENGTHENING WOMEN FISHERFOLK EMPOWERMENT TOWARD SOCIAL INCLUSION IN COASTAL ENVIRONMENT OF MALOLOS, BULACAN, PHILIPPINES

Elmira Thrina C. Pelayo

Center for Conservation of Cultural Property and Environment in the Tropics
The Graduate School, University of Santo Tomas

(affiliation), Bulacan State University
elmirathrina@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Women in the Philippine fisheries are often labeled as “the Invisible Fisherfolk”. Their pre-harvesting contributions are multifaceted, involving bait gathering, net fixing, and meal preparation for their husband while post-harvesting activities include bringing the fish to the shore, sorting, and cleaning of the daily catch. Women are normally associated with household chores. They are rarely admitted as an essential factor in pursuing their livelihood in the coastal communities. In most cases, women’s participation in fishing communities is neither socially recognized nor economically compensated. The primary goal for the development of women in the fisheries is to empower them, make them productive and self-sufficient. In this way, they can have an equal status as partners in promoting the living conditions of their own families and communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empowerment is all about people taking control over their lives, setting their own agenda, gaining skills, building self-confidence, solving problems, and developing self-reliance. The study acknowledges the importance of empowering women fisherfolk to carry on with their role in enhancing food security.

Social inclusion is an undertaking of enhancing the participation in society, specifically to those who are less advantaged, through building opportunities, chance to use resources, having means to be heard and the respect to everyone’s rights. Giving women a chance to be heard in the coastal communities and considering their welfare in policy making and project formulations will help them surpass all the challenges that come their way and will promote their inclusion in the fishing industry.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study is to describe the overall portrait of the women fisherfolk based on their profile, characters, experiences, activities and values. The study also explores different challenges in strengthening women empowerment that affect social inclusion in the coastal environment.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research is an ethnographic study of women fisherfolk as they go through their activities and their lives in the fisheries. It is a qualitative design where values, behaviors, belief, language, and learned patterns are recounted and explicated.

METHODOLOGY

Triangulation through participant observation, one-on-one interviews, and focus group discussion are employed as ethnographic methods in the study. Participant observation is utilized to observe their fishing-related activities, verbal and non-verbal communications, and their community as a whole. Face-to-face interviews involved thirty-three (33) women fisherfolk, who are 18 years old and above, actively engaged in fishing-related activities for not less than 3 years, and has been living in one of the coastal communities for not less than 5 years. Focus group discussion focused on the experiences of 8 women fisherfolk chosen based on the scores of the empowerment evaluation.

THE STUDY SITE

The study was conducted in five (5) coastal Barangays in the City of Malolos, Bulacan namely Babatnin, Caliligawan, Masile, Namayan, and Pamarawan, respectively.

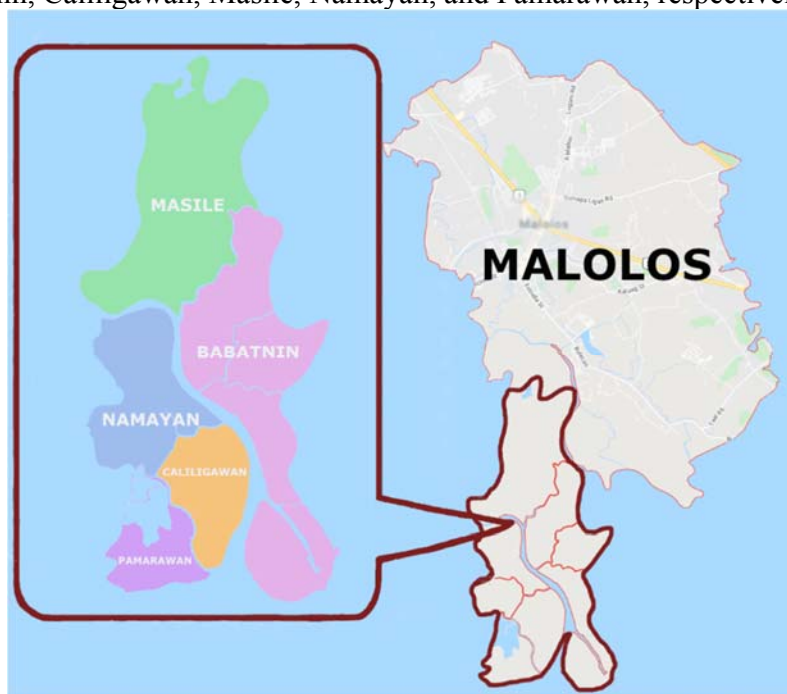


Figure 1. The Map of the City of Malolos including the five Coastal Barangays
Source: City Google Maps 2020.

PORTRAIT OF THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN FISHERFOLK: THEIR CHARACTERS, ACTIVITIES, BELIEFS, AND VALUES

Caregivers

1. *Namamalaisdaan*/Aquaculture Worker. They work as caretakers/operators of *palaisdaan* (fishponds) owned or tenanted by landlords. They are normally called as *bantay* who are in charge of setting, feeding monitoring, and guarding the ponds in 3-4 cycles a year. They are also in charge of pond preparations like in cleaning, draining, drying, and filling of water. They take part in simple bookkeeping and in providing cooked food during long hours of harvesting.

Risk-Takers

1. *Naggugulaman*/Seaweeds Gatherers. They provide a jelly-like substance extracted from red algae locally known as *gulaman-dagat*, a cooking substitute for gelatin, a clarifying agent for soda drinks, and an agent mix for making pails. The risk taking activity starts at around 5 in the morning as they paddle their way to the sea using a canoe-type of boat, then would carefully gather the seaweeds by scooping them inside the boat using their bare hands or bamboo sticks. Collected seaweeds will be hanged in clotheslines for faster drying. Then, it will be brought to the local market or to the plastic traders at Php 25/kilo. They usually collect 10–20 kilos for the span of 15 days. The most difficult part is the fact they cannot afford to buy their own *banca* that they have to pay a rent of Php 30 per day in order for them to proceed with their day's work.
2. *Mananalaba*/Oyster Picker. Women engaged in *talaba* [oysters] picking begin their work at 12 noon. They would paddle their way to the stakes for about 30 minutes, usually all alone by themselves. When they arrive at the area, they will submerge to a waist-high water after leaving their boats at a secured place. Carrying with them a hammer, a personally crafted belt bag, and a screwdriver, they will proceed to collect their day's produce. After gathering, they will return to their homes to clean and shuck the *talaba*. The danger of the *mananalaba* includes the threat of drowning during the times when the waters are very high.
3. *Namamaklad*/Actual Fisherfolk. *Namamaklad* is when women go out regularly on *bancas*, taking the risk with their husbands to fish. This activity starts as early as 10 in the evening. They would sail to the open sea towards their fish corrals, exposing themselves to unstable weather conditions with only the stars and the moon as their working companions. The strong winds that cause the rough seas during the *habagat* season make fishing a life-threatening activity. The *namamaklad* is supposed to have a strong body and patience in order to withstand the tedious requirement of sorting the catch for the night. There are no restrictions for their activity since they still practice even during the 8th month of their pregnancy and would usually resume on the 4th month after giving birth. It is not unusual to see them tagging along their newborn just to give them the needed care and sustenance.

Influencers

1. *Bakulera*/Fish Wholesalers. *Bakulera* is a term used to call a female fish trader who independently positions herself at the forefront of the fish trading business. The *bakulera* is often considered as a “big time” trader in the island, who has the capacity to earn as much as Php 10,000–20,000 worth of gross income as the trading day closes. The *bakulera*'s day starts at 3:00 am by heading towards the main ports to check the availability of possible trading goods. Their *bancas* are loaded with *banyeras*, pails of distinct color, and emblem exclusive to them. They

are responsible for negotiating the prices of their catch to the *consignacion* or the “big time” middlemen. They influence the prices of fish commodities since they take hold of the biggest supply of sea products that will be distributed in different market places through numerous fish vendors.

Strategist

1. *Tindera*/Fish Vendors. The tindera is a peddler, who sells fish either in their own community or in far barangays. Their activity starts at around 3 a.m., waiting normally in the ports for the motorboats to arrive. With their pails and bamboo or plastic baskets, they would try to secure their daily share ranging from about 5 to 20 kilos. They would, then, hurriedly go aboard the banca to proceed to the town or barangay main roads. As they arrive at their designated areas, they would get their *pedicab* (a bicycle with an attached side carriage), arrange all their fishes, and start their regular route of about 7 km long. They would usually scream their common chant to inform their *suki* that they are already in their area. They make use of cellphones in order for their buyers to place orders ahead of time, informing them of the available products. They provide special services such as cleaning the fishes and errands of bringing vegetables for them.

Preservers

1. *Mag-aasin*/Salt Makers. Salt farming is making a living through the solar salt production. The task of the salt makers starts from the preparation of the salt beds, condenser pans, brine pump set-up, and brine water passage. They would, then, proceed with actual salt making process and finally harvesting. They have to wait for the sun-heated hours of the day to harvest.
2. *Magbabagoong*/Shrimp Paste Maker. *Bagoong* (shrimp paste) is a common ingredient in most foods, which is made from *alamang* (fermented krill). The magbabagoong starts with *pamamakyaw* (wholesale buying) of the krill at 4 to 5 am. Small-timers buy 5 pails or 7 kilos of krill. Then, they would proceed to their houses to wash the krill and put 7 kilos of salt per pail to ferment them for 1 week inside a big *tapayan* (big old clay jar). They are responsible enough to make sure that their hands are clean as they mix the solution using their bare hands, avoiding spoilage of the fermented krill.
3. *Magtutuyo*/Salted Fish Maker. Since fish is highly perishable, they are offered on its processed state for a prolonged shelf life through smoking or sun-drying. The processing of fishes is ideal to coastal areas that are not equipped with refrigeration facilities or cold storage that could maintain the freshness of the daily catch. It is believed that processing can also improve the flavor of the fish. The absence of kilns in most of the houses and the unavailability of wood as fuel make smoking less favorable among women fisherfolk.

CHALLENGES IN STRENGTHENING WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

1. Hazards Due to Weather. Global warming results in an increased change in the weather systems in the country, producing more powerful typhoons and extreme warming of the ocean waters that result in death of coral reefs and migration of fishes to cooler waters. The southwest monsoon is quite shortened from 8 months to at least 4 months. This affects fisherfolk’s potential income aside from the thought of their dependency for their daily food.
2. Pollution Problems. These transitions caused by urbanization contribute to the degradation of aquatic resources. Damages related to this manifest in coastal or maritime resources-dependent

communities such as inexplicable fish kills, fish reproduction problems, reduction of catch, and abnormalities found in fish species.

3. Financial Availability. Cash income from fishing activities are distributed in various expenditures such as food, children's allowances, and other miscellaneous goods that are maintained on a daily basis. Women fisherfolk often sacrifice the capital intended for their fishing activities, inhibiting them to continue in fish trade and related ventures.
4. Product Preservation. Fish being a highly perishable product needs to be well-handled and preserved. Immediate processing is required in order to prolong the shelf life of the fishes if they are not immediately delivered to the market place. The inability to provide facilities such as cold storage and ice production equipment makes it more difficult for women fisherfolk compete against traders from the mainland.

CONCLUSION

The study eliminates the notion that women are just minimally involved in the fishing industry. It provides a substantial evidentiary narrative that women have a variety of roles in the coastal environment, particularly as salt makers, salted fish makers, fish wholesalers, shrimp paste makers, fish vendors, actual fisherfolk, seaweed gatherers, oyster pickers, and aquaculture workers. This is over and beyond their primary role as mothers, wives, and daughters to their aging parents.

Despite their active participation in assuring food security for their families and the community, the women fisherfolk are still denied of proper recognition in the policies drafted for the fishing communities. Those who are sincere in promoting their well-being should be serious in revising and adapting policies that can address the challenges that they have to overcome.

Women were observed to be enjoying in groups, though devoid of encouragement nor guidance to form organizations that can allow them to communicate and discuss pertinent issues and problems that could later on can be beneficial for them.

In building sustainable fishing communities, the fishery stakeholders should accept women fisherfolk as ideal partners and collaborators in spawning initiatives for the formation of better fisheries management and development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Ripple Effect Model. The model postulates that improved policies regarding women fisherfolk can accelerate the process of social inclusion of women fisherfolk in the coastal environment. A single drop of change in the lives of women fisherfolk can allow them to make a difference in the coastal communities which can inspire others to strive and be proud of their chosen livelihood. Being empowered could motivate and facilitate others to thrive vigorously improving their potentials and serve as enablers to other women fisherfolk.