

The Fishers of Talangban: Women's Roles and Gender Issues in Community-Based Coastal Resources Management

*by
Luz Lopez-Rodriguez, Associate Professor*

This paper analyzes the Filipino women's situation in coastal communities, particularly, those engaged in fisheries. It employs social and gender analysis as an important framework for a holistic understanding of the issues in community-based resource management particularly in the coastal zone. The author draws her ideas from her direct experience in assisting the establishment of a community-based coastal resource management program in Batan, Aklan; from a review of literature on the subject; and from exchanges with colleagues who have been working with women in fisheries and coastal communities.

Social and Gender Analysis in Fishing Communities

Gender is often left out as a variable in development programs, including those on environmental resource management. Most literature focuses on the bio-physical components of ecosystems and the technical aspects of production efficiency, ecological conservation and rehabilitation. Recently, there is growing attention to the unequal access to fishery resources in fishing communities and an advocacy for the empowerment of poor fishers. However, most researches and development programs still generally regard fishers as men and remain oblivious to women's direct participation in fishing and their contribution to the fishing industry.

Social and gender analysis recognizes that the processes of resource and surplus extraction in fisheries created marginalized and oppressed sectors, fishers both men and women, among them. Fishery technology and development programs promoting such technology have varying effects on men and women in a coastal community.

Mabunay (1995) noted the bias of research procedures in some studies of fishing villages in Asia which undervalue the role of women in the economic process. Research projects employed male field workers who depended on male informants who also tend to designate men as immediate beneficiaries of rural and/or fishery development projects.

Recent studies (Davis & Nadel-Klein, 1988; Illo & Pollo, 1990; Tungpalan, et. al. 1987; Sobritchea, 1993) however, indicate that oftentimes the "fisherman" is also a woman. Women appear as commercial fishers, fish plant laborers, proletarian processors, subsistence or artisanal fisher, processors and marketers, political agents, financial managers, dependent housewives, and

complementary partners in a wide variety of ecological, cultural, political and economic arena (Davis & Nadel-Klein, 1988).

Fishing as a way of life depends on women's unpaid as well as waged work. The patriarchal view of work created a reproduction and production hierarchy in the sexual division of labor. In Philippine society, women are primarily expected to do reproduction work. This is often unpaid, confined to the home, routinary and just as physically and emotionally taxing as paid work outside the home. On the other hand, men's domain is public production or paid work outside the home which is highly valued more than women's reproductive work. Therefore, women directly involved in fishing are more likely to be referred to as helpers or auxiliary fishers assisting their husband-fishers in handling simple fishing equipment gleaning, fish processing, trading, and mending of nets. Illo and Polo (1990) emphasize how the women are socialized into, and interact along, work roles more associated with the home than fishery. They are socialized into being female, with roles and responsibilities revolving around the home and housework; on the other hand, they were taught to be more than female, to work alongside men.

The nuances of women's role in coastal zone management is better illustrated through a case study of the Batan Bay coastal communities focusing on the Talangban Fisherfolk Organization or the Katibyugan it Mangingisda sa Talangban of Barangay Camaligan, Batan, Aklan. Talangban is located in an inner river tributary of Batan Bay, southeast of Aklan province.

The Batan Bay Environment

Batan Bay is located in the central Philippine island of Panay in the province of Aklan. It lies on the eastern side facing the Visayan Sea near the boundary with the province of Capiz (see Figure 1).

Batan Bay and the adjacent Banga Bay, more popularly called *Tinagong Dagat* by the locals, comprise a semi-enclosed estuarine with a 2.4 kilometer-wide opening between Batan and Dumaguit points. Batan Bay has a total area of 765 hectares, 40% of which is utilized by fishers with passive gears. Banga Bay has a total area of 668 hectares, 60% of which is also used by fishers with passive gears.

Batan Bay and its tributaries are shared by five municipalities with the municipality of Batan having jurisdiction over 60% of the water area. Both bays support a wide range of species of fish and invertebrates and host a range of fishing, aquaculture, and water navigation activities. Total fishery production (excluding mussels and oysters) is estimated at 654 tons per year, 46% of which

comes from Batan Bay, 30% from Tinagong Dagat and 24% from the tributaries. The estimated area of fishponds is about 2,400 hectares which is equivalent to the total area of mangrove swamps.

A sharp decline of catch has been observed in recent years. Among the major problems in the area is heavy siltation of about 17.5 centimeters per year. This is caused by denuded mountains around the bays, the loss of mangroves, and the congestion of stationary gears which impede water circulation. Pollution from housing settlements, fishponds, and farms, and oil and garbage spill from ships and navigational vessels also compound the problem.

Sitio Talangban, Camaligan, Batan

Talangban is one of the five sitios of Barangay Camaligan in the town of Batan, Aklan. It has a population of 607 distributed in 116 households, or about 31% of Barangay Camaligan's total population.

The sitio, being almost entirely by a winding river system, resembles an islet (see Figure 2). The highest elevation is only about 80 meters above sea level. The sitio's feeder road is flanked by mudflats, much of which has been developed into fishponds or fishfarms.

Around 80% of the area is agricultural land. Besides homelots and gardens, there are small fields planted with rice, coconut, nipa as well as patches of banana and bamboo groves. The physical and social environment is intimately tied up with the reverie setting that surrounds most of the village.

Most proximate is the Hae-o (Jal-o) River, essentially a brackish water body, the salinity of which increases towards the mouth of the Batan Bay. The others are Balete River, Kil-ohan and Aksam. There are only muddy bottoms throughout this river system; there is neither grassy vegetation nor any coral reefs, although some banks still abound with the oysters at Talangban.

Most households engage in fishing by operating stationary gears such as fish corals, lift nets, filter nets, barrier nets and using simple implements such as handline and crab pos. They also glean oyster and other edible shells around the mangrove areas. Others work as seasonal laborers in fishponds. Average annual income is estimated at P17, 000 or just a little more than P1, 000 monthly.

A gender-disaggregated activity profile of Talangban reveals the following division of labor in various activities:

Activity Profile: Camaligan, Lalab, Magpag-ong, 1993
(based on the fieldworkrecords, Alabado, Dionisio and Patriarca)

Activity	Adult Male	Young Male	Adult Female	Young Female
A. Household				
Cooking			***	***
Washing Clothes			***	***
House Cleaning			***	***
Fuel Gathering		***	***	***
Water Gathering	***	***	***	***
B. Farming				
1. Land Preparation				
Plowing	***	***		
Harrowing	***	***		
Dike repair	***	***		
2. Planting				
Seedling preparation	***	***	***	***
Transplanting	***	***	***	***
3. Maintenance				
Fertilizing	***			
Pesticide application	***			
Herbicide application	***			
Weeding	***	***	***	***
4. Harvesting				
Cutting	***	***		
Threshing	***	***	***	***
Drying	***		***	
5. Poultry/Livestock Raising				

6. Home Gardening				

C. Aqua Culture Production

1. Pond Preparation

Cleaning of pond ***

Drainage/drying ***

Fertilizing ***

Filling of pond ***

2. Releasing of ***

Fingerlings

3. Harvesting *** *** *** ***

D. Marine Fisheries Production

Letting Down the Nets *** ***

Raising of Nets *** ***

Mending of Nets *** ***

Processing of Catch *** ***

Selling of Catch ***

Shell Gathering *** *** ***

E. Copra Gathering

Gathering of Coconuts *** ***

Halving of Nuts *** ***

Preliminary Drying *** ***

Extraction of Meat *** ***

Drying of Meat *** *** ***

F. Nipa Thatching

Cutting of Nipa Stalks ***

Slicing Leaves from Stalks *** ***

Bunding *** *** ***

Transporting ***

“Pipis” (Sewing) ***

Selling *** ***

G. Daet Weaving

Acquisition of Buntal ***

Fiber Extraction *** *** ***

“Pagkiskis”	***	***
Combing	***	***
Washing	***	***
Boiling	***	***
Solar Drying	***	***
Connecting Fibers	***	***
“Sabungon”	***	***
“Sugponon”	***	***
“Eikison”	***	***
Weaving	***	***

H. Community Activities

Local Government	***	***
Church Activities	***	***
Social Dances	***	***
Market Days	***	***
Cockfights	***	***
Athletics	***	***

Women’s Contribution in Environmental Resource Management

The women of Talangban play multiple and strategic roles in community livelihood and environmental resource management. Recognizing these important roles is necessary in designing sustainable community-based coastal resources management (CBCRM) programs.

1. Women are primary food producers in farming and in fishing. Most coastal communities are farming-fishing households due to the seasonality of activities and income from both types of livelihood and due to the need to diversify income sources. Women are farmers accomplishing important stages in rice production, specifically planting, weeding, harvesting, post-harvest and marketing. Women tend home gardens and raise livestock and poultry which are sources both of food at the family table as well as of cash income.

Women are fishers especially in shallow waters along rivers or beaches. Together with children, they catch fish and collect edible shellfish for home consumption or for the market. They row bancas, install fishing gear, and haul nets with their husbands and

other male members of the family. They mend nets and maintain the fishing gears. They salt and dry fish and process food to store it for lean days or to generate more income.

2. Women are traders of fish, other locally produced petty commodities and consumer goods retailed in sari-sari stores. As soon as the catch is landed, women bring these to their *suki* (regular customer or wholesaler) or peddle the fish around the village. They also peddle vegetables and home-cooked food. This activity is particularly significant in keeping the local economy going.
3. Women are consumers and resource users. Women gather plants and collect marine products for food consumption and for the market. They collect *talaba* (oysters), *tahong* (mussels) and other edible shellfish along riverbanks. They cut *nipa* and coconut palms and weave them into thatches for their own use or for sale. They weave baskets from *buri* (*Raphia pedunculata*) for storing grains or strip *buri* stalks and weave them into raffia cloth. Less practiced nowadays is weaving fine *piña* cloth from pineapple leaves.

Women gather fodder for animal feeds and wood for fuel. Women do the laundry using well water and fetch water for the family's use at home.

4. Women are resource managers. They plan and allocate their meager income and the resources at their disposal for the multiple needs of the family. They transact credit when resources are inadequate and advise the family members on their consumption patterns when resources are scarce. They train the young by example on conserving and recycling resources such as water, fuel and food.
5. Women are housewives and caregivers. They are mostly occupied with childbearing, child rearing, housekeeping and other so-called reproductive tasks which nurture the health and general well-being of their husbands and other economic producers in the family or household.
6. Women are community volunteers and development workers. As an extension of their caregiving role in the family, women take on unpaid community management work such as being day care workers, barangay health workers, barangay nutrition scholars, Parents and Teachers Association (PTA) members and officers, and church volunteers.

Women’s View of Work and Livelihood

Women’s interrelated functions in reproductive work at home and in productive work at home and in productive work outside the home is succinctly captured in the themes “*pangabuhi*” and “*pangita*” which is documented in Ma. Luisa Mabunay’s study of Talangban women (1995).

Pangabuhi refers to reproduction involving life sexuality. It stems from the root word “*buhi*” (literally “life), “to live” or “being alive”). Figuratively, it also means to survive, and is often used in general and ambiguous ways.

Pangita comes from the root “*kita*” (literally, to “to see” or “a find”). In the context in which it is used, it insinuates a form of gain, as reward or profit. *Pangita* signifies diverse aspects of production specifically in terms of work and livelihood. ‘*Kita* is closely associated with a source or ‘*ginnabuocan*’ (literally, “where one gets something”). The reference is often for a specific expense item and indicates a monetization of the *kita*.

Juxtaposed with *pangabuhi*, *pangita* reflects the narrower and conventional conception of production for a “livelihood”, as a means of sustaining life, maintenance of living and synonymous with sustenance or subsistence. In combination, as “*gapangita’ it pangabuhian*”, the terms denote active pursuit or ways and means by which to live or succinctly “working for life”. It implies the connectedness of various aspects of women’s work as one aspect of their living.

Mabunay (1995) proposes the following schema in delineating *pangabuhi* and *pangita* as viewed by the women of Talangban:

PANGABUHI

Reproduction

Life

Sexuality

Self-Provisioning

Home

Private

Family

Strategic

Women

PANGITA

Production

Livelihood

Work

Commoditized

Society

Public

Household

Practical

Men

Women articulate the delineation of men's and women's *pangita* or *pangabuhi*. Women describe their occupation as '*sa sueod baeay*' (within the house) or as housekeeper, homemaker or housewife. Men's work is '*sa liwan*' (outside or beyond the home).

The connectedness of *pangabuhi* and *pangita* are key concepts and principles from which we can learn in setting the vision and strategies of CBCRM.

Gender Issues in CBCRM

Women are most negatively affected by environmental degradation and resource depletion. The changing environmental and social conditions affecting the local fishery resources and activities contribute to the shaping of women's work and lives at Talangban. At the same time, changing circumstances push women into situations which open new avenues and opportunities. Most of their undertakings indicate deliberate efforts to contribute more actively to their households' *pangabuhi* and *pangita*. However, there are several factors which impede women's full participation in a sustainable development process.

Among the key problems and its effects on women are:

1. **A degraded and depleted environmental resource base breeds poverty, results in the further overexploitation of such resources and the marginalization of women.** In the past when the rivers and bay were accessible to all, women, alongside men, actively fished along the shores with simpler technology, with less effort and less time. Now that mangroves are gone, and fishponds have appropriated most of the fishing ground, women fish less and re confined to edible shell gathering or work more as fish traders on consignment from the produce of fishponds. Younger women, unable to proceed with higher education, leave the villages to work as domestic helpers and factory workers in the cities and town centers. Men undertake most of the fishing activities with increasingly expensive technology that would sometimes require venturing farther out to the sea.
2. **The culturally constructed gender division of labor restricts most women to reproductive work in the home and regard them as secondary or auxiliary economic producers outside the home.** Men are generally regarded as "the fishermen" indeed because they seldom partake of or do only little reproductive work, in terms of child rearing and housekeeping. This gender division of labor implies gender stereotyping which results in the invisibility of women's work as economic producers and the "devaluation of women's

reproductive work. It implies a hierarchy of work and values where “fishing for income” is more valuable than “housework for the nurturance and well-being of family”.

3. **The stereotyped gender division of labor translates into development work, in terms of research, technology development and organizing.** Researchers are blind to women’s issues. Research methodologies treat men and women as respondents. Technology development focuses on capital-intensive and expert-dependent projects. Organizing on production and environmental projects target mostly the male head of households. Access to training, technology and credit has mostly been channeled through the men.
4. **Poverty and environmental issues aggravate women’s multiple burden while there is only very limited support services for reproductive work.** Deforestation causes the drying up of water wells which makes fetching and housework more difficult and time consuming. Mangrove deforestation and fishpond construction result in salt-water intrusion into water wells. Pollution of potable water sources poses serious health risks. When family members get sick, women as caregivers must painstakingly revive them back to health while performing other work at home and outside.

Strategies in Gender-Responsive Development

The Katibyugan it Mangingisda Talangban (KMT) or the Fisherfold Association of Talangban was organized in July 1992 by the Food Systems Development Project (FSDP) of the University of the Philippines in the Visayas (UPV). The FSDP is a rural development project assisted by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). The KMT’s Constitution and By-Laws was eventually ratified on September 27, 1993 with the following objectives:

1. To protect Batan Bay and its tributaries as a source of aquatic and marine products;
2. To establish a livelihood project that would address the needs of members for additional income as well as food supply to the community;
3. To act as a voice of the marginal fisherfolk in the area; and
4. To cooperate with other line agencies in bringing about change through livelihood projects.

Joint Participation of Men and Women in the Fishers’ Association

In recognition of gender equality, the association welcomed participation of both women and men in the association. Membership in the association included 13 households, deliberately involving both husband and wife to represent their respective households. The majority of the

households are marginal fishers who operate stationary gears along the river. They also engage in occasional wage work in the fishponds around the area. A few are small owner-cultivators with an average of one-hectare coral and rainfed rice land.

Community Organizing and Education Program

At the start, a community organizer spent considerable time on informal discussions, individually and in small groups, evoking environmental and economic issues affecting them. The women underwent gender sensitivity training. Follow-up discussions were also conducted on group building, leadership, and community organizing.

Technology Validation as Alternative Livelihood

The community organizer and fisherfolk leaders realized that they have to address the economic needs of the people alongside their involvement in advocating environmental issues, hence they turned to *tilapia* cage culture. Cage culture is less capital-intensive than fishpond operation where the small fishers have no access. The technology was made available with voluntary technical assistance from U.P. Visayas.

The U.P. Visayas team introduced them to cage culture of sex-reversed hybrid *tilapia* (*nilotica*). This technology was developed by Dr. Lourdes Dureza of the UPV College of Fisheries from the thesis experiment of her graduate students. She trained the KMT members in tilapia cage culture, as part of participatory technology validation and development strategy. The KMT members were enthusiastic about the new knowledge as well as potential source of additional income. An initial capital of P67, 000 was borrowed from the FSDP. The cage culture project started operation in December 1993. The members rendered free labor during the construction of the cage.

Outcomes of the Experience

Both women and men found the tilapia cage culture technology easy to learn and handle. Even the children assisted as well; hence it became a family-based enterprise. However, commercial feeds take up more than half of the production expenses. Community-based production of feeds was considered but there is not enough volume of fish cage culture ongoing at present to make this cost-effective. Not all the necessary materials for the feeds are readily and regularly available.

The project provided KMT members with a ready source of viand for their family and the community especially during lean times. *Tilapia* of reasonable size can be selectively scooped out any time for their consumption. This is an important source of protein to prevent malnutrition. The KMT members still have to diversify their sources of food especially in terms of vegetable production. However, the limited supply of water for year-round home gardening is still a constraint.

Selling the tilapia at P5 to P10 mark-up per kilo has provided additional income to women and their families. Women's entrepreneurship is reinforced by vending the fish and being quickly compensated in cash to buy other necessities for the family.

The experience of collective action in managing a project has fostered camaraderie and unity among the members, trained them in leadership, organizational and entrepreneurial skills, especially the women. Earlier, many scoffed at their initial venture.

Women have been recognized as partners at work and at home. Men have started to appreciate women's roles and contributions outside of the home and have gradually taken share in household chores.

At the moment, the KMT members are in the process of expanding to hatchery of tilapia cage culture project. Other fisher-groups are also interested in adopting the technology which can be managed by a people's organization, for both men and women. It contributes to food security by supplying the food needs of the local community and by serving as a profitable source of income. When further expanded and developed, this can become an alternative socio-economic activity to partially relieve the exploitative fishing activities in the river and bay.

However, this technology could not successfully stand on its own without the support of equally important activities:

1. **Gender-disaggregated baseline data and women-specific studies employing participatory research.** Earlier researchers were more statistical than qualitative in nature. Participatory research using focused-group discussions facilitated reflections on environmental and gender issues.
2. **Community organizing and continuing education on environmental, economic and gender issues.** This aspect was relatively unsustained with the pullout of community organizers in mid-1994. Ensuing monthly visits mostly dealt with technical inputs on fisheries and did not allow much input on organizational development.

3. **Networking and advocacy with LGUs, NGOs and POs.** though the U.P. Visayas was its major supported, KMT also linked up with municipal and provincial agencies for follow-up on environmental advocacy issues
4. **Gender awareness; equal sharing of responsibilities and decision-making in the home, in production, and in organizational activities.**

Limitations and Continuing Challenge for CBCRM

The KMT members are constantly reminded that tilapia cage culture per se is not the solution to their problems. They have to work with other groups in protecting the river and conserving the marine resources in the bigger ecosystem. The group is affiliated with the Intermunicipal Coastal Resource Management Council (ICRMC) which is composed of local government officials, government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and people's organizations, mainly fishers' organizations.

Once, they petitioned against the construction of a fishpond like obstructing a natural waterway in their vicinity. Despite their repeated follow-up with various government agencies, their petition has not yet been adequately attended to. The ICRMC, they noted, has not been active recently because of the political factionalism among local government leaders during the elections. Fishers' participation in the ICRMC is still relatively weak, and the fishers still have to consolidate their ranks across the various barangays around the bay. Women are not represented in the ICRMC.

References:

- Davis, Donna Lee and Jane Nadel-Klein. "Terra Cognita: A Review of the Literature".
To Work and To Weep: Women in Fishing Economies, pp. 18-50. Edited by Jane Nadel-Klein and Donna Lee Davis. St. Johns: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1988.
- Illo, Jeanne Frances I. Polo, Jaime. Fishers, Traders, Farmers, Wives: The Life Stories of Ten Women in a Fishing Village. Quezon City: Institute of Philippine Culture, Ateneo de Manila University, 1990.
- Ingles, Jose, et al. "A Study of Fisheries in Batan Bay." Iloilo City: Food Systems Development Project, U.P. in the Visayas. 1992.
- Mabunay, Ma. Luisa. "Gender Roles in Women's Lives: A Study of Fishing Households in a Central Philippine Community", Ph. D. dissertation, McGill University, Montreal, Canada: June 1995
- Sobritchea, Carolyn. "Gender roles and Economic Change in a Fishing Community in Central Visayas." In Fishers of the Visayas, pp. 279-304. Edited by Iwao Ushijima and Cynthia Zayas. Quezon City: CSSP Publications and the University of the Philippines Press, 1994.,