

HOUSEHOLD CYCLES AND TASK MANAGEMENT: VALUING THE PRODUCTIVE INVOLVEMENT OF WIVES IN A VISAYAN ISLAND FISHING COMMUNITY

Enrique G. Oracion

Abstract

In the feminist tradition of recognizing the potentials of women as human beings capable of managing their own affairs, this case study will reinterpret the stories of the wives in various stages of the household cycles in Apo Island as they work side by side with their husbands to break the constraints imposed upon them by the island's cultural and natural environment. This paper argues that although their reproductive tasks have limited their involvement in the productive domain of their husbands, wives at the height of child bearing and rearing have nevertheless successfully utilized some social mechanisms to help them cope with demands of reproductive tasks in order to find time to participate in productive activities. Meanwhile, those who have already completed their reproductive years are now able to devote more time in fish trading and other economic activities.

The roles of men and women are differentiated and made more distinct by biological justification which may sound logical but not necessarily true. Biological determinists believe that the anatomy of men and women is responsible for what they could do respectively. The unquestioned persistence of this belief over time had ultimately made it culturally accepted as well (Nolasco 1991, Sobritchea 1991, Showdon 1997). The practice of people and the reinforcing social norms have perpetuated the idea that there are indeed domains which specific gender should manage and specialize. Performance of tasks becomes "gendered" and crossing boundaries is discouraged and even socially criticized.

Meanwhile, the stratification by gender has created some kind of inequality that subordinates

women in the process. Certain tasks performed by women are categorically underrated compared to those carried out by men. Domestic tasks which are said to be biologically based have kept women in the home. Even though women, either because of necessity or opportunity, have intruded into the productive domain of men, their efforts are undervalued in terms of monetary and social reward because by tradition this is not their assigned place (e.g., Eviota 1986; UNICEF 1987; Wallace *et al.* 1987; Sobritchea 1991, 1994). These situations illustrate some of the obvious manifestations of the ideology of patriarchy that has taken root in society. In order to achieve the liberation of women, this ideology needs to be deconstructed. What needs to be done toward this end is to challenge and interrogate in literature and in practice the prevailing notions about the domesticity of women in order that women's role will be fully valued.

Paradigm Shift: Women in the Center

This paper maintains that women's capabilities are not to be underestimated. Women may be constrained by their biological na-

ture in performing certain specific tasks but this does not mean that they are not capable of being equally productive as men when given the opportunity. Similarly, what they produce should also be valued by society particularly as the present economic condition demands from both the husband and the wife equal efforts to sustain their families. This kind of paradigm shift, according to Nielsen (1990), requires "reinterpretations, reconstructions and re-analyses of existing data from a new perspective" where "women are seen, rather than just the men, in center stage" of family struggle for a decent living. In the Visayas, the visible participation of women, particularly in fishing households experiencing economic changes and resource degeneration, is well documented by numerous studies, such as those by Sobritchea (1994) in Bohol; Shields, Flora, Slayter and Buenavista (1996) in Siquijor and Leyte; and Oracion (1998) in Apo Island of Negros Oriental.

A holistic view of the fishing activities which examines the involvement of both husbands and wives and the extent of their participation in every aspect of the activity including those done before,

during, after, and by whom constitutes a paradigmatic shift from the traditional perception of fishing as a male-dominated economic activity where only the actual catching of fish is given emphasis. This approach offers an opportunity to assess the extent of women's participation in the fishing industry and argues that if pre- and postfishing activities are examined, the contributions of women become more visible. Only then can subsistence fishing be aptly described as a conjugal enterprise (see Oracion 1998: 40-47, for a detailed analysis of how the wives and husbands in households studied complement each other in doing domestic and non-domestic tasks).

In the feminist tradition of recognizing the potentials of women as human beings capable of managing their own affairs, this case study will reinterpret the stories of the wives in various stages of the household cycles in Apo Island as they work side by side with their husbands to break the constraints imposed upon them by the island's cultural and natural environment. This study will use the data gathered through observations during the fieldwork and those narrated by key informants

during in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Operating within the framework of the paradigm shift, this study will focus on the way the wives manage to get out from their given "natural" domain, that is, the home, to complement their husbands' activity at sea and maintain an equal place with them in the family and the community.

In particular, this paper argues that although their reproductive tasks have limited their involvement in the productive domain of their husbands, wives at the height of child bearing and rearing have nevertheless successfully utilized some social mechanisms to help them cope with the demands of reproductive tasks in order to find time to participate in productive activities. Meanwhile, those who have already completed their reproductive years are now able to devote more time in fish trading and other economic activities.

The Wives of Apo Island

Apo Island, where the study was conducted, measures about 74 hectares. It is located five kilometers off the southeastern coast of Malatapay, Maluay in the

town of Zamboanguita, about 25 kilometers south of Dumaguete City. Malatapay holds the regular Wednesday *tabu* (market). It is also here where people take off for Apo Island which is about 30 to 40 minutes ride by a pumpboat. Apo Island is popular among tourists and environmentalists because of its marine reserve and fish sanctuary managed by the island residents (see Oracion 1998: 38, for description of the island).

Twelve wives constituted the key informants of this case study. Their ages range from 22 to 64 years old while their husbands are, on the average, three years older. The average number of children is four, with ten the highest number. Generally, the wives and their husbands have reached only the elementary level of education. What is apparent also in these households is the patrilocal pattern of residence—Apo Island men who marry women from other places bring home their wives to the island to settle there. A majority of the wives interviewed came to the island when they married.

The husbands of the respondents are all primarily engaged in small scale or subsistence fishing using hook and line, net, and *baroto*

(nonmotorized outrigger). The wives claim that they are also involved in the fishing activities of their husbands in one way or another. Together with their household responsibilities, they perform major productive activities such as mat weaving, fish trading, operating a *sari-sari* store, selling souvenir T-shirts to island visitors, dress-making, and manicuring. They likewise consider themselves, particularly the older respondents, as active members of various community organizations found in Apo Island, notably the Development through Active Women Networking (DAWN), a local NGO which is possibly instrumental in making them aware of their rights as women.

One of the most pressing problems encountered by the wives in Apo Island is the absence of potable water (which has to be fetched from the mainland at a cost of about four to five pesos per gallon). Equally serious is the scarcity of fish catch during typhoon months. The wives also pointed to environmental problems caused by poor sanitation, deforestation, and the damage caused by tourist divers in the coral reefs as pressing concerns. Other problems experienced

by the wives are interhousehold conflicts which are usually economic and political in nature, limited sources of income outside of fishing, and poor medical services.

The research noted that among households engaged in subsistence fishing in Apo Island, the sex-based division of labor exists between husband and wife without creating tensions and frustrations between them. However, this sex-based division of labor is not a rigid arrangement because time availability, expertise, and willingness to do a task also determine household task assignment. This situation is reflected in the responses of key informants to questions such as who usually takes over homemaking tasks when the wife is out of the island trading, or what the wife does when the husband is fishing. Moreover, there are tasks that either of the genders could perform which Sobritchea (1994: 294) in her study of another fishing community described as "nongendered" roles to differentiate them from "gendered" roles which are exclusively performed by only one of the genders. Nongendered roles in fishing activities, such as fishing with torch and traps, repairing of fish nets, and processing of

fish for sun-drying, allow wives plenty of opportunities for participation. To some extent, some wives assist their husbands when they go out to fish by carrying the *baroto* into the water and again help them pull it off to shore when they arrive. There are also exceptional women among the participants of the focus group discussion who go out to sea with their husbands. They paddle the *baroto* while their husbands maneuver the fishing net or hook and line. On the other hand, the data also indicate that husbands perform domestic tasks when their wives are either away from home, pregnant, or nursing an infant.

Variations Across Household Cycle in Task Management

This section will examine closely the degree and nature of involvement of wives in the household cycle where they are categorized in order to determine whether reproductive and domestic tasks uniformly influence the extent of their participation in their productive activities. As operationalized in this paper, the household developmental cycle is determined by the presence and the ages of children

the couples have.

Household cycle one includes couples who are either childless or have only one child. It also includes couples in which the wife is either pregnant or has a nursing child. In cycle two are included couples who have children of working age. Cycle three have couples whose children are already married, while couples in cycle four have children who are practically all married and the couples are of retirement age. The average ages of wives in the four household cycles interviewed are 23, 26, 50 and 61 years respectively (see Table 1). In this analysis, only the stories of wives which show unique features relative to the rest are presented here for purposes of comparison and illustration.

Household cycle one

At the time of the study, Leonora and her husband had just arrived in Apo Island three months before from Siquijor Island where her family of orientation resides. Leonora was then pregnant and eventually delivered her firstborn. She claimed that during her pregnancy she was economically unproductive since her husband did not allow her to do strenuous tasks because he was anxious about their

firstborn. For the same reason, they temporarily resided with her parents-in-law for the duration of her pregnancy. Leonora's husband is also engaged in fishing, and during his wife's pregnancy, his mother sold the catch for them. At present, all the other household tasks are shared by Leonora's husband and her in-laws, especially since Leonora is nursing their baby. However, this situation is temporary until the couple are able to manage their own domestic affairs and live separately from the husband's parents.

The story of Leonora can be examined further in relation to the case of Doris who has a nursing child. Doris and her husband live separately from the husband's parents but within the same community. Doris's 12-year old sister lives with them and assists in homemaking, particularly in looking after the four-month old baby. During the interview, Doris's sister was tending the baby while Doris was washing clothes.

Before her marriage, Doris used to work as a sales representative for a small cosmetic company based in Tanjay (northern mainland town). She met her husband when she was promoting the beauty

Table 1. Some demographic characteristics of the twelve wives by household cycle included in the study.

Household Cycle	Mean Age	Mean Years in Schooling	Mean Years Residence (as family) in the Island	Mean Number of Children
1	23.33	8.67	3.79	0.33
2	26.00	8.67	2.00	1.67
3	50.33	6.00	32.00	5.67
4	61.00	4.00	39.67	7.00
Mean	40.17	6.84	19.37	3.67
Range	22-64	0-12	3 mos.-43	0-10

products in the island. When she married, she stopped working in the cosmetic company and came with her husband to Apo where she earns extra income by occasionally giving manicure services in the island. She used to do home manicure service but has since minimized this activity because of her nursing child. Before she had a child, she also used to deliver fish to her former coworkers in Tanjay. Nowadays, however, she can hardly manage to go to the mainland to sell fish; instead she requests her

mother-in-law to trade for her as well as buy their household needs in the mainland. For most of their household needs, Doris buys from the stores in the island.

By observing her husband, mother-in-law, and the other women in the island, Doris learned the process of drying fish. Realizing that they would soon need more money, she convinced her husband to buy their own fishing net instead of using the net owned by her in-laws. Occasionally, Doris and her husband receive some cash

gifts and rice from her own parents.

The situation of the wives in this cycle demonstrates how their reproductive obligations limit their productive mobility. And since their households are still developing, economic and labor supports are provided by their family networks, especially from women relatives or maternal parents. These wives, however, realized that sooner or later they have to contribute directly or indirectly to household earnings.

Household cycle two

As wives in this cycle are still in the height of their reproductive years, they expect their household to grow with the coming of more children. But the need to augment household income and build up the economic status of their respective households impels these wives to engage in economic activities. However, those who still have small children (below 4 years old) to attend to remain partly constrained by their reproductive and domestic tasks and are only minimally involved with their husbands' fishing activities. As a result, they redirect their own activities toward those that allow more flexibility in time.

For example, Edna and Susan consider mat weaving as their major economic activity, while Sylvia is involved in fish trading. Edna also runs a *sari-sari* store in her house to augment her family's income. Because their husbands are into fishing, Edna, Susan and Sylvia are all engaged in fish drying. They are also actively involved in economic decision making within their respective households. For example, it was Sylvia who convinced her husband to buy their own *baroto* rather than borrow from her father-in-law. On the other hand, Susan discussed with her husband the possibility of buying a piglet which she could raise and later sell.

It is also in this cycle that borrowing of money from parents or nonrelatives to buy medicine and other household needs is more pronounced. The attachment of parents to these households is recognizable in the financial support, either in cash or in kind, which they provide their children. This dependence on parental support is also manifested in the practice of borrowing the fishing equipment owned by parents or in getting a ride with them in their parents' boat when they go to the mainland to trade. When they themselves

have no opportunity to leave their households or are in urgent need of cash, Sylvia and Susan usually sell their fish catch to their respective parents and parents-in-law, who are themselves fish buyers in the island.

Household cycle three

Meanwhile, the wives in cycle three belong to established households with grown-up children. These wives have enough time to pursue economic activities because they are no longer burdened by their reproductive and domestic tasks. Some of their children are already married while the unmarried ones assist them in household chores. They are now more focused on managing their time and productive resources to maximize household income. Celia buys fish in the island and sells them in the mainland. She also supplements what she earns by weaving mats which she also sells during market day in Malatapay. Delia manages a *sari-sari* store bigger than that owned and managed by Edna in cycle two. She is also a barangay council member from which she receives a monthly hono-

rarium. Meanwhile, Francisca only sells fresh fish caught by her husband to the local buyer; the dried ones she sells in the mainland during market day.

That these wives spend the highest number of days trading in the mainland shows further that they have more time for activities outside of homemaking. For example, Celia goes to the mainland almost daily to sell the fish she buys in the island when supply is available and the weather condition is good. Even then, bad weather rarely stops some of them from leaving the island to trade in the mainland. A woman fish trader, for instance, claimed that she is not daunted by bad weather as long as she can find a pump boat operator who will take her across the sea. For her, this makes good business sense to take advantage of the high price of fish because of low supply in the market during this time.

On the average, all the wives in this cycle spend three to four days a week trading in the mainland during which household needs are purchased. All the wives said that they have likewise established their own *suki* (regular customers) considering the number of years

that they have traded in the mainland. This is particularly true among the wives who regularly attend the weekly market day in Malatapay. Like the women in the first two cycles, the wives in this category have *suki* comprising of people who are not intimately related to them. They establish a *suki* relationship with anyone who gives fair price, especially in buying their goods, as well as with store owners who are willing to extend credit or loan on certain merchandise. This relationship facilitates their transactions and allows them time to buy their needs with little loss of time, especially as they have to go back to the island in the afternoon of the same day.

The apparent economic stability of households in cycle three enables these families to support their newly married children (e.g., Illo and Polo 1990). This condition is observed in Apo Island particularly among couples who are economically productive. Households in which wives participate in economic activities enjoy greater economic advantage compared to households in which only the husbands are productive and the wives are saddled with reproductive and domestic responsibilities.

Household cycle four

In this cycle couples have children who are mostly married, have established their own families, and are expected to give their parents some form of support. Theoretically, the needs of households in this cycle have decreased and couples in this category have no need to exert effort to earn except only to sustain themselves.

However, Magdalena, one of the wives in this cycle, still dries fish and weaves mat for sale in the mainland while her husband remains actively involved with fishing. She sells the fish her husband catches to the local fish buyer. The dried fish she sells in the mainland every market day. This is also the occasion when she buys their household needs.

Magdalena sells not only finished mats but likewise fresh and dried *pandan* leaves both in the island and in the mainland. She also supplies mainland weavers with *pandan* leaves from which she receives a 25 percent share of the total number of mats they have woven, which she also sells. Despite her age, Magdalena is still physically able to dry fish, weave mats, and trade.

The case of Anselma is quite different. Although her husband still goes fishing, Anselma has stopped weaving mats because of worsening back pains. The income of the household comes solely from the sale of fish caught by her husband which they sell mainly in the island. An unmarried daughter, who used to stay with a brother in Manila, has come home to live with her parents. Anselma's married children in Manila send money occasionally. At the time of the study, her husband was visiting their children in Manila and was expected to bring home some money from them. Anselma and her husband also look after the three children of one of their sons who is separated from his wife. Although this son regularly sends money, this is intended mainly for the support of his children.

Towards Alternative Configurations of Gender Roles

The preceding stories of wives in the fishing community of Apo Island have shown the reality that women are in varying degrees involved in productive activities while simultaneously managing

their reproductive and domestic tasks. Since subsistence fishing households are considered one of the five most impoverished sectors of Philippine society (UNICEF 1977: 28), the contribution of these women to the survival of their respective families in the midst of increasing economic difficulty both caused by natural phenomenon and human competition cannot be underestimated.

Interestingly, their stories are no different from the experiences of other Philippine rural women. Such stories support the view that the efforts women expend to provide the necessary material requirements of the family are equal to those of men. However, the patricentric cultural norms that dominate gender relationship in the family attribute to the husband the economic status of the family while undervaluing the economic contributions of the wife. Despite the fact that the number of women who are in the labor force has been increasing through these years (UNICEF 1977: 90), wives continue to be seen as playing only supporting roles. This is so since the domain of the wife is expected to be limited to home management which includes child care and

housework. Any economic contribution she makes is always regarded as insignificant despite pervasive evidence to the contrary. According to Wallace, *et al.* (1987), viewing women as invisible resources perpetuates their subordination in the labor market, which is a sad reality in capitalist-oriented economies like the Philippines (Eviota 1986).

Even on the household level, patricentric cultural norms operate to judge the practice of role sharing or swapping as a form of deviation. Situations in which husbands choose to stay home to take care of housekeeping tasks and look after the children while their wives work, for instance, in better-paying jobs or have better opportunities for more gainful employment, are often viewed in a negative light by the community (e.g., Illo and Polo 1990: 106; Nolasco 1991: 100). These culturally imposed gender role expectations prevent other couples from trying alternative task arrangements. As a result, valuable human resources are wasted. According to Illo (1977: 47), "couple-sharing tasks and other family responsibilities provide another incentive for female market participation," which

would mean additional household earnings if practised. When the perception that gender role sharing is productive becomes popular, the wife's economic contribution and participation in household decision-making (Alcantara 1994, David 1994) will finally be valued and considered as significant as the husband's role in providing the basic needs of the family (e.g., Cohen 1993). To achieve this end, society must first acknowledge the oppressive role of patriarchal norms, challenge their power to warp individual lives, and accept alternative cultural arrangement of gender roles.

Summary

The situation among the wives of Apo Island shows that, although childbearing, rearing, and domestic tasks put limits to their productive involvement in the local fishing economy, such factors are considered to be temporary relative to the stage of the respective household developmental cycle in which they presently belong. It is obvious that caring for and breastfeeding an infant are special maternal responsibilities a wife cannot just delegate to her husband

(e.g., Illo 1977: 37). In the Philippines as a whole, the proportion of mothers who breastfeed is higher in rural areas (90%) than among the urban poor (85%). Specifically, there is a bigger number of breastfeeding mothers in the Visayas, in which Apo Island is a part, than in other regions (UNICEF 1987: 88-89). The figures suggest that rural wives spend more time with reproductive tasks than their urban counterparts.

One of the interesting findings of this case study is the value a husband gives to his wife who is pregnant or has just delivered a child, in the case of a newly formed household. This supports the observation of Alcantara (1994: 106) that having a child increases the wife's domestic powers and worth compared to when the wife could not give a child or is not able to bear a child at all. The wives in cycle one and two in this case study demonstrated that the prospect of additional children helped them successfully convince their husbands to acquire their own fishing equipment and other productive resources. Equally concerned for the economic well-being of their families, husbands willingly took up their wives' suggestions.

The stories of the wives in cycle three show evidence of their ability to maximize their productive activities. This suggests that the reproductive role of the wife no longer impinges on her productive activities. When the wife completes her childbearing years and her children are already able to look after themselves, the economic opportunities of the wife broaden. These wives are also able to allocate productive resources, either in cash or in kind, among themselves which they can use to start a small enterprise like mat weaving, pig raising, selling souvenir T-shirts or buying fish in the island which they sell to the mainland. In their study on gender and resource management in the Visayas, Shields, Flora, Slayter and Buenavista (1996) describe this economic transaction as being facilitated through networks of relationship either affinal or consanguinal which are considered as social capital. In Apo Island, these social networks become mechanisms by which the women are able to develop an informal arrangement in resource exchange (see Oracion 1998 for details). For example, a wife in cycle four provided *pandan* leaves to weavers and received, in return, a share in the

sale of total mat woven. The same is true with a woman who bought souvenir T-shirts in Dumaguete and allowed some women she could trust to sell them in the island. She received a fixed amount for every T-shirt sold while the seller has to add an amount on top of this price in order to earn. All of these, together with the establishment of *suki* relationship which assures fair price, credit, and other forms of arrangement involving other kinds of resources enabled the wives to negotiate a productive role in their households rather than be totally dependent upon the earnings of their husbands.

It should be noted, however, that old age often limits the active involvement of couples in economic activities and slows down their movements around the island as well as to the mainland. This is the stage when the financial support from adult children is more noticeable. However, one wife in this cycle showed that old age has not hindered her active involvement in economic activities; for this wife, old age does not always mean economic retirement, especially as she still feels physically able. As in many rural households, older women in Apo Island who are still

able to work do not let old age keep them from contributing to the family income.

As their stories illustrate in this study, women in a rural community are not only wives and homemakers but also important economic providers along with their husbands, a role society has not truly valued.

Note

The data used in this paper is part of a larger study conducted under the auspices of Silliman University Center of Excellence in Coastal Resources Management (COE-CRM) through a grant from the United States Agency for International Development. The opinion expressed herein, however, are not necessarily those of the USAID.

References

- Alcantara, A. N. 1994. "Gender roles, fertility and the status of married Filipino men and women." *Philippine Sociological Review*, 42: 94-109.
- Cohen, T. F. 1993. "What do fathers provide? Reconsidering the economic and nurturant dimen-

- sions of men as parents." In Hood, J. C. (ed.), *Men, work and family*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.
- David, F. 1994. "The roles of husbands and wives in household decision making." *Philippine Sociological Review*, 42: 78-93.
- Eviota, E. U. 1986. "The articulation of gender and class in the Philippines." In Leacock, E. and Safa, H. (eds.), *Women's work: Development and division of labor by gender*. Massachusetts: Bergin and Garvey Publishers, Inc.
- Illo, J. I. 1977. "Involvement by choice: The role of women in development." Final report submitted to USAID by the Social Survey Research Unit (Naga City), Institute of Philippine Culture, Ateneo de Manila University.
- Illo, J. I. and Polo, J. B. 1990. "Fishers, traders, farmers, wives: The life stories of ten women in a fishing village." Manila: Institute of Philippine Culture, Ateneo de Manila University.
- Montiel, C. T. and Hollnsteiner, M. R. 1976. "The Filipino women: Her role and status in Philippine society." Final report submitted to the Local Water Utilities Administration by the Institute of Philippine Culture, Ateneo de Manila University.
- Nielsen, J. M. 1990. "Introduction." In Nielsen, J. M. (ed.), *Feminist research methods*. Colorado: Westview Press.
- Nolasco, C. 1991. "The women problem: Gender, class and state oppression." In Mananzan, M. J. (ed.), *Essays on women*. Manila: The Institute of Women's Studies, St. Scholastica's College.
- Oracion, E. G. 1998. "Exchange transactions of Apo Island with the mainland: From the perspectives of wives involved in fish trading." *Silliman Journal*, 39(1): 34-53.
- Shields, M. D., Flora, C. B., Slayter, B. T., and Buenavista, G. 1996. "Developing and dismantling social capital: Gender and resource management in the Philippines." In Rocheleau, D., Slayter, B.T., and Wangari, E. (eds.), *Feminist Political Ecology: Global Issues and Local Experiences*. New York: Routledge.
- Showdon, C. T. 1997. "The 'nature' of sex differences: Myths of male and female." In Gowary, P. A. (ed.), *Feminism and evolutionary biology: Boundaries, intersection and frontiers*. New York: Chapman and Hall.

- Sobritchea, C. I. 1991. "Gender ideology and the status of women in a Philippine rural community." In Mananzan, M. J. (ed.), *Essays on women*. Manila: The Institute of Women's Studies, St. Scholastica's College.
- Sobritchea, C. I. 1994. "Gender roles and economic changes in a fishing community in Central Visayas." In Ushijima, I. and Zayas, C. N. (eds.), *Fishers of the Visayas: Visayas Maritime Anthropological Studies I (1991-1993)*. Dilliman: CCSP Publications and University of the Philippines Press.
- UNICEF. 1977. *Situation of children and women in the Philippines*. Manila: United Nations' Children's Fund and the Philippine Government.
- Wallace, B. J. et al. 1987. *The invisible resource: Women and work in rural Bangladesh*. London: Westview Press.