

FILIPINO WOMEN  
IN COASTAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT:  
THE NEED FOR SOCIAL RECOGNITION<sup>1</sup>

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ABSTRACT

*This paper focuses on the involvement in coastal resources management of women in subsistence fishing households and their specific contributions as managers of scarce resources. Recognizing the major involvement of wives in household as well as in the local fishing economy, this paper argues that women have equal right as their husbands to be considered as stakeholders in carrying out the objectives of a community coastal resource management program. Like their husbands, women have equal responsibilities as well as privileges in the program. Their concerns are equally important and must be similarly recognized. In arguing this case for women, this paper will examine the community-based coastal resources management program of Apo Island in the Philippines to demonstrate the extent of women's involvement from the initial stage of its implementation to the present. As such, this paper is intended to be a response to the challenge of feminist environmental groups to recognize the emerging visibility of women, particularly the wives, in all aspects of the local economy.*

**Introduction**

The alarming state of food resources in Filipino coastal communities is an index of the extent of the deterioration of the country's marine environment as a result of destructive fishing practices, overfishing, industrial pollution, and population pressure. This critical situation has spurred the development of various environmental programs designed to curtail the further destruction of this important resource base for protein food for Filipinos. The common theme of these programs is the promotion of proper resource management

through sustainable use of coastal resources. Their objective is to slow down the pace of depletion of these vital resources.

It should be noted that as a concept, coastal resources management is understood either as a program or as the production and utilization of existing resources. As a program, it involves the protection, preservation, and rehabilitation of resources through informal or formal mechanisms like the promulgation of policies and ordinances or laws by the local and the national government units and is realized through the collective participation of non-government and people's organizations (Oracion 1997). As an activity, it includes the wise and sustainable use of scarce resources in coastal communities, both marine and terrestrial. It also involves the introduction of diversified activities, practices, and use of resources by the local people as alternative mechanisms to reduce pressure on dwindling supply.

This paper focuses on coastal resource management, especially on the role of women in the production and utilization of existing resources. In highlighting the vital contributions in this program of women particularly in subsistence fishing households, this paper argues for their recognition as important stakeholders in the management of scarce resources. As such, this paper is a response to the challenge of feminist environmental groups to recognize the emerging visibility of women, particularly the wives, in all aspects of the local economy.

### **Perceived Problems in the Local Fishing Economy**

In a study of a coastal community in Central Visayas, residents have noted the direct link between major changes in the local fishing industry and the deterioration in the quality of life of people (Sobritchea 1994: 296). According to these residents, the major changes in the local fishing industry include the introduction of new fishing techniques and the use of nets of various sizes and motor-

ized boats which intensifies exploitation of marine resources. In addition to these new fishing techniques, residents have also reported the prevalence of illegal fishing activities such as the use of dynamite, poisonous chemicals, electricity, and fine-meshed nets. Consequently, these destructive fishing practices have wreaked havoc on marine resources and in turn have adversely affected the community's food sources.

For residents of this island community already challenged by scant economic resources and unfavorable geographic conditions, the result of these changes can only be calamitous. They have identified at least three major problems which plague their day-to-day existence. Most serious of these problems is the decrease in household income as a direct consequence of the decrease in the volume of catch in fishing. Finding themselves often at the mercy of natural elements, residents have been unanimous in pointing out unpredictable weather conditions as the second most serious problem besetting their island community. Exacerbating these two problems for island residents is the absence of viable alternative sources of income particularly at times when bad weather causes strong sea currents and makes fishing difficult, if not impossible.

It is possible that the lack of capital to engage in non-fishing related economic activities has contributed to the residents' inability to pursue other ways to be productive. Scant financial resources prevent them from purchasing better fishing equipment, while their lack of skills explains why they are unable to repair broken equipment themselves. Meanwhile, the high prices of basic commodities in the market in relation to their low income conspire with other factors to make their already worsening condition a disaster.

### **Gendered Responses to Resource Scarcity**

Residents of subsistence fishing-based communities in the Philippines respond to the scarcity of food resources in different ways. In this Central Visayan coastal community, for instance, household members who no longer feel that the

community has anything to offer to improve their condition often decide to leave the island and find work as factory workers or domestic helpers in urban centers, or as crew in commercial or deep-sea fishing operations based on other islands. During their period of employment which keeps them away from the community for several months, they may send money home or save their earnings which they later bring home when they return for vacation or family visits (Sobritchea 1994: 287, Oracion 1998a: 38). Families of individuals who join deep-sea fishing are usually given advances in cash or in kind to attract them to join the fishing expedition which often lasts for ten months (Abregana 1999a: 53).

Those who remain in the community engage in a variety of income-generating activities such as small-scale fishing with the use of hook and line, nets, and fish traps, blacksmithing, farming, carpentry and wood carving, *tuba* gathering and livestock raising. On the other hand, when they are not performing fishing related activities such as gleaning, women spend their time thatching or trading nipa, weaving mats, raising livestock, raising or selling vegetables and cooked food, or tending a *sari-sari* store. Some provide laundry services for well-off households, or health services such as massage, while others sell souvenir items to tourists. Still others engage in dressmaking and hairdressing (Tanchuling 1993: 12; Sobritchea 1994: 288; Shields, Flora, Thomas-Slayter and Buenavista 1996: 163; Oracion 1998a: 39). On Apo Island the two island-based resort-and-restaurants which cater to tourists provide some of the women the opportunity to work as cook and food server. It is evident from these examples that both men and women resort to a combination of activities to maximize income.

Household data on the production activities of husbands and wives amidst resource scarcity show that a good number of wives are very much involved in fishing aside from other productive activities that they pursue as a source of in-

come (Sobritchea 1994: 288). The same data, however, also reveal that there are women who consider themselves primarily as housewives. As such, they do not report involvement in any productive activities and regard their husbands' work as their family's major source of income. It is interesting to note the data in Table 1 which show that while a number of women in the sample are engaged in a variety of productive endeavors, a majority of husbands (83 percent) perform only a single activity—fishing. This profile, however, is expected given the fact that the community is dependent on the sea rather than on land for subsistence.

*Table 1. Production Activities of Adult Filipino Men and Women in a Fishing Community (n= 30 Households)*

<b>Men</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Fishing	83.00	Gleaning	50.0
Blacksmithing	20.00	Fish Trading	37.00
Farming	16.00	Join Husband in Fishing	33.00
Carpentry / Wood Carving	13.00	Nipa Thatching	27.00
Tuba Gathering	3.00	Vending Cooked Food	7.00
Caretaker of Farm Animals	3.00	Laundry Service	7.00
		Hairdressing	3.00
		None	20.00

*Source: Sobritchea (1994: 288)*

The data also reveal that women perform a greater variety of domestic activities than their husbands whose fishing activity takes them to sea for most of the time. However, the data do not reflect the amount of time spent. This is particularly true during the peak season for fishing or when they fish away from shore which often takes between 2 to 5 days for those who have motorized *banca*. But even when they are not fishing, husbands still do some fishing-related activities like repairing the fishnet or the boat. Moreover, they carry out the more strenuous domestic tasks like gathering and chopping firewood or fetching water from a source usually farther away from the house. Meanwhile, it is the wives' responsibility to prepare the food, wash clothes, clean, and care for the children. Usually, when domestic duties allow them, wives also help their husbands repair the fishnets.

Table 2. Domestic Activities of Adult Filipino Men and Women in a Fishing Community (n= 30 Households)

Men	Percent	Women	Percent
Gather and Chop Firewood	47.00	Food Preparation	57.00
Repair Fishnet	33.00	Wash Clothes	40.00
Fetch Water	27.00	Clean House and Yard	33.00
Child Care	10.00	Child Care	27.00
Boat Repair	10.00	Gather and Chop Firewood	27.00
		Repair Fishnet	20.00
		Raising Livestock	10.00

Source: Sobritchea (1994: 290)

Although it is seen as a departure from their traditional task, the involvement of wives in fishing-related activities also suggests how difficult life is at present particularly for those who have never engaged in this activity before. This problem becomes more striking during times when husbands are unable to fish because of bad weather conditions or when they are sick. Meanwhile, wives who pursue a type of work different from their husbands' have shown a greater autonomy and freedom over their earnings (e.g. Illo and Polo 1990: 106). Although this is considered a favorable development in women's role in the economic sphere, the general perception in the community remains that women's involvement in economic activities is only supplementary to their husbands' occupations (Tanchuling 1993: 12). This perception exemplifies the pervasive influence of certain cultural norms on people's beliefs although such norms have ceased to be relevant in the context of the present economic crisis. In a comparative study made on the work of adult men and women, data show that while men do 22 percent more productive work than women, the latter perform 70 percent more of the reproductive tasks, suggesting that women cross task boundaries more often than men (Lachica 1993: 24-25).

### **Involvement of Women in the Local Fishing Economy**

To gauge the extent of women's involvement in the traditionally male domain of fishing, seven women participated in a focus group discussion in a coastal community in southern Philippines. Of this group four were primarily involved in pre-harvest and post-harvest fishing activities and three actually participated in fishing out in the sea (Abregana 1999b: 13). In another report, ten out of the thirty or one out of three wives interviewed have joined their husbands in actual fishing although these were small rather than commercial fishing ventures (Sobritchea 1994: 288).



Slicing and salting the fresh catch



Washing the fish before sun drying



Dried fish vendor from Apo island trading in Malatapay



When domestic duties allow them, wives who are not pregnant or have grown-up children accompany their husbands on fishing trips particularly when the fishing ground is near the shoreline. Their task is to help catch fish by using multiple hook and line or by casting the net while also keeping their husbands' drinking under control (Abregana 1999b: 12). Some women in the community participate in seining and reef fishing with the use of scoop nets and fish traps (Sobritchea 1994: 289). Aside from fishing out in the sea, women, usually with their children, also perform fishing-related activities such as gleaning edible seaweeds, mollusks, eels, sea urchins, and other marine organisms during low tide along the coast and in shallow waters (Tanchuling 1993: 11). They also earn extra income by collecting fish and prawn fries which they sell to fishpond operators or to fry traders. However, this particular activity is seasonal and very much dependent on the spawning period of fish and prawn (Sobritchea 1994: 289).

Wives contribute to the fishing activities of their husbands by preparing the provisions like food, water, gas, extra clothing, rum, and cigarettes for the fishing trips. They also assist in the purchase and preparation of the baits and hooks. On Apo Island, wives also help carry the small *banca* (non-motorized outrigger) to and from the water when their husbands leave for or arrive from fishing. It is also the wives' task to decide what to do with their husbands' catch—to sell the fish fresh or to sun-dry them, what or how much to keep for family consumption, how much to sell and to whom, or which to give away and to whom especially during abundant catch. Wives either sell their husbands' catch to the buyers or peddle them around the community. In turn women fish buyers on the island sell the fish on the mainland almost everyday when supply is plentiful (Oracion 1998a: 40).

Fish drying and trading are considered major activities of women which require them to travel and spend some

time away from home to deliver the fresh and dried fish to their regular customers (*suki*). My study on Apo Island revealed that rough seas or strong winds have never discouraged women fish traders, who have an average age of 40 years old, to cross over to the mainland and pursue their business (Oracion 1998a: 43). The unpredictable sea conditions have always been part of the lives of the island residents.

Fish trading allows women to take advantage and maximize their time on the mainland by doing other chores such as purchasing their family's household needs as well as their husbands' fishing equipment like hook, nylon, and net. During the weekly market day (*tabu*) in a coastal community on the mainland directly facing Apo Island, husbands accompany their wives trading dried fish and mats although most of them spend this time relaxing with acquaintances. Studies of fishing communities in the Philippines show that trading appears to be a task more often delegated to the wives.

### **Bonding, Networking, and Sharing Among Women**

The multiple responsibilities of wives often require them to find support from each other in times of need. Linkages with natal and affinal families are nurtured principally by the female members of households for mutual-support networks. Women in fishing and farming communities in the northern Philippines, for example, share food, work, and resources like fishing and farming tools, as well as assist each other in looking after the children. Mothers and mothers-in-law as well as female siblings usually assist young wives in the first year of their marriage particularly when the latter have recently given birth and are temporarily prevented from engaging in productive work like fish processing, trading and marketing of household needs (Illo and Polo 1990: 86). They look after grandchildren, prepare the meals, wash, and perform other household chores. Other women in the

neighborhood usually volunteer to market her spouse's fish catch or dried fish along with their own as well as do small errands on the mainland. Occasionally, they share special dishes, vegetables, and fresh fish and lend each other rice and other household supplies.

When sun-drying fish, women sometimes borrow salt from each other when the local supply runs out and pay which they pay back as soon as they are able to buy from the mainland market. Another type of mutual support the women have formed is known as *turnohan* or a system of group saving in order to pool their financial resources (Illo and Polo 1990: 87). In this system, a leader collects the amount from individual members and gives it to a member who is scheduled to receive this collection. The same pattern is repeated every month until every member is able to collect a large sum of money during her assigned period. The amount received by a member is equivalent to the sum of money she will accumulate if she saves it herself. The process basically operates within the ethics of mutual trust and cooperation.

In an interview about their trading activities on the mainland, women fish traders reported that in order to maintain a more efficient exchange of resources they establish *suki* relationship with particular buyers on the mainland. A mutually beneficial arrangement, the *suki* relationship assures both the buyers of a stable supply of good quality fish and the traders from the island of a fair price for their fish (Oracion 1998a: 46). In return, mainland *suki* storeowners and fish buyers provide the island fish traders with credit lines to allow them to purchase household items even though they have run out of cash. Furthermore, the island women also engage in direct exchange or barter of products with mainland farming households. When they have enough supply, they bring dried fish to the upland areas of the mainland to exchange with corn from farmers with whom they have established a prior relationship during other harvest seasons (Oracion 1998a: 45).

The wives use these various social networks within and outside the family as mechanisms for accessing resources which

are vital to the survival of their respective families, especially during periods of great need. Through these social networks and resource exchange relationships, they are able to build social capital among themselves which they can activate to gain access to resources not available within their respective domains (Shields, Flora, Thomas-Slayter, Buenavista 1996: 155). As studies reveal, women show willingness to assist each other during critical moments.

To some extent, the ability to accumulate resources to support the family when their husbands fall short of satisfactorily providing these resources empowers women and give them more influence over domestic affairs beyond their traditional domains.

### **Affinity of Women and the Environment**

The foregoing discussion shows that the provision of the material needs of the household is no longer the exclusive domain of husbands particularly with the growing scarcity of food resources brought about by environmental degradation. Evidence shows that majority of women in coastal communities actively participate in ensuring household survival. Earning their personal income empowers them and gives them confidence in dealing with insensitive or irresponsible husbands who show little concern for the quality of life of their respective families (Illo and Polo 1990: 106). Because of their attachment to their children and the home by virtue of their traditional tasks, wives show keener interest in family welfare than their husbands. Their sensitive awareness of resource scarcity is attributed to the multiple roles or tasks they actually handle, both at home and in the local fishing economy (Lachica 1993: 25). As mothers who are responsible in the planning and budgeting of the meager family income, and for preparing family meals and supplying other needs, women are more exposed to various environmental realities including the depletion of marine resources, fuel, wood, or water. As fish traders, they know that their income

depends on fish catch. Finally, as fishers, it is only natural for them to desire to catch more in order to feed the family and save for other household needs. These various responsibilities situate women and wives in particular in a position which impels them to confront the deterioration of resources in the community as well as manage scarce resources available in their household. In contrast, some husbands generally feel only the impact of diminishing fish catch and are not as bothered as their wives by the burdens of household management. That husbands and wives view nature differently is clearly described in this report:

*Women compared the environment to a child who needs special care and attention in order to grow healthy and strong. Men, on the other hand, looked at the environment as a provider and as such deserves care and attention because of the benefits which can be had from nature. Women generally thought that the state of the environment requires immediate attention; men usually viewed the problem of the environment as still within the tolerable limits. Women readily accepted the care of environment as every individual's responsibility; men generally expected that other people and groups work together and do their share in taking care of the environment (Abregana 1997b: 117).*

This report suggests that because they directly feel the impact of resource scarcity on the survival of their respective families, wives are more sensitive of their family's welfare than their husbands (Tañada 1993: 193). This also explains the difference in their perception of the environment. For instance, when they go out with their husbands to fish, wives always remind their husbands of the need to have a good catch in order to have cash for basic needs or to pay off debts (Abregana 1999: 14). It is also for this reason that wives usually interfere with their husbands' drinking and smoking habits which they perceive as

draining their already meager resources (Illo and Polo 1990: 102).

The activities of wives in coastal communities in the Philippines exemplify those performed by women who defy cultural boundaries by carrying out the dual tasks of reproduction and production in order to secure the economic welfare of their families. When their husbands are out on the sea fishing, wives involve themselves in community affairs such as environmental programs. Because they have more time and show more sensitive understanding of nature, women are easier to call and mobilize (Tanchuling 1993: 13).

### **Role of Women for Sustainable Coastal Resources Management**

The participation of organized communities is recognized as a viable strategy in responding to the dwindling fishery resources. The success of these communities relies on empowering people or stakeholders as day-to-day managers of resources available in their immediate environment. The core of the community approach in coastal resource management develops among local people the attitude that the protection and use of their resources are their responsibility. Having developed a sense of being proprietors and claimants of the resources around them makes these people proud of whatever good things they have done to the environment. This description finds meaning in the experiences of the residents of Apo Island after almost two decades of strictly protecting the marine reserve and fish sanctuary which they claim to be the product of their combined labor.

In 1982 Silliman University came to Apo Island to introduce a marine conservation and development program in order to put an end to all the destructive fishing practices of the residents which included the use of blast and poison which not only killed fish but also the corals. The positive

response of the residents to the program paid up when they received a national recognition and cash award in 1997 for having the best marine reserve managed by the community people themselves. Together with this recognition is the influx of domestic and foreign tourists to the island which has also contributed to the revenue of the local tourism industry and the island government. However, this has some negative impact on the fragile marine ecosystem of the island in terms of the destruction of coral reefs by reckless tourist divers, particularly the amateurs, and pollution because of the plastic food wrappers and empty bottles of mineral water they leave behind on the island. In order to prevent more serious problems, the Protected Area Management Board (PAMB), an inter-agency group which became operational in 1996 and has a legal-regulatory role on the island, promulgated some guidelines to be followed by tourists as well as residents to maintain the ecological balance of Apo Island.

The women who participated in the focus group discussion were part of the 16 core households which originally responded to the organizing efforts done by the community workers of Silliman University. Together with their husbands, they helped in hauling rocks and sand used in building the community center. This structure overlooks the area designated as the fish sanctuary. The women took turns to guard the fish sanctuary against intruders while their husbands were out fishing. According to the women, a number of island residents were initially critical of the idea of establishing the marine reserve and fish sanctuary and continued to fish in the protected area. According to the *barangay* captain of Apo Island, it took almost five years for Silliman University to convince the residents of the need to take good care of the coral reefs (Lujan 1998: 11). Given the success of this sanctuary now, the efforts of women did not altogether go to waste. In retrospect, they never regretted the efforts they expended on this worthwhile project.

The women further said that the sanctuary allows the fish to breed and mature until the adults move out to the non-reserve areas where they are caught by island fishers. A *barangay* council member of the island who is also a fisherman remarked that they no longer have to travel far out into the dangerous sea because the establishment of a marine reserve and a sanctuary give them bountiful catch without the use of sophisticated fishing gear (Lujan 1998: 12).

In sustaining the excellent state of Apo Island marine ecosystem, wives continue to play a major role in deterring illegal fishing and promoting quality life. Their pro-nature attitude and involvement in community organizations such as the Apo Progressive Community Development Association (APCODA) which looks into ecologically sound development programs of the island, the Marine Management Committee (MMC) which oversees the good condition of the marine reserve and fish sanctuary, and the Development through Active Women Networking (DAWN) which sensitizes and empowers them, give these women the social avenues by which they could implement programs they believe to be consistent with their interests and condition. Like any other successful coastal resource management program, Apo Island will go on telling its success stories as it also continuously recognizes community participation and the substantial contribution of women and their organizations in its marine development program.

## Conclusion

The close affinity of women to the environment and their sensitive awareness of the growing scarcity of food make them important stakeholders in coastal resource management programs. They easily understand the need to protect, preserve, and rehabilitate the coastal and marine environment because they are directly affected by it. As the Apo Island fish sanctuary project shows, women play a major role in empowering the community to protect their environment.



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