

Role of Women Farmers in Improving Family Living Standard

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Abstract

This phenomenological study described and examined the lived experiences of 20 purposively selected women farmers in Lusaran, Cebu City, Philippines where farming is a major livelihood in the place. The naturalistic paradigm was used in the study with varied tools to cross-check their responses and information and reflections which were interpreted and deduced into different themes from their narrative accounts. Results revealed that women farmers were doing more farm work than their husbands were. They engaged in small scale business and animal raising to augment their income to raise their living standards, send their children to school and to buy things for themselves. They were proud of their occupation. The multifunction roles of the women farmers made them stronger even in making decisions on family matters. They realized that they are capable of hard work, difficult tasks, and managing their resources for their family. The quality of a women farmers' life is full of hardships, varied roles, and economically challenged journey towards their goals in life. Yet the women farmers faced these challenges with pride, satisfaction, contentment, enjoyment and most of all hope in fulfilling their dreams because this life is God given.

Keywords: women farmers, living standards, phenomenology

1. Introduction

Farming is one of the major livelihood activities that support most of the families in far-flung barangays in Cebu City. It may be considered a lowly means of living, but amazingly, countless farmers have successfully meet their daily needs, have sent their children to school, and more impressively, have bought household appliances and electronic gadgets for their children. Countless successful Cebuanos are sons or daughters of farmers, just like the former Chief of Justice Hilario Davide Jr. who come from the mountain area of Argao Cebu. Hence, it can be said that farmers may be professionals but they can make professionals.

Everyone is aware that farming is the core responsibility of men in the family. However, in the present era, women or wives and daughters of farmers cannot be exempted from the work in the farm especially when there is not enough male family members. Women may have limited strength and low level of tolerance under the heat of the sun, yet they have to support their husbands in tilling the land, or in other related farming activities. Surprisingly, in one of the rural barangays in Cebu city – Barangay Lusaran,- women are visible in the farmlands, planting, harvesting, applying fertilizers, and much more even plowing the fields. They are also seen milking cows, and taking care of farm animals. These women, who are also the budget officers in their homes, are doing these jobs to augment their family income.

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Barangay Lusaran is fortunate as a recipient of three poverty alleviation projects for farmers from government and non-government agencies. In all these projects, women play a very important role as not only members but also officers in the organization created by the projects. It is in this context that this research is conducted, firstly, to find out the impact of the three projects on the lives of the farmers and secondly the role of women farmers on the operations of these projects and in improving their household standard of living and community. The main purpose of the study is to explore lives of women farmers and their roles in the poverty alleviation that may have lead an impact to their household conditions and to the community as a whole. In totality, the study also narrates the quality of life of women farmers as they interact with the people in the community.

Awareness of the lives of women farmers can lead us to emerging realities of gender roles in farming communities. These results can provide gender development workers insights on how to address gender equity and equality. The farming community can also plan for an evaluation of the different livelihood projects and assess what to improve to be enhanced and what new practices can be integrated to improve the productivity of the more doable projects that may improve their way of living.

This study trailed an atheoretical stance (Polit & Beck, 2008) since this followed an inductive process (Berg, 2008). Substantive theoretical underpinnings and review of related literature are suspended since this can influence how data are being gathered and how transcriptions are interpreted (Polit & Beck, 2008; Creswell, 2007). To avoid data contamination, review of related literature and identification of substantive theory will be done after data collection. This will be done side-by-side with the interpretative process. This will ensure that those results are induced from the ground (informants in the natural world) and not influenced by frameworks (deduction).

2.0 Review of related studies

Over the last several decades, considerable effort has been made throughout the world to provide women farmers and women on the farm with efficient, effective, and appropriate technology, training, and information. The positive effects are beginning to show in agricultural production statistics and in indices of family welfare. Yet these successes still fall far short of what is needed at a time when public sector investments in agricultural research and extension are under pressure, when ever-greater demands are being placed on rural women in the face of rapid social transformation, and, in an increasing number of areas, when evidence of environmental degradation is mounting (Jiggins, Samanta and Olawoye, 2011) Women are typically, and wrongly, still characterized as "economically inactive" in statistical surveys of agriculture, a result that tells us more about survey methodology than about reality (Janelid in Jiggins, Samanta and Olawoye, 2011). Agricultural extension services still do not attach much importance to reaching women farmers or women on the farm. Policy makers and administrators typically still assume (in the face of the empirical data) that men are the farmers and women play only a "supportive role" as farmers' wives (Samanta, in Jiggins, Samanta and Olawoye, 2011).

Women are responsible for half of the world's food production (UN-FAO in Monchuck 2006). Despite their contributions to the global food supply, women farmers are often undervalued and overlooked in agricultural development strategies. Karen Serres, president of the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP) Committee on Women in Agriculture said that "*In the poorest countries, rural women produce a very large proportion of the food. Hunger and malnutrition still concern too many countries, and women farmers are right on the front line in fighting these problems. However, female farmers are largely underrepresented in every continent in the world.*"

In Asian countries, women produce approximately 60 percent of the food; and women produce more than 80 percent of the food in Africa. In these and other regions, women are often restricted from owning or inheriting the land they use, which excludes them from accessing credit. Across the developing world, studies have shown that women find it more difficult than men to gain access to land, credit, seeds, tools (Monchuk, 2006).

The study of Trazona, et al. (2011) about women cotton farmers looked into gender difference in the access to, adoption of, and use of genetically modified (GM) cotton in Colombia and to develop a qualitative methodology that facilitated the active, lively, and equal participation and discussion of male and female participants. Research findings revealed that women farmers have less access to information compared to men due to their wider array of responsibilities that interfere with their chances to attend meetings or interact with other farmers.

At the same time, their social circles and their leisure time is quite limited, making it difficult for them to meet other female farmers to talk about their experience with cotton. This is probably one of the reasons why female farmers, compared to men, tend to pay more attention to their technical adviser's advice. This would seem to suggest that female farmers are potentially better adopters than men are, as they are keener to adjust their practices than men, who appear to place more value on their previous experience with cotton and other farmers' advice. An extensive review of the literature (Doss, 1999) on women farmers in Africa, explores the potential reasons why women farmers have not adopted improved farming technologies. Studies revealed that women farmers are often constrained by their lack of access to labor, land, and inputs. In addition, women may prefer different outputs than men. Finally, the dynamics of household decision-making affects technology adoption; roles and responsibilities within the household are often renegotiated when new technologies are adopted, and women may be reluctant to provide labor if they do not receive some of the benefits.

3.0 Methodology

This study utilized Interpretative Phenomenology to describe, identify the essence, and interpret the lived-experiences of women in Barangay Lusaran who have a role in improving their family standards, and identify its essence. The domain of inquiry will focus on the: (1) lived-in experience; (2) economic and social impact of the barangay livelihood projects; and (3) quality of life. The study was done in Lusaran, a barangay of Cebu City, located upland northwest of Cebu City. It is about 49 kilometers from the city and can be access through a motorcycle ride known as "habal-habal" for about 40 -60 minutes. It is part of the critical watersheds of the Central Cebu Protected Landscape (CCPL). Although it is adjacent to the southern town, Balamban and northern town Compostela, yet it is under the political jurisdiction of Cebu City. Preliminary data from informal conversation with farmers revealed that there were already farming activities since 1927. Corn was the main crop planted together with coconuts. The abundance of trees led the people to have charcoal as one of the livelihood activities which is still on-going until the present. The residents are proud of their Lusaran River that never dries up even during the El Nino. Thus, farming is a lucrative livelihood in the place. Twenty (20) key informants were chosen using purposive sampling. They were women farmers living in Barangay Lusaran and having a role in the implementation of the livelihood projects; and their family standards. Auxiliary informants were purposively identified to triangulate the statements made by the key informants.

The main instruments of the study were the researchers themselves (Polit & Beck, 2008). This highlights the role of the researcher during interviews, observations, and interpretative process. Interviews were highly unstructured. All sessions were audio-taped to facilitate recording of the interactive process. To facilitate qualitative research rigor, multiple unstructured interviews per informant were done in different time-points. To enhance the trustworthiness of this study the following were done: 1) Person triangulation where auxiliary informants confirmed statements made by the key informants; 2) Time triangulation where same questions were asked in different time points; and 3) Method triangulation wherein aside from multiple individual interviews, observation were done to confirm statements and researchers' self - reflection was also done. All information gathered based on interviews and observations were audio-recorded, transcribed and were coded for thematic analysis using Van Manen Method for phenomenological interpretation.

4.0 Results and Discussions

4.1 Farming

About thirty-five percent (35%) of the working age population in Barangay Lusaran were engaged in farming. More than fifty-six percent (56 %) of the farmers were tenants who shared 1/5 of their harvest to the land owners, but shouldered all expenses in the farm like land preparation, seed propagation, use of fertilizer and other implements. Fifty-three percent (53%) of the household were considered poor with a monthly income of P 8,000 and below (Asian Development Bank & Metro Cebu Water District, 2012). Both men and women in Barangay Lusaran were engaged in farming. However, women farmers were seldom recognized as income contributors to the family ((ADB & MCWD, 2012). They claimed that their husbands usually gave them the responsibility in preparing the land, planting, cultivating, weeding, mixing, and spraying of pesticides, applying fertilizers, harvesting, and marketing of the farm produce.

They had been helping their husbands but do more work in farming than their husbands do. They played a major role in agriculture activities both directly and indirectly, along with their household responsibilities and socio-cultural obligations

" Informant A was a woman farmer since birth. Her parents were both farmers and she inherited the land. She also married a farmer who also owned a farmland. Farming was a family affair for them, though both of them hold the responsibility of taking care of the farm and their livestock. However, Informant A expressed that:

"...kung ting-ani na gani murag ako ra gyud ang responsable sa pagpamupo ug talong kada semana ug pagbaligya niini ako ra sad pabot-on sa presyo. Usahay maglabad ako ulo ilabina Kung ubos kaayo ang presyo SA talong. Mao sab kung ting-pamupo na gani magkadipodipo ko sa pag-atiman sa pamilya kay ako pa man ang magluto sa among pagkaon. Lisod pa gyud kaayo ang pagsakay sa mga produkto, mao nga ibaligya na lang namo og barato". ..(During harvest time I feel the only responsible person in harvesting the eggplants every week and sell them according to my price. Sometimes, I am frustrated if the prices of the vegetables are cheaper. At home, I still do the household chores like cooking for the family, taking care of the children, washing our clothes, cleaning the house and I still have to harvest the farm produce. Since transportation is so difficult for us, we have to sell the vegetables at a very low cost).

This contention was supported by Informant B saying that:

... Ako man ang mo magdumala, desisyon ug mogiya sa ako bana. Mas mo trabaho pa ko kay sa ako bana. Usahay magtapulan man ako bana SA pagtrabaho SA umahan. Kasagaran magsalig ra man siya nako. Gawas kun bug-at na apra nako cya na aroud alsa. (I manage our work in the farm and guide my husband in making decisions for the farm. I do a lot of work in the farm, more than I do my husband. Most of the time, my husband depends on me but in times of hard labor he will do it for me).

Informant C shared that:

" Ang tanan nga kababayn-an parehas ra gyud ug katuyuan nga daghan ang igahin nga panahon para sa umahan ug mo-atiman pa gyud sa buluhaton sa panimalay. Kadtong nasakit na ako bana, ako na gyud ang modaro ug mo-atiman sa umahan, uban sa ako anak kay mahal man ang pagpasuhol sa umahan." ... (All women have the same purpose in life; to spend more time in the farm and do the household chores...when my husband got sick, I have to do the plowing, planting, cultivating, weeding, mixing, loading, and spraying of pesticides, applying fertilizers, harvesting and marketing the produce with my child).

Hence, it can be deduced that women farmers are more active and their role as helper of their husbands may not be significant as seen by the society and they can never be underestimated. In the Philippines, the machismo culture is still evident in the farming industry. Only males are considered as "farmers" and females are expected to do household responsibilities. Nadal (2011) defines machismo as the belief in the superiority of males over females which means that men are expected to be strong, uphold rigid gender roles. The "machismo" for most Filipino men somehow allowed them to make Filipino women as the "subordinates" and would endure various forms of work. However, besides the work in the farm and in the household, they also take part in all aspects of animal husbandry such as herding, grazing, feeding, transporting and cleaning livestock sheds. In addition, women are also involved in general health care, milking, and marketing. These later duties performed by women are mainly of great importance and contribute a lot to their family income (Ahmad, 2001).

Despite of the many farming activities that these women do to uplift their economic condition, their spouse most of the time never give recognition and appreciation of the things they do for the family. It has become a way of life for these people that women do more work than their husbands; be it in the farm or at home for they are women and that men would only do the hard work for them and for the family. They viewed their husbands as strong and superior and they become submissive to them to maintain harmonious relationship because traditionally Filipinos are known to value family solidarity and cohesiveness (Quismundo, 2009). The women farmers in Lusaran were already involved in farming since they were young. Their parents were farmers and some of them own the farm while some are tenants. They were working in the farm to earn a living. They were actively involved in farming activities regardless of age. They considered farming a great importance and contribute a lot to their family income (Ahmad, 2001). This was manifested by Informant M that states:

"...nag-uma ko sa una pa kay amo man ning yuta, bata pa ko nag-uma na ko hangtud 72 na ko ron...madala pa man sa ako lawas...ako ra gihapon and nagtikad sa yuta kay minyo na akong mga anak unya naa pa ko duha mga apo naa nako..." (I started farming since I was a child. We own the farm and until now, I'm 72 years old, I'm still farming for I can still do it. My children are already married and I have two grandchildren with me).

On the other hand, some farmers who owned the land did not till the farm anymore as what Informant P had stated that:

"...Sa una bata pa ko motanom na ko kay amo man ni ang yuta.. Karon tiguwang na magsuhol na ko. Ako man bahinon kuarta aron kahibawo ko kanus-a ko magpasuhol ug patanomaron maka-ani" (I started farming since I was a child...but now that I am older I have to budget the money so that I can pay and know when to ask somebody to do farming for me so that we can harvest).

For some tenants, they had to share their produce to the owners like Informant J who shared that:

"Bata ba ko gisuhulan ra mi magtanom ug magtikad sa yuta. Wa man gud mi yuta mao nga saop ra gyud mi hangtud karon. Kun nay abuno: ¼ sa tag-iya ug ¾ amo bahin; kun walay abuno: 20%sa tag-iya ug 80% sa amo(mga saop)" (Since I was a child we are paid to do farming. We are just tenants until now, for we don't own the land. If there is fertilizer, we give ¼ share to the land owner and we receive ¾ of the share of the produce. If there is no fertilizer, 20% goes to the land owner and we receive 80% of the share of the produce). Whether the women own the farm or not, farming becomes a part of their life. It becomes a way of life for them no matter how much share they got from the produce. They are contented in life for they have no other choice and opportunity to break the cycle of poverty in their place.

4.2. Multi-functional role of women farmers

Traditionally, women farmers simultaneously undertook multi-functional roles as household manager that is, maintaining the home and bringing up the family. Foremost of their role was being a mother and a homemaker.

Informant F shared that:

"...Sayo ko momata sa buntag, dayon, mo una og adto ako bana sa umahan. Moapas lang ko niya kay magluto og mag-andam pa man ko sa amo pamahaw og mga kinahanglanon sa amo mga anak unom nga anak". (I wake up early, then my husband would immediately proceed to the farm. I would just follow him later in the farm because I have to prepare our breakfast and attend to the needs of our six children).

Informant G related that:

"...Momata ko ug alas-singko sa buntag, manugway sa kabaw, ug mobalik ko sa balay kay mag-andam ko og pamahaw para sa ako lima ka anak. Naa pa gyud ko lain nga buhaton sama sa pagpanglimpyo sa balay, laba sa amo bulingon, luto og pagkaon, magkawos og tubig, manghugas sa mga plato og kaldero og uban pa. Usahay tabangan ko sa ako anak kung wala sila klase". (I wake up 5 o'clock in the morning, then I our cow. I have to return immediately to our house to prepare breakfast for our five children. I still have other household chores like cleaning the house, washing the clothes, cooking our food, fetching water, washing dishes and others. Usually, my children helped me in these activities if they don't have class).

Informant H narrated that:

"...Mogahin gyud ko og panahon sa ako pamilya ug mga anak kay ako man ang inahan. Looy man sad ang mga bata kung walay mo atiman nila. Dali ra baya masakit ang mga labi na kung gagmay pa sila. Ako iblansi ang ako panahon SA pagpanguma ug paggalam SA ako pamilya labi Na SA akong daghang anak." (I have to spend time for our family and children because I am their mother. It's a pity to the children if nobody takes care of them. They easily get sick. I have to balance my time with farming work and rearing of our several children).

The narration showed that women farmers of Barangay Lusaran did not neglect their responsibility of taking care the children. Undoubtedly, the role of women farmers in cultivation was very significant, as well as their role in the family and community (Yogaswara. 2011). They assumed a double workload in domestic duties especially the bulk of childcare and household support. The study of Ogato, Boon & Subramani (2009) in Ethiopia revealed that rural women are responsible for almost all domestic activities like cooking, firewood collection, family care, cleaning and washing. It is further confirmed that females' contribution to reproductive work at household level is very large.

Similarly in Africa, women perform 80 percent of the work associated with rural domestic tasks, including collecting water and firewood, preparing and cooking meals, processing and storing food, and making household purchases (FAO, 2012). Housework and childcare were recognized as extremely important roles among women farmers (Grace, 2004). As women farmers took on different and often overlapping roles, the women farmers in Barangay Lusaran still performed another role, that of being a wife.

Informant B shared that:

"... Mosayo ko og adto sa umahan, maggalam sa mga tanom nga utan. Inig abot sa 11 sa buntag, kanang init na kaayo, mouli ra sad ko sa balay labi na kung lain ang pamati sa lawas sa akong bana." (I have to go early to the cultivate the crops in the farm. When the sun is somewhat hot at 11 in the morning, I have to go home especially if my husband is not feeling well).

Informant I explained that:

"...Dili gyud kaayo lalim ang ako trabaho kay mouma pa, dayon ako pa atimanon ang mga kinahanglan sa ako bana, sukad nga nasakit siya, atimanonon na gyud siya." Usahay magpasohol na lang ko sa paglimpyo sa umahan kay dili na nako makaya. Ako gyud palabihon ako bana." (My role is never that easy because I have to do several activities in the farm, at the same time attend to the needs of my sick husband. There are times I have to hire somebody to cultivate the crops because I can't do it anymore and I have to give time/priority to my husband).

It can be deduced that most of the women farmers accepted that being a farmer's wife is a tough but vital role to perform. They believed that they have the traditional role of attending to the essentials of their husbands. Most of the time, they do everything and their families depend on them. The results of the analysis indicate that female farmers contribute in crop production and more in home management. However, despite their significant role in agriculture, the other domestic roles of female farmers are not well recognized or valued (Ogato, Boon & Subramani, 2009). Women farmers were likewise actively participating in the different activities in the community. These women comprised most of the participants in any trainings initiated in their locality.

Informant J described that:

"Nakat-on mi sa saktong pamaagi sa pagtanom sa seminar sa Brgy. Tag-ube. Kung aduna gani mga pulong-pulong sa barangay, ako ang motambong para sa among bubong. Daghan man sad kong makat-onan." (We learned new methods of farming from the seminar in Brgy. Tag-ube. I usually attend to represent our household if ever there are gatherings in the barangay because I also learned a lot from it.)

Informant K related that:

"Ganahan man sad KO mosalmot SA mga lain-lain nga miting sa among barangay ilabi na kung kabahin kini sa pagpananom. Matudloan man mi sa mga bag-ong pamaagi sa pananom, ilabina kay nagbag-o na ang atong panahon karon. Mokalit Lang ug uwan SA panahon SA ting-init, o magsigi na lang pod og uwan o bagyo nga makadaut sa among mga utanon. Maayo unta og manghatag sila ug abuno kay gawas nga mahal kini, ang abuno gyud na among kinahanglan para daghan ang ani." (I like attending meetings in our barangay especially if it is about farming and livelihood. We are usually taught about new ways of planting especially that weather condition nowadays has changed- sudden rainfalls during summer and the recurrences of rains and typhoons that greatly affect our crops. I hope they will provide us fertilizer to increase our produce because fertilizers are expensive).

Informant L narrated that:

"Ganahan ko mosalmot og mga pundok-pundok sa barangay. Usahay makatambong ko labi na kong matunong nga dia ko sa Lusaran, namaligya sa among produkto". Gusto ko naa makat-onan pareha sa paghimo og sabon ug kandila. Anindot sad to nga proyekto." (I like joining small group gatherings in the barangay. Sometimes I am able to attend these gatherings when I am in Lusaran selling our produce. I want to learn something like soap-making and candle making.) It can be observed that women farmers were active participants in community activities by representing their household in any gatherings. They availed any access to agricultural and livelihood extension services in the community through affirmative action's (Ogato, Boon & Subramani, 2009).

This indicates that women farmers are willing to join and learn educational, livelihood and agricultural undertakings to improve the productivity of their farms. Through these activities, they learned new skills, venture into small-scale industry and eventually augment their earnings. To encourage more attendance and participation among rural women farmers, effective government programs should be organized to provide support to this marginalized group. Instead of being treated as mere beneficiaries, the rural women farmers should be viewed as individuals who possess knowledge which complement the experts' formal knowledge in farming through organizations or associations. According to studies done by World Bank (2001), Quisumbing (2003) and Quisumbing and Maluccio (2003) interventions increased women's access and control to improve family food security, child nutrition and education as well as their well being. Thus, they could participate in activities that are beneficial to empower them in alleviating themselves from poverty. To increase the levels of production and productivity, it is important for them for organizations to support and promote new conceptual and development programs for them to view diversified income-generating activities and services. In households where women had higher shares of assets, girls tend to have better health as cited by Hallman (2000) and they gain power and authority in their households and communities (Flintan, 2008).

Conclusion

In improving the living quality standard, women farmers have multi-dimensional role to play in life. Adversities in life in terms of psychosocial and economic challenges are conquered with pride. Spiritual strength gave them the conviction and contentment in life.

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