

Asia/ Philippines

Voices from the field

These are stories of three women, part of community-based coastal resources management groups in the Philippines, who met at a recent workshop organized with the objective of enhancing women's roles in these groups.

by Nalini Nayak, a member of ICSF

Betty looks so little and frail. She giggles like a little girl and one thinks she is just a student. But Betty is 31 years old, a mother of three and the only woman chairperson of the Fisheries and Aquatic Resource Management Council (FARMC) in her region. These FARMCs were created in 1998-90 after the passing of the Fisheries Code that was lobbied for by several fishworker organizations. The Code stipulates that 15 km of inshore waters should be reserved for the artisanal fishers, where no destructive fishing will take place. The FARMC is mandated to manage these 'municipal waters', as it is called. Betty explains:

The FARMC is composed of 17 members, with the Mayor as the chairperson. There are other *ex-officio* members like the municipal development officer, the agricultural officer, etc. There are 11 representatives of the fisherfolk, one representative of the private sector and one professional. Of the 11 fisherfolk, four are women. I was elected as acting Chairperson in 1998 and the original term was for three years, which was later extended without elections. This was the decision of the Mayor, who supports the fisherfolk. It is actually the municipal development officer who opposes us. He once put me to shame at a monthly meeting when we were passing an ordinance. We had worked out all the details but he opposed us making some technical objections and treating me like an illiterate, and so I cried. But we got it through all the same and this ordinance became the model for other municipalities in the Tayabas Bay. The three provinces of Batangas, Quezon and Marindukue then created an integrated FARMC because of the common fishing grounds of the communities of this area.

There are several committees in the FARMC looking after subjects like security, education, conservation, etc. I have to participate in all these

committees, besides doing paper work and also going to the field. So it is almost a full-time job for which I am paid only 500 pesos a month (US\$1=50 pesos). There are 10 of us on the Fisheries Law Enforcement Team. When we travel, we get per diems of 200 pesos. Our municipality is not so rich, but when there was an NGO in the area that supported our work, we got some more travel and training allowance.

All this work in committees and in the public field was new to me because I was brought up in a simple family, remaining aloof from people. My father was a fisherman and all of us eight children and mother went out to fish and to vend fish. Alongside, I studied and completed the first year at the Polytechnic at the University of the Philippines, for which I had secured a scholarship. But, as there was no money for the food expenses, my mother called me back as the family could not afford it. Reluctantly, I came home and became a worker at the day care centre and got married at the age of 21. I have three children now.

The initial experience in the committee and then participation in the Asian Social Institute training programme gave me more skills. Later, I also participated in a training programme organized by the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) to become a fish examiner, that is, to certify whether fish is legally or illegally caught. I was the only woman among 30 participants and only 20 of us passed the course.

My husband has been very supportive and lets me freely engage in this work. In fact, it is because he encouraged me that I entered this field. He is a longline fisherman and has a 3-m boat with a 30-hp engine. Nowadays, when we women take steps in the community, some men call us 'Gabriella' (the name of a feminist organization in the Philippines). But we want to do what is right and we all want to serve our community. I am not interested in politics. I only want justice for my community.

Glo comes from Tinambaac in the *barangay* of Bagacay. Together with some of her colleagues, like Rose, Glo has been very active in building up the women in fisheries organization in their area. She tells her story:

I am a mother of three children. In my earlier days, I went with my husband to collect crabs, which we sold to the middlewomen. When my children grew older, I worked in the local crèche and preschool. That was eight years ago. When my husband became a member of Bikis Lakas, the fisherman's organization, I attended their meetings and got to know about the problems of our fishery, the causes for depletion, and I became very active and vocal about the need to stop illegal fishing in order to safeguard our fishery.

The fishermen encouraged me to stand for election in the *barangay* (local government unit) so that I could lobby there and get official support to apprehend illegal fishers. So I started to canvas votes for myself and I told women that if they voted for me I would provide free childcare for their children. Many of the women already knew me as I also taught several of them how to recycle the plastic bags as part of the zero-waste programme in my area. I was elected in June 2000. I was the only women of the seven elected members on the *barangay* council and the only one representing fishers. I realized that none of the others knew anything about the fisheries and it was very difficult to convince them about the issues.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to participate in a training programme organized by Betty and Vir of the Asian Social Institute, and I got a good idea about how to work in the community and also how to organize for our rights. So when I returned, I not only began to organize other women with Rosa and a few others who also attended the training, but I also learnt about the Fisheries Code and understood that this was a tool in my hand. So I took a copy of the Code to the *barangay* and asked the others to read it, and we understood that we could implement the Code by issuing Ordinances in the *barangay*, and this is what we did. We set down rules and also demarcated the area where trawling and dynamite could not be used. We also decided on the punishment—fines for different crimes. So this helped us to apprehend the illegal fishers.

I was very active in the patrols as we women could handle the apprehension better than the men



who would get into quarrels. We also received 40 per cent of the fines when we apprehended the illegal fishers. But since we women do not patrol at night, we felt these illegal fishers sometimes operated at night. So we got the media to highlight the problem and, as a result, this is now very reduced.

One of the big problems that I face is that the *barangay* captain (president) is always trying to put me down and does not encourage me. It is only because most of the other men support me and because he knows that I have the support of women in the community, that he has to control himself, and I can go ahead.

We are now around 120 women in our organization, meeting in groups of 30 once a week. We do a lot of awareness-raising, especially related to conservation of the environment, guarding of the sanctuary, regeneration of the mangroves, etc. We have also started some alternate livelihood programmes and we have helped women with loans to start small cottage industries, like adding value to the fish and other food products and starting a piggery. For this, we are supported by the NGO called CARD that helps us with savings and credit.

Through this, we also have an accident and emergency insurance programme. In our own women's organization, we also have a fund to which all the members contribute five pesos a week. We are trying to get our organization accredited so that we can be recognized for assistance by government programmes.

Glo has three of her own children. She fulfilled her election promise of free childcare by continuing to work voluntarily in the crèche as she got an allowance as a council member. She also got the *barangay* to open another childcare centre in the community.

Wilima lives in Dalig, Cardona, on the banks of the Laguna Lake—a very steep bank that is densely populated too. On this bank, she and her 30-odd women friends have managed to put up a little tin-cum-bamboo shed, which is the centre of their women's group called Bulaklak. Wilima's story:

I was always inspired by the older fishermen who fought for the conservation of the lake and the passing of the Fisheries Code. (Wilima referred to Koni who was a wise, committed and charismatic fisherman leader). When I participated in the seminars organized by CALARIS, our fishermen's federation, I also realized that I was a part of the problem, destroying the lake by contaminating it. So some of us women took the initiative to clean up the lake, but later when I participated in the women's trainings organized by the Family Centre, I got more ideas, skills and courage to go ahead.

Our group of 30 women meets regularly. We continue to raise awareness about the contamination of the lake and we also have cleaning drives. As we save one peso a day, we now have a kitty of 2,290 pesos. In the initial stages, we ran a store with grains that was subsidized by the government. This was a good programme that all the women benefited from. But when the government changed, this supply was stopped. More recently, our fishermen leaders organized a training programme for us through BFAR, where we learned to do all kinds of fish processing. The products are very good. There is also a good market. But we produce some of the products only on order. We want to build up a regular market by networking with different women's groups.

Earlier, our husbands did not want us to get to work collectively, but later they realized that their incomes are dwindling and we cannot make ends meet in the home. So, many of our men now do the housework, while we go out to the market. Our men go to fish at night or in the early mornings and since we now sell our fish directly in the market, we manage to bypass the middlemen. Coming together as a group has helped us fight our poverty. We know our efforts are small but we do not have great ambitions. Some of us now have small fish pens where we just let the *bangus* (milk fish) grow without feeding. Most of us vend fish and some of us also do the processing. We hope that we will be able to build a strong network of women so that together we can fight this process of marginalization.

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