

100.LAN002

Universidad Austral de Chile  
Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada  
Canadian International Development Agency  
Instituto de Biología Marina

“Of Land and Sea. History of a Women’s Group”.

A visual ethnography,  
from a gender perspective.

Gabriela Araya Gómez

CHILE

2000

## ABSTRACT

In the framework of the agreement of international cooperation ratified by the Canadian International Development Agency, Memorial University of Newfoundland and Universidad Austral de Chile, designed to develop aquaculture in Chile, it has been proposed as one of the objectives, to increase and develop the participation of women in the craft fishery and in aquaculture, from a gender perspective.

Within the contemplated activities to carry out such an objective are the production of a video, which tells the experience of Cultimar, a women's group related to the craft fishery and aquaculture. Through the history of the organization, the reality of women in the craft fishery community is seen; putting special emphasis on the different roles that they play and the gender relations that exists in the community.

The video on the one hand tries to be a contribution to the knowledge about the situation of women in the craft fishery in Chile, as well as an instrument of promotion and development for craft fisher women and workers in aquaculture. Both functions have been framed within a gender perspective, also in agreement with the initial objective proposed by the CIDA/MUN/UACH project.

## The video as a visual ethnography.

“It will be necessary to pay special attention to women to overcome the deeply rooted prejudices that have originated a relative invisibility of women and an undervalue almost systematic of their productive and reproductive contribution [in the craft fishery]”

(Nauen, 1993).

Equally to the agricultural and peasant sector, the work of women in the craft fishery has become invisible. Nauen (1993:267) reports on the limits of the statistics at the moment of measuring the productive participation of women in the fisheries, and thus it is frequent that the census' methods exclude from the counting of the productive activities that production that is non-marketable in the official markets.

Women in the craft fishery communities fulfill important productive roles, as are the activities of support to the fishery, in land; however, since such activities are in many cases carried out within the home itself and are not remunerated, are considered as an extension of their domestic role (Nauen, 1993).

Faced with this situation, through the video we try to “make visible” the craft fisher women, taking the case of Cultimar. On reporting on the multiplicity of roles that women play in this organization, be it in the interior of their families or in their communities. At the same time, besides making visible the real reproductive, productive and community agent contribution of

these women, we are contributing to diminish part of the ethnographic vacuum that exists on the subject.

Focusing the video from a gender perspective implies, not only seeing the subject of the invisibility of women, but also tackling aspects of the content and the form as much as the realization of the audiovisual product.

### About the content.

First of all it is necessary to make it clear what we refer to with visual ethnography. There are multiple definitions for this type of audiovisual account, but for the purpose of this work, we consider the visual ethnography as an ethnographic text written with images and sounds.

Ethnography transports us to a type of research methodology, which implies the permanence of the researcher in the community or group under study and the collection of data through observation of the participant and in-depth interviews, all of this in a sufficient time to get a real understanding of the subject and a good rapport with the individuals.

The ethnographic research that supports the video is framed within the feminist anthropology.

This meant on one hand, developing the concept of **gender**, in its relational character (Montecino, 1996; Arando, 1995), that is, the way in which women and men relate to each other in a determined culture.

And on the other hand, working out the concept of **the difference** ( Moore, 1991). This leads us

to incorporate not only gender as a category of analysis and of differentiation, but also other variables such as social class, ethnicity, age, etc., that keep marking the relations between men and women and among themselves. In the same way, besides seeing the gender relations and the multiple categories that define these relations and the roles that women and men play, it is necessary to put in context all of this in a broader level, referring to the different social, political and economic contexts at the local level as much as at the general level.

Developing a visual category from a gender perspective meant carrying out field research, doing participant observation and in-depth interviews and directing our sight and analysis from the concepts of gender and difference, putting the situation in context at a level beyond the community.

Starting from this theoretical frame, the main contents developed during the investigation and in the video are:

- The multiple roles that the women of Caipulli play in the interior of their home and in their communities.
- The relations between the men and women of Caipulli. Looking at the women's own perception of the gender relations in their community in the present as much as in the past.
- The history of Cultimar. Looking at how the idea emerged, the achievements and problems of the organization, the benefits that they have obtained at the personal level. The different histories and motivations of every one of the members of the organization.
- The social and economic context in which the organization is placed. Due to economic

problems derived from the reduction of price and the exhaustion of the alga pelillo (*gracilaria ssp*), the main water resource that sustains the community, women look for new productive alternatives.

These contents are treated in the video starting from the perception that the women of Cultimar have of themselves, being developed in three main themes referring to the desires that motivate these women in their actions:

- The need to diversify their economic production, through the search for new alternatives in the face of scarcity of resources and possible future restrictions: **“The Change”**.
- Participation in organizations and the need for a space of community coexistence, specially feminine: **“The Learning”**.
- The materialization of the obtained feminine “emancipation” and the desire for a continuous development at the personal level: **“The Consolidation”**.

Taking up again the initial ideas, with the contents developed in the video we try to contribute to the knowledge about craft fisher women. We have to make one point clear, the locality of Caipulli is not in itself a fishing community since the activities developed by the its inhabitants are of an agricultural and aquacultural nature; their subsistence is based on both sources, therefore, we find in the presence of an agro-fishing community. However, the women in Cultimar see themselves now as carft fisher women, a character also given to them by the law.

With the history of these women we are also trying to put an end to the essentials and

stereotypes that abound in the studies about women and in the development programs. First of all, we are in the presence of a community in which women play multiple roles, not only of a domestic nature. Even though they define themselves mainly, or first of all, as owners of the house, that does not mean that they do not fulfill other functions, either of a productive nature or as community agents; besides, defining themselves as “owners of the house” does not mean to them that they are not conscious of the importance that the role they play in the interior of their families, or community, or that they may play, as the case will be when their cultivation of molluscs start generating economic resources. Second, we are in the presence of a community where the relations between men and women are very much egalitarian and where women enjoy a higher status. This situation made possible, among others, the creation of a feminine organization with a productive character. And thus we see that in this community the subordination of women has been overcome.

#### **About the form and the realization.**

As indicated before, creating the video from a gender perspective does not only involve the contents to be developed, but also, the form in which these contents are presented in the video, and the treatment of the video itself.

Producing the video from the optic of gender and difference, meant that all the voices of the members had to be present, that none was excluded. All of the women appear telling a story of shared desires as much as of the individual yearnings and perceptions. Each one of them contributed to a particular topic: Señora Catalina to the importance of education; Señora Norma

to the importance of participation in the church; Señora Quica to the sacrifice that involves leaving Caipulli, to go in the search for better opportunities of education for the granddaughter that she has raised; in short, every woman has a history of her own that marks her. In the same way that it was important to show the collective epic of this group of women, it was important to show them in their individuality: women with a common experience but at the same time with histories that make them different from each other, either because of age, family relationships, social class, origins, educational level, interests, etc.

Each of the women appears not only in images but also telling part of their life in the first person, or the way they see their history as women.

We made certain decisions in the same way, “Of Land and Sea. History of a Women’s Group”, would be the history of a group of women told by themselves. This did not mean that men would be excluded, on the contrary, they are present all through the video, but seen through the eyes of the women and how they now see their relationship with their partners, relatives and neighbours. The topic of gender relations is present but through the feminine eyes and perception.

There is an important point to be considered with regards to the views. Although the video tells a history of women told by themselves, their views pass through the prism of our own view, that of the directors. We were not neutral subjects in front of what we observed, we shared and talked in the community of Caipulli. Finally, we were the ones that put in order all the



information gathered: we put it together, classified it, we started to give it sense and coherence, based on the speech of the women themselves. We were the ones who wrote the script.

We inserted ourselves in the narration, through the narrator, with the desire of simply delivering some important information for history, putting things in context when it was necessary, and in some moments, to direct the narration. But, in the end, the women carry the voice, they are the protagonists, annexed through our eyes. An approach that is guided, in its turn by the idea of gender and difference.

Being conscious of our intervention in the narration, that passes not only through narration, but also through the selection of the images and the music, takes us to the topic of **positioning**, another concept developed by feminist anthropology. Lila Abu-Lughod proposes that the ethnographer is always situated, positioned in different social, economic, ideological and power structures, therefore, his/her pretension of knowledge can not be free of what those positions imply. However, instead of searching for the so desired objectivity in our work, we must understand that “the positioning, that the feminist theory proposes, is not only a disadvantage but it should be an explicit and explored fact” (Abu-Lughod, 1993:15). The stories narrated by the ethnographer belong to specific times, places, contexts and specific objectives.

Following the author, we have not tried to produce an “objective” narration from the women of Cultimar, but on the contrary, we have taken our position, conscious of our interference in history, which is determined by our own perceptions regarding the organization and the

community as well as our own ideas and concepts about what is to be a man and a woman, and the relations between both genders.

To make the video I placed myself as a woman ,anthropologist, young, married, mother, middle class, Christian. My view was crossed by all of these categories. At the same time, I had to find consensus for my view with that of my co-workers, they are men, journalists, young, single, middle class; along with the crossed disciplines was the fact of facing a history of women from two views, feminine and masculine, besides every one's individuality.

The “inevitability of positioning” is not undeserving of history, on the contrary, as the author proposes it, it enriches it.

Positioning also reminds us to the concept of **power** that takes place between the ethnographer and over the subjects of her/his study. In the case of the video, we arrived in the community with a video camera, recording different moments of the life of the women and their families, and then with that material we put together a story. We had the possibility of manipulating the data, altering images, sounds. In sum, we were in a situation of advantage over our other self, by having the control over the audiovisual recording.

However, we tried to minimize that effect, so much for ethical reasons as for the validity of the story, by incorporating women not only as protagonists of the story but as active subjects in the production of the video, incorporating the topics that were relevant to them, as well as their

opinions regarding the recording itself. We always maintained conversations with them regarding the script, and before getting the final product we showed them a preliminary copy to hear their opinions about the final product.

Even though the participation of the women was not in all of the work, the disposition and the space were always present for them to face the production of the video in an active, not a passive way.

In spite of the video being conceptualized as a visual ethnography, and therefore, of interest to specialists and researchers in the field, it was treated in such a way that it would be an accessible product to a greater audience, be it specialists, women's groups, or the general public. The video was treated in such a way that it would move and be of interest to a broad public, paying great attention to the aesthetic component for example, besides, we tried to put together a pleasant story but without losing the depth in the contents. Until now the video has been shown to different audiences, with a good reception, the public has picked up the message, for example, the issue of the importance of organizing to achieve common goals, independent of the type of group that we are talking about.

### The video as instrument of promotion and development of the craft fisher women.

The video does not have as its only function contributing to the knowledge about the craft fisher women, but also tries to be an instrument of development and promotion for women, from a gender perspective.

First of all, the video, by delivering knowledge of an ethnographic character, sets a base for the production of future development projects destined to benefit the same organization (Cultimar). Or else, it could serve as a base for the implementation of development policies directed towards craft fisher women or that seek the integration of a gender perspective in their approach. Even though the video is about a particular case, there is information that backs other studies that tell of the multiplicity of roles that women play, as well as the importance of the organizations for their development. At the present, the incorporation of the gender approach in the development projects is seen as urgent, and thus, organisms such as CEPAL, see the growing need to incorporate the cultural dimension in the relation of women and development.

Second, the video is presented as an important educational tool. To reinforce the pedagogical character of the audiovisual product a pamphlet was made, that includes a guide for analysis of the video to be discussed by other organizations of women. Seeing the importance of the organization to reach objectives and goals either economic or personal is sought through the guide. The women of Caipulli have for several years participated taking an active role in different organization within their community. Also the importance of counting on very egalitarian gender relations within the community, which establishes a positive base for women to carry out new activities is analyzed.

Thus the video can contribute to the development of the organizations or groups of craft fisher women, by knowing and reflecting about the experience of Cultimar. Moreover, this educational package composed of the video and the pamphlet can be useful to other

organizations not only in the area of the fisheries, it can also be useful to organizations of a mixed character, given that one of the fundamental ideas is the importance of organizing for the achievement of goals, independently of the activity that is realized. And along with it, the importance of counting on egalitarian relations between men and women for a good development of the organization.

The video also serves for the promotion of Cultimar. The video has become a letter of presentation of the organization, either to obtain funds or to show their experience in different instances.

## Bibliography.

- Abu-Lughod, Lila (1993) *Writing Women's Worlds*. Pp. 1-142. California: University of California Press.
- Arango, Luz Gabriela et al. (1995) *Gender and Identity*. TM. Ediciones, Ediciones UNIANDES, U.N. - Facultad de Ciencias Humanas, Colombia.
- Moore, Henrietta (1991) *Anthropology and Feminism*. Ediciones Cátedra, Universitat de Valencia - Instituto de la mujer, España.
- Montecinos et al (1996) *Concepts of Gender and Development*. Interdisciplinary program of Studies on Gender, Univ. de Chile.
- Nauen, Cornelia (1993) *The Participation of Latin American Women in the Fisheries*. En Tassara, C. editor (1994) Craft Fishery, Aquaculture and Environment. Memories from the International Seminar "The Policies of Development of the Craft Fishery in Latin America and the Caribbean". ECOE ediciones - CISP - Movimondo Comitato Internazionale Per lo Sviluppo del Popoli. Colombia.
- Witham, P. et al (1990) *The Role of Women in the Craft Fishery in Latin America and Strategies to Improve it*. FAO - Universidad de Concepción. Santiago, Chile.