

FILIPINO WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT: THE IMPACT OF POVERTY

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It is generally agreed that the roles women play in society are closely linked to economic and social development. Indeed, if a society systematically excludes its women from active participation in its community life or from assuming responsible roles in its institutions, such a society is not likely to be dynamic or progressive.

The Philippines, like most other developing countries, needs the talents and creativity of all its people — its central resource for development. And about half of these human resources are women.

It has been asserted time and again that Filipino women have taken an active role in the socioeconomic development of the country. Mention is made of women's contributions and achievements in education, business, social welfare and other professions. Their role as managers of the household and controllers of the purse strings has also been emphasized.

But this general notion about the Filipino women and her contributions to society smacks of a halo-effect emanating from the image projected by middle and upper class Filipino women who have had the benefits of higher education, who practice alongside men in the professional fields, who have entered business, who have reached high levels in government. Indeed, their contributions to economic and social development are most apparent.

But what about women of the lower class? How do they fit in the development process? What roles do they play and have played? These are important questions when we consider that the bulk of Filipino women belong to this sector — whether they be found in the city, in the town, or in the barrio. These are questions this paper addresses.

The Social-Psychological Study

This paper is based on a social-psychological study of lower class Filipino women as social actors in the development process. It will highlight results of the study that bear on the effects of poverty on the role of lower class women in development.

Data for the study come from interviews with 300 respondents — 150 women and 150 men — from urban, semi-urban, and rural communities. Men were included because the roles women play must be taken in conjunction with those of their role partners. The respondents were divided into mother, daughter, father and son subsamples. A multistage, stratified, systematic random sampling procedure was used in selecting respondents from the communities.

Barrios Obrero and Kahilom of Pandacan, Manila served as the urban community site. The low income clusters of the poblacion proper of Tanay, Rizal comprised the semi-urban community. Seven outlying barrios of Sto. Domingo, a town in Northwestern Nueva Ecija, provided the rural community setting.

Demographic characteristics

About 85 percent of the mothers are between 21 and 50 years of age; 93 percent of the daughters are between 15 and 25. Over half the families studied are nuclear in structure. The rural and semi-urban women have not been geographically mobile whereas most of the urban mothers are first generation migrants. Nearly all of the urban daughters were born and reared in the city. A majority of the mothers have not gone beyond the elementary grades; about half of their daughters have attained some or a complete high school education.

Table 1
Distribution of respondent types by sex and position
in the household

	Female		Sub-total	Male		Sub-total
	Mother	Daughter		Father	Son	
Number in each community	35	15	50	35	15	50
Total for all communities	105	45	150	105	45	150
Percent of total	70%	30%	100%	70%	30%	100%

Table 2
Frequency with which duties were mentioned in various areas of responsibility
by respondents classified by type and community

Area of responsibility	Mother			Daughter			Sub-total	Father			Son			Sub-total
	R	S-U	U	R	S-U	U		R	S-U	U	R	S-U	U	
Household chores	127	104	91	50	48	65	485	35	61	50	36	48	32	262
Family	48	62	57	19	21	20	227	54	55	49	15	21	18	212
Occupation	27	27	14	9	10	3	90	36	41	28	12	13	11	141
Kin group	21	24	21	7	6	9	88	23	33	20	6	9	9	100
Community	12	9	14	11	3	8	57	14	19	9	8	12	12	74

R = Rural; S-U = Semi-urban; U = Urban

Results and Discussion

The home as locus of the role system

Respondents were asked to enumerate their duties and responsibilities as the index of role perception and understanding. These were then categorized according to: (1) household chores, (2) family, (3) kin group, (4) occupation, and (5) community. Initially, responses were elicited spontaneously by free recall. Those who did not mention duties in any of the areas by free recall were then asked whether they had duties in the categories left out. Table 2 gives the frequency with which duties were mentioned in each of the areas.

The study shows that women have more household chore duties than men while men have more occupational duties than women. Analysis of the manner by which the duties and responsibilities were mentioned reveals that the women gave most of their household chore and family duties spontaneously by free recall. Occupational, kin group, and community duties were mainly elicited after prompting. Among men, however, majority of the occupational and family duties came by free recall while household chore, kin group, and community duties were given after prompting.

These findings point out that among respondents, the traditional belief that women

Table 3
The decision to work of working women classified by type and community

Decision to work: when and why	Mother			Sub- total	Daughter			Sub- total
	R	S-U	U		R	S-U	U	
Before marriage: economic reasons	45%	8%	27%	25%	100%	67%	100%	87%
After marriage: economic reasons								
(a) to support the family	15	20	27	20	—	17	—	7
(b) to supplement husbands' earnings	40	60	46	50	—	—	—	—
Others	—	12	—	5	—	17	—	7
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Number	(20)	(25)	(11)	(56)	(6)	(6)	(3)	(15)
No information	1	1	1	3	1	—	—	1
R is not working	14	9	23	46	8	9	12	29

R = Rural; S-U = Semi-Urban; U = Urban

are for the home is as true today as it was in the past. The lower class women's role is circumscribed around home management and family life. On the other hand, men's roles are circumscribed around family life and occupation. Even if some of the women work, they do not perceive this behavior as an economic role. It is mainly the men who feel they have an economic role. Men, on the other hand, do not feel they have a home management role even if several of them perform household chores.

It has been asserted that modernization has brought about a wider latitude of social roles for women (Ward 1963). This may be more true, however, of middle and upper class women who through their education have taken on careers and occupations that constitute new dimensions to their role as women (Green 1970). Data point out that the case is markedly different for the lower class woman studied. If ever she is initiated into the labor force, it is primarily to be able to sustain or help sustain the basic subsistence needs of her family (Table

3). Thus, engaging in an occupation is mainly an extension of her traditional role, particularly its aspect which demands that as a good woman, wife and mother, she must do her share to enable the family to survive through its ever present financial crises.

The woman's typical day: time as resource and its allocation

Analysis of the daily lives of the women indicates that they spend most of the day on household chores. Mothers put an average of 8.7 hours in these tasks (rural, 11.1 hours; semi-urban, 6.3 hours; and urban, 8.8 hours). Daughters spend an average of 5.8 hours (rural, 8.8 hours; semi-urban, 4.7 hours; and urban, 3.9 hours). Thus, much of the woman's time is spent fulfilling her many obligations in the home — primarily in the form of child-rearing and routine household chores. Since many of the families studied are nuclear, the greater burden of household management rests in the

hands of the female especially the mother. Consequently, despite economic pressures, 61 percent of the non-working mothers (or 27 percent of all mothers) are unable to engage in gainful employment because they just do not have the time for it. For those who do, however, there is the problem of a double dose of obligations. Because of this, when working women were asked whether they would continue working if the economic reasons that prompted them to work no longer prevail, 68 percent answered "no" because they want to be faced with fewer role demands.

The woman as family treasurer: options or limits?

Much is made of the Filipino woman's control of family funds as the base of her power in the home as well as her primary contribution insofar as the economy is concerned. Sociologist Mary R. Hollnsteiner, however, asserts that "where the purse is ample, she has the freedom to decide allocation of expenses; but where the income is less than needs, the exigency decides how the meager sum should go. In a developing country where the greater majority survive on a less than subsistence economy, it matters little who holds the purse" (1975). The findings of the study bear out Hollnsteiner's assertions. In all three communities, food gets the lion's share of the expenses followed by home operating costs, education, and clothing in that order. When the women were asked about how they budget their funds, the majority answered that they do not budget at all. Rather, it is the most pressing needs among the many that get the funds. Sixty-four percent of the women are unable to save from the money that they manage. Among the 36 percent who do, the amount is too small to be significant.

The data point out that the women hardly have options on where the money should go, their choices being predetermined by the demands of survival. Hence, even if nearly all of the women act as family treasurers, they are unable to exercise properly the power and resource allocation component of this function.

Poverty, fertility, and development

In the Philippines, as well as in other developing countries, high fertility is proving to be a major obstacle in raising per capita income. The problem of high fertility as a deterrent to development is especially evident in the low income group. Data of the study indicate that the average size of the mother's family of procreation (8.4 children) is large compared to the average Filipino family's size of six children. With the high cost of living, meager incomes, and the large family size, the picture painted by the respondents' families is one of hand-to-mouth existence.

Although most married respondents feel that the appropriate number of children for any family is from three to four, the overwhelming majority are satisfied with their large family size (93 percent of mothers and 94 percent of fathers). Primary reasons for satisfaction are the respondents' assessment that they somehow manage to support their children, the economic security value that children represent to parents, the joys of family life and the feeling that one has no choice but be satisfied because the children are already there. Another area of ambivalence is family planning. Even if 81 percent of the mothers and 85 percent of the fathers favor the limiting of family size, only 25 percent actually practice some form of family planning.

Women and work in a developing society

One of the major ways by which women can actively contribute to economic development is through participation in income-generating activities. From Table 4 we see the following employment figures for mothers: rural, 60 percent; semi-urban, 74 percent; and urban, 34 percent. Employment figures for daughters who are not studying are: rural 54 percent; semi-urban, 60 percent; and urban, 27 percent. A majority of the unemployed women desire work.

These employment figures, however, are not as rosy as they appear at first blush. About three-fourths of the working mothers devote part-time to their occupation. Furthermore,

Table 4
Participation in income-generating activities of women
classified by type and community

Participation	Mother			Sub-total	Daughter			Sub-total
	R	S-U	U		R	S-U	U	
Unemployed, desiring work	29%	26%	49%	34%	39%	30%	64%	44%
Unemployed, not desiring work	11	—	17	10	8	10	9	9
Employed	60	74	34	56	53	60	27	47
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Number	(35)	(35)	(35)	(105)	(13)	(10)	(11)	(34)
Respondent is still studying	—	—	—	—	2	5	4	11

R = Rural; S-U = Semi-Urban; U = Urban

most of the women are self-employed in low income, low prestige, traditionally feminine types of work. Except for the rural mothers who work alongside their husbands in the fields, it is likely that the combination of meager job openings for married women and the demands of home management cause many of the mothers to seek self rather than other employment. Supporting this conjecture are findings that regardless of community setting, the majority of working daughters and men are employed by others.

The data point out several factors as important influencing variables on the work participation of women. These are:

1. Restrictions imposed by the wife-mother role. Domestic constraints such as the unavailability of other people to do household chores and take care of younger children is a major reason for the women not seeking employment.

2. Family structure characteristics. Data of the study indicate that there are more grandmothers who had an occupation than there are

mothers. This could be due to the fact that since many of the families studied are nuclear, the heavier home management responsibilities of the present crop of mothers, as contrasted from their own mothers (the grandmothers) who had extended families, prevent them from engaging in an occupation.

3. Community setting and location of work. There are more employed rural and semi-urban mothers than urban mothers (Table 4). There are also more rural and semi-urban mothers engaged in both a primary and secondary occupation. The following may account for these differences:

- a. there are more work opportunities available for women in the rural and semi-urban than in the urban community;
- b. work opportunities, being closer to the home, make it easier for rural and semi-urban women to combine their work and wife-mother roles; and
- c. it is less risky to leave children alone in the home in the rural and semi-urban areas than if one resides in the city.

Table 5
Reasons for getting together with neighbors of women
classified by type and community

Reasons for getting together	Mother			Sub-total	Daughter			Sub-total
	R	S-U	U		R	S-U	U	
Informal chats	48%	94%	65%	63%	62%	85%	54%	58%
Special occasions (e.g., baptisms, fiestas, etc.)	68	39	52	48	85	54	46	53
Meetings of community organizations	16	—	19	11	—	15	62	22
During work	23	18	3	13	15	23	—	11

R = Rural; S-U = Semi-Urban; U = Urban

*Percentages indicate the proportion of respondents who mentioned the particular reason to the total number of respondents of the same type who belong to the same community.

4. Education. Low income levels are to a large extent the result of limited education and lack of skills. The employed women have an average monthly income of ₱189 in their primary occupation and ₱128 in their secondary occupation. Even if these reflect income from part-time employment, still, the amount is low.

Participation in community life

A majority of the women get together with their neighbors and other members of the community primarily for informal chats and gatherings during special occasions like marriages and baptisms. Few women get together with their neighbors for purposes of community organization (Table 5). Primary reasons for non-participation are ignorance of the existence of organizations, including citizens' assemblies in the area and lack of time and interest to get involved.

Only 15 percent of the mothers read newspapers at least every other day. Fifty-one percent do not read at all. Printed media exposure is mainly to comic books with 34 percent of

the mothers and 67 percent of the daughters reading such at least every other day. Radio exposure consists primarily of soap operas which are listened to several times during the day. Even if more than 60 percent of the women are exposed to some form of radio news at least every other day, such exposure is on the whole incidental. Hence, many of the mothers hardly are aware of the current events that affect their daily lives.

Respondents were asked what action programs could be instituted in their respective communities that would be beneficial to women. Seventy-six percent of the mothers, 75 percent of the fathers, 60 percent of the daughters, and 61 percent of the sons suggested activities that would enhance the economic participation of women.

Personal and societal problems

One of the major constraints to the participation of women in development are the socio-personal problems they face. These problems consume the time and energies of the women

and detract them from otherwise participating more effectively in the home, at work and in the community. What are these problems?

Across all communities, the overwhelming majority of women report poverty and the myriad of difficulties it brings as their single most important problem. This is obvious. But what is perhaps more interesting are the women's perceptions of the causes and their suggested solutions. Eighty-five percent of the mothers and 69 percent of the daughters feel that their problems are due to external conditions and circumstances over which they have no control. Very few consider the problem as being due to their own personal inadequacy or

the inadequacy of others. Despite this perception of cause, however, 63 percent of the mothers and 78 percent of the daughters feel that they will have to personally strive to overcome it. Hardly anyone suggested enlisting the aid of the government or of some external agency (mothers, 2.9 percent; daughters, 2.8 percent). Is this an indication of a lack of faith in the government or a feeling that it is too distant to hear the problems of the "common tao"? Few of the women feel completely helpless (mothers, 5.8 percent; daughters, 2.8 percent) or gave fatalistic solutions (mothers, .58 percent; daughters, 2.8 percent).

Table 6
Aspirations for self of women classified by type and community

Area of aspiration	Mother			Sub-total	Daughter			Sub-total
	R	S-U	U		R	S-U	U	
Aspirations related to family life	3%	20%	13%	13%	-	7%	7%	5%
Aspirations related to decent and/or improved standards of living	63	43	29	45	7	21	13	14
Aspirations related to formal education	7	-	6	4	20	43	53	39
Aspirations related to engaging in income-generating activities	13	11	26	17	47	14	20	27
Aspirations related to having congenial work	-	11	16	9	7	7	7	7
Aspirations related to health	7	9	6	7	-	7	-	2
Other	7	6	3	5	20	-	-	7
Total	100%	100%	99%	100%	100.1%	99%	100.0%	100.1%
Number	(30)	(35)	(31)	(96)	(15)	(14)	(15)	(44)
None	5	-	4	9	-	1	-	1

R = Rural; S-U = Semi-Urban; U = Urban

Poverty and the aspirations of lower class women

The present aspirations of the lower class women reflect their basic economic needs: to have decent or improved levels of living, to engage in income-generating activities and to have an education (Table 6). It is interesting to note that 20 percent of the mothers and 32 percent of the daughters feel that their aspirations will be fulfilled because they will personally strive to achieve them. A substantial number, however, either leave such to the workings of fate and God (mothers, 39 percent; daughters, 34 percent) or feel that their aspirations will not be fulfilled (mothers, 13 percent; daughters, 21 percent). The women were asked what were their aspirations during childhood. Sixty-six percent of the mothers aspired for socioeconomic mobility through education but poverty prevented its fulfillment. Eighty-one percent of the daughters had the same aspiration and for 76 percent, poverty also prevented its fulfillment.

Summary and Conclusions

The data point out the pervasive effects of poverty on the lives of the women as well as on their role in the development process. Because they can neither afford domestic help nor home labor saving devices, the women spend most of their time performing routine home chores — time which could otherwise be spent in gainful employment. And those who do engage in occupational activities have to make several compromises: part-time and hence less income-generating work, a double dose of obligations, and less leisure time. Furthermore, because of inadequate education and lack of skills, the women enter more of the low-paying, unskilled types of work.

Poverty has limited to a certain extent the life concerns of the women to eking out an existence for the family and getting seemingly

endless household and childrearing tasks done each day. Thus, modernization has not had much impact on her role perception. She still sees herself as wife and mother and only that. And even within the home, poverty restricts the woman from exercising her treasurer functions properly. Then, of course, there are the myriad problems concomitant with poverty: high fertility, poor nutrition, lack of sanitation, and ill health among others.

In conclusion, the implications of the findings suggest that a consideration of the role of Filipino women in the socioeconomic development of the country will have to take into serious account the plight of the lower class woman.

Note

At the time she read this paper Anna Miren B. Gonzalez was a research associate at the Institute of Philippine Culture, Ateneo de Manila University. The paper is based on a study of Filipino Women in Development which the author conducted with Dr. Patricia B. Licuanan.

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