

# ENHANCING WOMEN'S ROLE AS NATURAL MANAGERS OF COASTAL RESOURCES: THE CASE OF AN ISLAND-TOWN IN THE PHILIPPINES

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There is an urgent need to take a serious look on how coastal resources are to be utilized and managed in sustainable ways. The supply of food and fish in the future must be ensured by the present generation. How is this to be made possible in the face of an alarming depletion of coastal marine resources, and the unabated destruction of many of the remaining coral reefs? As the growing population along the coasts puts greater pressure on the environment, so does the push of fishing households to resort to unsound and illegal fishing practices if only to generate more income for the survival of the family. The resulting poor fish harvests and rapidly depleting fish stocks, particularly in small-scale fisheries, are critical indicators of a real future disaster. That is, of not finding food and fish on the tables.

The women along the coasts, mostly housewives, are an untapped group for sustainable coastal resource utilization and management. As the UN Chronicle (1995) notes, "Women are among those who suffer most from environmental degradation and also among the most significant actors in the conservation and safeguarding of natural resources."

This paper takes off from this scenario. The women, who maintain the family on a daily basis, find themselves scouring the coasts and the waters for food and for livelihood especially when there are cash shortages in the family. Making their role more difficult is the reality that women find themselves in a macro labor market setting where there is gendered access to coastal resources in favor of men, and where there are gendered power relations at home and beyond. Nonetheless, women (by their natural selves) are able to make both ends meet. They know the environment and they know where to look for what they need from their coastal surroundings. This, in the same way as a mother can easily find missing things around the house, those that other family members cannot find. Women are observed to easily put things in the proper order. Women are natural managers.

Extending women's homework of home management to the coastal environment means widening women's access to coastal resources, hence, making them active stakeholders in the utilization and management of their coastal resources. How can women's role as the natural managers of coastal resources be enhanced? Are women ready to take up the managerial role? What mechanisms must be in place in order to heighten women's participation in the sustainable resource use?

The case of the island-town of Limasawa in central Philippines is the research locale of this paper. Limasawa is a typical small-scale fishing community where the challenge to involve its women and to enhance their capacity as natural managers of coastal resources is recognized, in order to cushion and abate possible ill effects of coastal resource depletion.