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Research Article

The Uncounted Dimension of Women in the Crab Meat Industry: Their Roles to Household Food Security

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ABSTRACT

The crab meat-picking industry has been recognized over the years worldwide. In this economy, women are well known as crab-pickers. They played crucial roles and faced a lot of challenges, yet their efforts to improve household food security are invisible and unrecognized. Hence, the study focused on the roles of women in the crab meat industry and their contributions to household food security and income in the Province of Masbate, Philippines. Through descriptive surveys and interviews, it was revealed that the majority of crab pickers are women with basic levels of educational attainment. Sixty-one to seventy percent (61%-70%) of the respondents rely solely on their household income for crab picking. Utilizing in-depth interviews, it was found out that respondents experienced crab-picking health-related problems, discrimination in recruitment, and staggering low wages. Therefore, even with the working conditions experienced by women, they greatly contribute to household income and food security in the area. It was deemed necessary to give emphasis to addressing challenges met by women through regular sanitary inspections by the authorities, revisiting recruitment policies in the industry, and imposing a minimum wage law to ensure that women contribute to and sustain household income.

Keywords: *Crab meat industry, Crab-picker, Household food security*

Introduction

Women involvement in fisheries and aquaculture is an old practice in many Asian and African countries (Ferdoushi & Xiang-Guo, 2010) which means women perform a number of responsibilities in fisheries around the globe, making substantial contributions to the industry from a variety of positions. In the past,

women were largely involved at subsistence fisheries level (Vunisea 2015). In Fijii households, women are the principal source of income, and they participate in a broad range of activities, including gleaning, fishing, post-harvest processing, selling and marketing of value-added items (Thomas et.al, 2020).

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In the crab picking industry, it can be noted from the published studies that women play an integral role in this sector. Crab-picking is "handpicked," a term referring to the way the crab has been prepared (by hand) to guarantee its natural flavor and known to be the best grade of crab meat. Women in Cawayan, Masbate, Philippines are married into it, knowing that their fate would be to separate crabs from their shells with as much speed and dexterity as they could muster, picking fast enough each day to stay ahead of the next day's catch. As a picker says that "If there's a crabber in the family, chances are you pick crabs". The work these women do defines their lives and yet how it can easily be done elsewhere by others. Due to the rising cost of living, many women are compelled to work in order to support their household necessities. While household food security remains a significant reason for women to participate in this labor, little information is gathered regarding women who engage in crab picking, as well as, gendered-specific guidelines are not out in place to take care of these women in this kind of industry.

Since women are the dominant sellers of any kinds of seafood (Vitukawalu et al., 2020) and contribute a lot in household food security performing multiple roles in the family and community, the study sought to determine the experiences of women crab pickers in the crab meat industry. It sought also to provide basis for women economic empowerment in the area as well as awareness to the local government on the significant role performed by women which can be led to formulation of policies in addressing women health issues, take home pay and other empowering projects to sustain and strengthen the crab meat industry.

Methods

The study used a descriptive method of research in gathering the profile of the respondents and practices involve in crab picking. The objective of descriptive research is to precisely

and methodically characterize a population, situation, or phenomena. It can answer queries about what, where, when, and how, but not why. To explore one or more variables, a descriptive research design may use a vast array of research methodologies (McCombes, 2019).

Phenomenological research method was utilized to gather the lived experiences of women crab picker. Through an in-depth interview during focused group discussion their experiences and challenges met in the industry were recorded. Phenomenological research is a qualitative method that aims to comprehend and characterize the universal essence of a phenomena. The method analyzes the common experiences of humans while researchers suspend their previous notions about the topic (*What Is Phenomenological Research Design? — Delve*, 2022).

The researcher employed purposive sampling for the FGD and in-depth interview, but random sample for the profile, which included a total of 190 respondent female workers at three crab processing factories in the municipality. The survey questionnaire served as an interview guide for the focus group discussions, and it was used to obtain respondent profiles. Survey questionnaire was utilized for gathering the profile of the respondents, interview guide for FGD. Frequency count and percentage was the statistical tool used while thematic analysis for the transcribed responses of the respondents. The participants in the FGD were selected based on criteria such as their duration of employment in the crab business, the number of children in their households, and their total family income. Ethical considerations have been stated, such as the fact that all of the responses will be kept confidential and that they will only be used for the sake of study. There will be a strict adherence to anonymity. Requests for permission to record the interview were made to both the individuals who participated and the management of the factories.

Results and Discussion

Profile of the Respondents

Description	Frequency	Percentage
Age group		
25 years or below	62	32.6
26 – 30 years old	48	25.3
31 – 35 years old	31	16.3
36 – 40 years old	25	13.
41 – 50 years old	14	7.4
Above 50 years old	10	5.3
Aducation Background		
Elementary level-graduate	138	72.6
Secondary level-graduate	52	27.4
Tertiary level-graduate	0	0.0
Number of Children		
1 – 3 children	55	28.9
4 – 6 children	97	51.1
7 – 9 children	22	11.6
Above 10 children	16	8.4
Number of Years as Crab Meat Picker		
1 – 3 years	128	67.4
4 – 6 years	32	16.8
7 – 9 years	23	12.1
Above 10 years	7	3.7

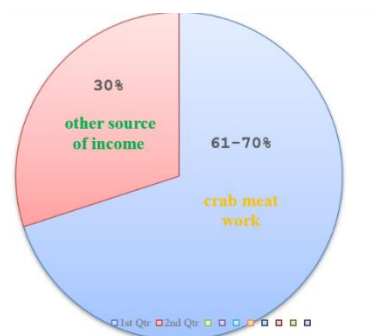
It can be noted from the table above that most of the women in the crab meat industry are young and with an educational attainment mostly of elementary level or graduate. All of them have children and with 1-3 years working in the crab industry. The profile shows that women aside from the childrearing, they are associated in a paid work sector being employed. This means, that they perform double or might be multiple roles in their life. It can be seen from the table that women have low educational attainment that might hamper them to land a high paying job in the community. In the Philippines, (Siason, 1996) women's full involvement in sector development initiatives is hampered by low educational attainment and socio-cultural barriers. Their literacy level influences their capacity to utilize and obtain

accessible information. Their conviction in their own lack of competence and aptitude, in comparison to their male counterparts, undermines their self-confidence in pursuing tasks autonomously. Therefore, there is a need to design a program on women economic empowerment specifically on alternative livelihood training, financial literacy and better business practices in the crab meat industry.

Experiences of Women Crab Picker and Their Roles in the Household Food Security

This part of the paper presents the results from the focused group discussion conducted by the researcher. Themes were identified based from the experiences given by the respondents and were categorized by the researcher.

Role in household food security



Based on the graph, the vast majority of respondents must rely on harvesting crab meat to provide for their families' basic needs. It is the primary source of income for them, and it helps them provide for the various members of the family. Respondents also said that working in this industry gave them a sense of self-worth because they made friends, went to social events, took part in religious activities, and were seen as wage earners by their families. It indicates that women have made contributions toward satisfying the needs of their families and even their own.

Nonetheless, since it is a major source of income to the family, respondents claimed that they were able to provide food, school needs of children and basic house needs as well as medicine. Home food security occurs when all members of a household have physical, social, and economic access to enough, safe, and nutritious food at all times that fits their dietary requirements and food choices for an active and healthy lifestyle (World Food Summit Declaration, 1996). Thus, in this kind of work, women tend to secure not just food in the table but also other basic needs for the family. Their participation in this kind of work led to addressing sustainable development goals number two which is zero hunger. It is believed that women generate 60-80% of the world's food. Furthermore, since they produce, process, and prepare the bulk of accessible foods, they play an important role in ensuring food security in their families and communities (Rio & Salazar, 2017). In spite of this, their contribution to the production of food is not acknowledged, and as a direct result of this, less outreach and training programs and even benefits are provided to women.

Experiences of Women Crab-Picker in the Crab Industry

Women engaged in the crab meat business did their duties as crab pickers, sorters, and inspectors to the best of their abilities out of a sense of duty and responsibility. Due to the nature of their employment, these women experienced a great deal of strain and encountered challenges. Below are the emergent themes identified.

Theme 1: Health related problems

The crab pickers' labor normally starts in the wee hours of the morning, after the crabs have been transported from the cooking facility. In the majority of crab houses, women labor standing or seated at long tables in a vast room. Men put stacks of grilled crabs at intervals along the long tables; women then remove the flesh from each crab individually. Rapidly, the ladies collect both male and female blue crabs. The pace and intensity of the work environment might be observed. The sheer speed of the labor makes the ladies susceptible to cuts and other more severe occupational dangers. Due to the repeated nature of crab-picking, experienced crab pickers sometimes have swollen, arthritic hands. Additionally, some women developed adverse responses. Many employees now experience work-related and health-related injuries and other issues. Injuries are caused by the use of sharp blades, contact with chemicals, exposure to infection, lack of formal training, and the rapid speed of work.

Thus, these women describe symptoms of asthma and allergies, which are typical in the seafood sector, which is notorious for occupationally-related chronic and acute respiratory

problems. Crab asthma is a frequent occupational asthma caused by exposure to crab-related procedures such as boiling, steaming, cleaning, cutting, or scraping (*Crab Pickers Face Health Disparities in Maryland, Says New Report / Migrant Clinicians Network*, 2020). Further, veteran crab pickers who were interviewed spoke in Maryland claimed of the long-term health effects of the physically demanding crab-picking work like they had increasingly swollen and arthritic hands, after years of working in the industry (Rathod & Lockie, 2010).

Many of these employees' injuries might and could have been avoided by adhering to occupational safety and health regulations. Unfortunately, the majority of these employees are unaware that they may be entitled to these claims, and even if they are aware, they lack the legal means and fear retaliation from their employers to pursue these claims.

Theme 2: *Discrimination in recruitment*

Concerns regarding discrimination are raised by gendered hiring practices and disparities in treatment depending on age. Discrimination is usually thought of as treating someone or a group unfairly because they are a member of a certain group. It is a behavioral bias, which makes it different from stereotyping (which is a cognitive bias) and prejudice (which is an attitude bias; Dovidio, Hewstone, Glick, and Esses, 2010; Mackie and Smith, 1998), which are both cognitive and attitudinal biases. According to respondents who were interviewed, age discrimination may potentially be an issue for the sector. Women described situations in which older and younger employees were treated differently. Younger women are given chances to renew their contracts while older women are given less opportunity for contract renewal.

"I feel to they want us out in the factory since we are more prone to diseases and sickness." (R67)

Many older individuals feel their age to be a disadvantage while seeking employment. This is particularly true for women and racial mi-

norities, since age discrimination in the workplace often intersects with gender and racial bias. Those who are least able to afford age discrimination are those who are most likely to be harmed by it (Suh, 2021). Thus, it can be noted based from the profiles of the respondents above that mostly of the workers in the crab meat industry in Cawayan, Masbate, Philippines are young women. However, employers may ponder on this thought that it's not about 'too young' or 'too old' since in the job, being too young is frequently connected with a lack of knowledge and experience, whilst being too old is associated with being less capable of acquiring new skills and more rigid. in hiring workers (Posthuma et.al, 2013). With the work so demanding it is high time to include age in the factory's diversity and inclusion policy as well as other categories. It is abundantly clear that further work must be done to improve system coordination in order to successfully adjust to demographic changes in general. Building inclusive workplaces, in which individuals are actively encouraged to strive toward realizing their full and individual potential, requires everyone to make an effort.

Theme 3: *Staggering low wages*

Despite the staggering quantity of labor that is done by women in the crab business, there is a dearth of emphasis paid to the concept of equal work and equal pay in this line of work. The vast majority of the women who were questioned about their employment conditions said that they were paid for their work on a piece rate basis. This implies that their total weekly income was dependent upon the quantity of crabmeat, measured in pounds, that they harvested. As a result, there is no set wage rate per month for them, which has resulted in shockingly low wages. In connection with this, they stated that there have been instances in which the marketability of crab meat has been unstable, and as a result, the owner of the factory has given them only half of the income they were supposed to deserve. Because of this circumstance, women went to various businesspeople in the municipality to ask for financial assistance in the form of a cash loan. In Maryland, women crab pickers take out loans to pay different fees and expenditures before arriving

in the United States, creating a system in which many migrants "pay to work," and stay in debt despite seeking to make a living, also, many of the women choose to operate inside this system despite the debt they acquire because of promises about remuneration and hours of labor to be done (Rathod & Lockie, 2010). When it was asked if the female respondents whether or not they were satisfied with the manner in which they were being paid, each and every one of them responded that they were not satisfied and did not feel secure in their place of employment due to the lack of appropriate health protocols and protective equipment. In

Hence, improving women's earnings, education levels, and access to information and decision-making processes will empower them to make greater contributions in this kind of industry, which will have far-reaching effects for individual families and for society as a whole. Though this is great challenge to women in this industry they are directly involved in providing and assisting their husband or other family members is securing food in the household.

Conclusion

The challenging work that women do in the crab meat industry presents an opportunity for the women of Masbate, Philippines, to help increase the income of their families, ensure that their households have food and other necessities, and contribute to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In spite of the difficulties that women face, such as work-related health issues, discrimination, and staggeringly low earnings, women have a tendency to execute their jobs with the greatest industry for the sake of the needs of their families. Therefore, it is proposed that there be a clear policy in frequent sanitary inspections by the authorities, a reconsideration of recruiting practices in the business, and the imposition of a minimum wage regulation in order to guarantee that women contribute to and maintain family income. It is therefore, the right time to count all the efforts of women in food security in the country. Further, their participation in the crab industry is deemed complementary, despite the fact that it is obvious that their employment is critical to their family's existence.

Hence, women must be regarded as more than just housewives, but as a key link in ensuring the connections and preservation of the family, it will be feasible to have more symmetric social interactions.

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