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Women and Literacy: Exploring the Literacy Experiences and Practices of Women Farmers in the Philippines

Katrina Ninfa Topacio¹

Abstract

Filipino women farmers have displayed their indispensable contribution to the Philippine agricultural economy for a long part of history, yet there remains a dearth of knowledge concerning how these women use literacy to effectively perform their roles in society. This research looked into Filipino women farmers' literacy experiences and practices. Through an ideological literacy perspective, feminist framework, and ethnographic research approach, it was revealed that the literacy practices of the Filipino women farmers of a rice-planting community in Northern Philippines are deeply rooted in their social and economic environment. Their literacy events vary according to what they want to achieve and what roles they play in the different domains of practicing literacy. Furthermore, it was found that these literacy practices and the women's experiences with literacy are patterned after long established sociocultural practices and existing patriarchal structures within Philippine agricultural societies.

Keywords: Women's literacy, Ideological literacy, Feminist ethnology, Filipino women farmers

Introduction

Historically, literacy has been defined in general, universal, and monolithic ways usually only reflecting the culture of the west, or if not, the more dominant culture in any given society. This view of literacy is related to what has been termed by Street (2003) as an autonomous view of literacy. In this model, literacy is claimed to have independent effects on individuals' cognitive development, thereby paving the way for social development or growth. The model views literacy as working autonomously without considering other pertinent factors that may affect a person's or a group's literacy such as social, economic, and other material realities. Hence, literacy and illiteracy have been considered in a binary relationship, instead of considering the complexities that constitute such notions. In this way, literacy has been viewed as a key factor in achieving personal and economic growth among so-called illiterate individuals and societies, despite other factors that may contribute to achieving such growth. For instance, in economically challenged countries such as the Philippines, higher literacy and education are seen as the ultimate means of overcoming poverty.

Street (2003) contested this idea of literacy and offered an alternative ideological perspective to include the literacy perspectives, experiences, and practices of people in varied social and cultural contexts. This "new literacy" as Street calls it focuses more on the idea of "social" literacy rather than acquired technical skills.. Furthermore, this model explains how reading and writing are not autonomous skills but are deeply rooted in cultural ways of knowing. This concept of literacy shatters the universal and monolithic definition and replaces it with a notion of literacy that is multiple, social, and culture-specific.

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The ideological literacy of Street relates to the notion of “social literacy” as described by Barton and Hamilton (2000). Here, literacy is understood more as social practices and events being performed by people within a particular society, and literacy practices are influenced by culture and other socio-material factors present in that society. Hence, people of different societies are expected to have different ways of practicing literacy. Moreover, because literacy is a social practice, it cannot veer away from the workings of power structures within a society. Therefore, it can be observed how certain views and types of literacy are more favored and influential than others. In the Philippines, for instance, the autonomous view of literacy is more dominant and is deeply rooted in the social values among its members regardless of their social class. This view is manifested in discourses about education and how one’s ability in literacy can give one an advantage in society.

In this light, literacy can no longer be defined only as a process of accumulation of important skills such as reading, writing, arithmetic, and the like, but also opens up the possibility of recognizing other skills beyond the fixed ones. Hence, it also challenges the notion of the “illiterate,” a term which tends to marginalize people and categorize members of a community in terms of their abilities or a lack thereof. In the theory of multiple and social literacy, no one is illiterate, but people only differ in how they view the world, interpret it, and act within it. Therefore, it is paramount that social research constantly seeks for new definitions of literacy and gives evidence to its multiplicity. This present research adopts the concept of ideological and social literacies as it aims to focus on identifying literacies used in social practices within a particular community. These literacies are recognized within literacy events as skills and knowledge on how to do things so that individuals can perform their roles and tasks in everyday life. Moreover, this study proposes a view of literacy that is open-ended (i.e., not limited or restricted to existing categories of literacy), so it can accommodate new ideas on literacy and its practices particular to the culture of the community in question.

In this study, the concept behind ideological literacy or “new literacy” is connected to standpoint theory, which has ideological roots in feminist studies. In this theory popularized by Smith (2005), it is argued that a person’s knowledge about the world is influenced by their subject position in society. It emphasizes that people from different social and cultural backgrounds have varying standpoints and understanding of the world, and that this brings into question the validity of objective knowledge. In the field of gender and women studies, the theory has been used to advocate the standpoint of women as opposed to the dominant and more popular male standpoint.

Through an ideological literacy perspective, feminist framework, and qualitative research approach, the larger aim of the study is to arrive at an understanding of literacy particular to women farmers in the Philippines. There are reasons to believe that a new perspective of literacy will arise from the study, and this includes the fact that the key participants belong to a cultural group that is often found in the periphery of knowledge and research. First, it is interesting to explore how farmers in a rural part of the Philippines view literacy and how such views intertwine with the economic, social, and cultural activities in their society. Second, the study focuses on the literacy views of women farmers who occupy a more peripheral position compared to men farmers who have a more central position in agricultural societies.

Method

The methodological framework of the present study was based on ethnographic methods. Triangulation techniques, such as interviews, observation field notes, questionnaires, and other participatory methods were employed to explore the phenomenon in question. Smith’s (2005) feminist institutional ethnological framework was used as a basis for data analysis, particularly in exploring Filipino women farmers’ experiences and perceptions as linked to wider and more powerful institutions that surround them.

Subjects and Study Site

The participants in the study were women from Pinili, which is a barrio (or village) in the city of San Jose, Province of Nueva Ecija. It is a five-hour drive north from Manila, the capital of the Philippines. Agriculture is the main source of income in the province, and rice is the primary product. Even though farming is the main job in the area, most of the residents are only tenant farmers and do not own land of their own.

Initially, there were 19 women farmers who participated in the project attending group discussions and any other participative activities. Prior to data collection, these women were invited through the mediation of their *barangay* (smallest government unit in the Philippines) officials to attend an initial meeting with the researcher. Their attendance to the said meeting confirmed their willingness to participate in the research. However, detailed interviews were only conducted among ten selected women from the group. The selection was done by the researcher, research assistants, and representatives from the local government unit who assisted in organizing the activities. These ten women were selected based on their willingness to participate and share their experiences through video and audio-recording, and their wide array of experiences in farming and any other community events.

The age range of these women are from 28-62 years old. Most of them, with the exception of one, were married and have children. Only two of the 19 claimed that they attended college. Some were able to attend high school, but most only attended elementary. All of them were observed to be able to read and answer questionnaires, showing a certain level of functional literacy.

Most of these women claimed that they did not have a fixed monthly income. Like most farmers in San Jose, their husbands are tenant farmers who only rely on other people's land. Only three women reported that their husbands do other jobs such as carpentry, construction work, and transport service. Further, with the exception of two, all women said that their families farm on lands that are less than one hectare. Hence, it can be assumed that these women came from an economically challenged farming community whose income is unstable because of lack of land ownership, unfavorable environmental conditions, and uneven business opportunities.

Data Explication/Mode of Analysis

Qualitative data were collected in a span of one year through the following measures: participative methods such as World Café (informal talks) and diagramming tools, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, observations, and field notes. Participative methods included dynamic group interactions where the subjects of the research mostly discussed particular topics assigned to them. Questionnaires were used to extract the participants' demographic data. More detailed narratives about the subjects' particular experiences with farming and literacy were obtained from interview data.

The data from interviews were transcribed and coded. Emerging themes were identified and categorized. Field notes and other outputs from the participatory activities were used to support the findings from the interviews. Reflexive methods were used to lessen the subjectivity of interpretation, such as reflecting on interviews and previous activities conducted before planning the next one, listening to interviews with colleagues for exchange and validation of ideas, and writing down notes during community visits. Further, an intercoder was asked to verify whether the themes from the data analysis were categorized appropriately.

Ethical Considerations

The women were informed of their rights as participants in the research process. The researcher explained that their participation in the activities was all voluntary and that they could withdraw

from it any time during the research process. Consent forms written in the local language were signed by the participants to signify their willingness to participate in the study.

Findings

The concepts of literacy practices and literacy events patterned after the social literacy of Barton and Hamilton (2000) were used to categorize the literacy experiences of the women farmers in the study. Literacy practices are defined as “general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon in their lives” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 7). Apart from observable behavior of reading, writing, or doing literacy, this notion includes attitudes, feelings, and social relationships as well. Hence, the analysis of literacy practices here is not limited to what people read and write but extends to the participants’ views, opinions, and awareness of literacy. It also includes an analysis of social relationships, power structures, and cultural norms that may shape these people’s understanding and experiences of literacy.

Literacy events, on the other hand, are observed as the “activities where literacy has a role, usually there is a written text, or texts, central to the activity and there may be talk around the text” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 8). Hence, literacy events are more specific contexts where there are specific goals to be accomplished. In this study, it is deemed important to understand the purpose of these literacy events for the women-participants, and their roles in the different domains of activity in which they practice literacy. Likewise, it is important to recognize that not all practices of literacy are the same for these women. There may be changing of roles, goals, and even perspectives depending on which domain they navigate.

The following table shows the literacy events and the corresponding domains of use observed among the women farmers in this study:

Table 1: Literacy Events Participated by Women Farmers and Corresponding Domains

| Domain of Use | Literacy Event | Text |
|---------------|---|---|
| Home | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Teaching recipes to grandchildren ● Helping children/grandchildren with homework ● Using gadgets for communication with distant family members | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● School textbooks ● Internet-search applications such as Google |
| Farming | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Planting and producing crops ● Producing self-made organic pesticides ● Using appropriate organic fertilizers for crops ● Identifying and planting crops suitable for the season | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Flyers and brochures from trainings ● Notes from trainings ● Passed-on cultural knowledge |

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| <p>Entrepreneurship</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Direct selling of crops from house-to-house ● Selling crops and negotiating prices with middle men | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Mental texts or notes |
| <p>Community Affairs and Social Relations</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Conducting and facilitating parents' meetings ● Participating in meetings and trainings ● Participating in small talk or social talk with other members of the community | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lecture notes ● Flyers and brochures ● Text messages |
| <p>Legal Rights and Land Ownership</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Negotiating rights for land ownership ● Preparing land titles | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Legal documents ● Passed-on cultural knowledge |

The domains of literacy use include the home, farming, entrepreneurship, community affairs and social relations, and legal rights and land ownership. The home is one of the most studied domains in the literacy experiences of women. It is in the home that women's roles in literacy and child-rearing can be observed. This is also a domain that is observed to intersperse with others. According to Barton and Hamilton (2000), domains do not have stable boundaries, and one domain may be observed to overlap with others. In other studies on women and literacy (Kalman, 2001; Puchner, 2003), it was reported that women may participate in other literacy events within the domains of the home apart from traditional household activities and child-rearing. Within the domain of the home, women can also do business and participate in social talk. In this study, it was observed how women are most engaged in literacy events in which their children and grandchildren also participate. Women are the primary guide in their children's or grandchildren's education (if the mother of the children is not around), assisting them with schoolwork and keeping themselves updated about school projects and affairs. Several times in the interviews, it was claimed that these women see education of their children as important to their social security. Apart from guiding children in their school activities, some of them even claimed that it is their responsibility to teach their children household skills such as cooking and housekeeping.

Despite the declaration of the home as an extension of learning, it was observed from the home visits that households lack reading materials. Most of these women farmers' houses are small huts consisting of practical tools and spaces. Usually, living spaces are multipurpose where they can eat, sleep, and study, and there is an indoor or outdoor kitchen and usually an outdoor bath. Books and reading materials are not usually part of these farmers' homes. When asked why there is no presence of schoolbooks in the house, one woman replied that schoolbooks are left at school, and when children have homework, they just bring their notebooks with them to answer. She further claimed that answers for homework are not taken from printed materials anymore but are sourced from internet-search applications such as Google. It can be gleaned here that even though books are not considered practical tools at home, gadgets and the Internet are. In several interviews, it was

learned how many of these families relied on gadgets, and despite their limited financial capacities, they make sure they allocate budget for Internet and cellphone load.

Kalman (2001) made the same observation in her study conducted among women in a suburban community in Mexico. She observed how women's homes contain too little of the tools used for reading and writing, with the exception of school textbooks and the Bible. In this study conducted in a small village in a province in the Philippines, there is little or no presence of textbooks at all. Textbooks are claimed to be reading materials within the domains of the school only.

Farming likewise is a very important domain of literacy among the women farmers. Literacy events in this domain include planting and producing crops, applying appropriate fertilizers, producing self-made pesticides, and identifying and planting crops suitable for a particular season or cycle. In this domain, a rather vernacular kind of literacy is observed. This kind of literacy event does not constitute direct and observable reading and writing behavior; nevertheless, it displays important knowledge and skills in achieving particular social goals. Unlike dominant literacy practices that use overt texts, farming and crop knowledge require the reading of environmental texts in order to execute a particular activity. Although the women participants claimed that they sometimes attend trainings for agriculture offered by the local government and agencies, most of their farming skills were learned from passed-on cultural knowledge. Their skills were directly learned from their own parents or relatives or observed from practices in their surroundings. Some of the skills they learned from training are the use of organic pesticides and fertilizers, in which knowledge transference is commonly done through lectures and distribution of flyers or brochures. However, the most fundamental farming skills were learned through cultural transference. In one interview, one woman farmer narrated how she learned farming from her parents and aunts, and mostly by watching them do it. She likewise shared that it is important to rotate crops according to season to achieve optimal crop-production results. When asked how and where she learned this, she said she did not learn this from school or any formal training, but only through observation. The following transcript shows a sample of this experience.

| English | Tagalog |
|--|--|
| <p>Interviewer: Do you know what crop to plant next?</p> <p>Interviewee: Yes.</p> <p>Interviewer: How did you know it?</p> <p>Interviewee: It will not work if it will always be <i>ampalaya</i> (bitter gourd), or always <i>patola</i> (silk squash) because the soil will lose its calcium. If it will always be the same crop, the result will not be good.</p> <p>Interviewer: How did you know that?</p> <p>Interviewee: For example, it is only now that my parents' farm get a good income. In the past, they will just plant the same crops such as <i>sitaw</i> (string beans) and <i>kamatis</i> (tomatoes). But now they tried a new one, <i>patola</i> (silk squash).</p> <p>Interviewer: How did they know that they should plant <i>patola</i> (silk squash) next? Did someone tell them?</p> | <p>Interviewer: Alam nyo na kung ano yung itanim nyo pagkatapos ng palay?</p> <p>Interviewee: Opo.</p> <p>Intvierwer: Pano nyo po nalalaman yun?</p> <p>Interviewee: Eh Ma'am kasi hindi naman po pwede laging <i>ampalaya</i>, laging <i>patola</i> kasi po yung sa lupa ay mawawalang po ng calcium yun kung laging yun at yun nalang tsaka hindi po gaganda Ma'am.</p> <p>Interviewer: Paano nyo po nalalaman yun?</p> <p>Interviewee: Katulad po dito sa amin ngayon di ngayon lang po nagkaroon ng bayad dito sa bukid po namin kaya maganda po yung patalo</p> |

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| <p>Interviewee: Farmers know this. Especially those who are experts in farming.</p> <p>Interviewer: Did you learn that in school?</p> <p>Interviewee: No.</p> <p>Interviewer: So you just learned from each other?</p> <p>Interviewee: Yes.</p> <p>Interviewer: Did you learn that from the Department of Agriculture?</p> <p>Interviewee: No.</p> <p>Interviewer: So how can you easily believe that this is the right thing to do?</p> <p>Interviewee: It is because others have already proven it. For instance, when my neighbor only planted <i>ampalaya</i> (bitter gourd) every year, the produce were not good. It was because they only planted the same crop every year. So they should change (the crop).</p> | <p>ng magulangko. Kasi lagi pong kamatis, sitaw ang mga tinanim niya, ngayon binago na. Patola.</p> <p>Interviewer: Pano niya nalaman na dapat patola yung itanim niya? Meron bang nagsabi sa kanya?</p> <p>Interviewee: Silang mga mag-gugulay Ma'am alam na nila. Lalo na po yung mga ekspertong nagtanim Ma'am alam na nila yun.</p> <p>Interviewer: Pero di naman po sa eskwelahan natutunan yan?</p> <p>Interviewee: Ay hindi po.</p> <p>Interviewer: Ahh sa isa't isa niyo lang po natutunan?</p> <p>Interviewee: Opo</p> <p>Interviewer: Hindi po ba sila taga Department of Agriculture?</p> <p>Interviewee: Hindi po.</p> <p>Interviewer: Eh paano po kayo naniniwala agad na ganun dapat yung gawin?</p> <p>Interviewee: Eh kasi Ma'am yung mga iba nasusubukan yung mga, tulad sa kapit-bahay naming puro ampalaya siya, ampalaya ampalaya siya yearly, eh hindi na naging maganda yung bunga. Eh kasi lagi nalang ampalaya ang tanim dun yearly. Hindi na talaga maganda yung mga bunga. Eh yung mga mahahabang ampalaya nga po, hindi na maganda. Kaya dapat baguhin.</p> |
|--|--|

In one interview, a participant was asked whether knowledge from training or learned from their elders are being passed on to their children. There were mixed responses regarding this activity. Although some of them prefer transferring agricultural skills to children, there are some who do not for the fear that their children might just end up as farmers. For some parents, farming is seen as a survival skill that children need to learn. However, some also claimed that their children are not interested in farming anymore. Training them depends on the children's interest and is not seen as an obligation as they did in the past. For parents who do not want their children to be trained, they expressed fear that once their children are exposed to farming, they might not want to attend school anymore.

Even among the women farmers and their family members, farming is not always regarded as a profession. For instance, among women farmers, despite their knowledge and skills in agriculture and experiences in planting various crops, they did not consider the activity as a job. In fact, when asked about their profession in the questionnaires they filled out, most of them wrote housewife or other jobs such as seamstress or vendor. Some of their family members, especially the younger ones

such as children or grandchildren, see farming as a temporary job while waiting to be employed in another job or while on leave from school.

| English | Tagalog |
|--|--|
| <p>Interviewee: My eldest grandchild, who is now in Grade 6, has started to learn planting onions since it is an easy one. But I said he might be influenced by the other youth who stopped schooling once they have learned to farm and earn a living. So, Ma'am, as much as possible, I don't want my grandson to learn farming early because he might not go to school anymore.</p> | <p>Interviewee: Itong apo kong panganay, yung Grade 6 ko po, nitong bakasyon natuto siyang magtanim ng sibuyas kasi madali lang magtanim ng sibuyas. Eh sabi ko naman baka magaya siya sa ibang bata na pag natutunan niya nang magtanim, maghanap-buhay ng pera, baka kako tamarin ka na rin mag-aral kaya kung pwede lang Ma'am yung ganong bata pa ayaw ko naman na magtanim kasi ganon nga tumatamad na nga mga iba na mag-aral.</p> |

It can be inferred from the above extract that while at home, women and younger members of the household participate in literacy events, but the involvement of the youth in farming practices is seen to be waning. Narratives from these women farmers reveal how agricultural knowledge is transferred from generation to generation in the past, but little effort is being done at present to pass on that knowledge among the youth.

In the entrepreneurship domain, the literacy events observed are direct selling or vending of crops from house-to-house in addition to selling of crops and negotiating with middlemen. In research conducted among sugar farmers in the Philippines, the instability of the sugar economy led women farmers to look outside farming to cottage industries where women were mostly employed to produce handicrafts and any other native products for export (Garcia-Dungo, 2007). This economic instability is also apparent among the rice farmers in the present research site where income is dictated by availability of work, price of produce, and climate conditions.

Most women farmers whose families harvest a considerable amount of produce sell these products to middlemen who, in turn, sell them in markets in the city. This middleman system is prevalent in the Philippines and is often considered as an extortive activity. However, such extortion was not observed in the study. In fact, the women farmers claimed that negotiating with middlemen helped in lessening the burden of selling their crops. Although they are aware that middlemen can get more profit by selling their produce in city markets, the women farmers cannot help but rely on these middlemen to sell their goods. When asked why they do not sell the produce themselves, one participant said that she does not have the means to transport or even rent transportation of goods to the markets. Moreover, she does not have contacts or links with market vendors who can help her sell the products. Middlemen also pay them directly, whereas market vendors only tend to pay them once the goods have been sold. Other women who try to sell their produce do not have permanent market space. Instead, they walk around the village going from house to house to sell their products. This is a time-consuming and energy-consuming activity, but it seems to work for some women who claim that vending helps provide for the family's other basic needs.

Texts in the entrepreneurship domain are also not overt. Behavioral literacy practices are seen in the way these women perform basic mental arithmetic to know how much to sell their goods, how much profit they will get from transactions, and how much income they need to address particular needs in the family and the household. Usually, these transactions do not have any written

record. These women do their transactions by relying on mental notes and general cultural ways of doing things as learned in their environment. Unlike other businesses, vending and farming transactions do not require official receipts, accounting records, and business plans. Based on observations, aside from number and financial skills, communication and negotiation skills are likewise important in the domain of entrepreneurship. However, it can also be observed how the lack of certain skills also lessens the opportunities to increase these women's income. Even though they are very learned in the area of farming, their lack of entrepreneurial skills and certain resources, such as transportation for goods and market linkages, can result in a decrease in income opportunities. The observed lack of texts in the literacy events likewise implies the need to upgrade literacy skills in this domain.

The domain of community affairs and social relations constitutes the following literacy events: conducting/facilitating parents' meetings, participating in meetings and trainings given by local government units and agencies, and joining in social talks among other members in the community. Parents' meetings, organized by the local government unit and the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), are usually attended by women in the family. Topics in the meetings include social development and awareness on child-rearing, illegal-drug issues, personality development, and growing economic opportunities. According to a DSWD staff member during an interview, this activity is a once-a-month program offered by the agency, but they find it difficult to engage all parents to attend the meetings. One of the staff members commented that most of the time, the farmers do not see the importance of investing their time in personality and social development trainings because they would prefer spending their time where there is income to be gained. In one interview, one participant said that such meetings interfere with her work, so she did not have the time to attend them. However, interview and participatory-output data revealed that these women are interested in attending the trainings conducted by the Department of Agriculture, especially when they are given livestock to raise or free seeds for planting. Hence, their interest in and willingness to attend trainings depend on whether such programs have direct impact on their livelihood as farmers. In literacy events such as trainings and meetings, texts would include notes that these women take down, and flyers or brochures given to them by the agencies. However, flyers and brochures are rare, and if given, the women farmers do not keep and rely on them for instructions. When given a cattle to raise, for example, they again rely on culturally transmitted knowledge on how to raise it.

These women also conduct meetings among themselves. Some leaders have been identified among them, and usually, they are the ones who display better communication and leadership skills. Meetings are planned and scheduled through text messaging, which is observed as a vital means of communication among these women. The women also engage in small talk or social talk. Such an activity has deep cultural roots in Philippine society in which women sit close to each other during their downtime and discuss any topic. In the past, this was done face-to-face. However, the emergence of communication gadgets such as cellphones likewise allowed these women to engage in small talks through text messaging when face-to-face conversation is not possible. The rise of wireless technology also required these women to learn new digital literacy skills. However, some pointed out how their children or grandchildren are more digitally adept than them. Instead of them teaching the younger ones this skill, children can very well do this on their own, or sometimes the younger ones end up teaching them.

Lastly, the domain of legal rights and land ownership gives rise to literacy events such as negotiating rights to land ownership and preparing and keeping of legal documents such as land titles. Land rights and ownership are important for women farmers who depend on land for much of their family's livelihood. However, land ownership remains one of the main struggles of farmers in the Philippines, especially those who have been plowing in other people's fields all their lives. For a few women who own pieces of land, challenges also exist. One participant, in an interview, narrated

how she lost her right to a conjugal land property because of disputes with her husband and his siblings. The following narrative is an excerpt from the interview:

| English | Tagalog |
|--|--|
| <p>Interviewee: There was a year when I got seriously ill. When I recovered, my husband stopped giving me a share of his income and started telling me harsh words. I felt resentment toward him, so I built my own small house, a hut. He told me that he wouldn't get into a lot of debts if I did not get sick. They (the husband's family) wanted to drive me out of my hut. They were insisting that even the small hut belongs to them. He even forbade me to plant crops under the shade of a mango tree because it is where he ties his carabao. When they took the farm from me, they told me that the land was under their father's name. I do not have the right to the land because I was not truly a part of their family. I did not (legally) fight for my right anymore because I didn't have the financial capability. Also, I am alone in this fight, whereas my husband had his siblings to back him up.</p> | <p>Interviewee: May taon po na nagkasakit ako. Yung gumaling ako at dumating na ako dito, doon po nagumpisa na hindi na ako inabutan ng income ng assawa ko. Hangagang sa nakapagsalita siya ng hindi maganda. Ngayon po, sumama ang loob ko. Ang ginawa ko po, gumawa po ako ng bahay ko, maliit na kubo dahil sinabi po niya kung hindi daw po sa akin, hindi siya magkakautang-utang. Kaya po sa tinitirhan ko, gusto pa po nila ako paalisin at kanila pa po daw yun. Pinagbabawalan ako na magtanim sa mga silong ng manga kasi daw po tatalian nya ng kalabaw. Yun pong pagkakuha ng lupa sa akin, ang sabi po nila (nasa) pangalan ng tatay nila. Ngayon po, wala daw po akong karapatan dahil sampid lang daw po ako sa kanila. Hindi ko na po nailaban dahil nga po wala po ako pinansyal (na kakayahan). At isa pa po, mag-isa lang po ako lumalaban. Yung asawa ko po naging kakampi niya mga kapatid niya.</p> |

It is apparent from the above interview extract that land rights have patriarchal orientation. There is a cultural understanding among the people involved that land ownership runs through male lineage. In the situation of the woman above, the husband has the right to retrieve her properties thinking that it belongs to him. He and his siblings also think that because the land originally belonged to their father, the woman as wife has no right to the land because she is not affiliated by blood. When other women were asked about land ownership, most of them who own land said that the legal ownership belongs to their husband because titles are named after the men. In another interview, I asked whether they are aware that land ownership should be conjugal. Even though they are aware of this concept, it seems acceptable to some that legal titles belong to their husbands. They have a strong belief that whatever belongs to the husband also belongs to them and will be inherited by their children even with the absence of legal documents protecting their rights. It can be surmised from their responses that land ownership is more of a cultural construct rather than a legal one.

Discussion

Understanding the literacy events where women farmers participate can give a glimpse of literacy practices and orientation of literacy in their society. It can be gleaned from the data and observations conducted in the study that women prioritize literacy practices that have direct contribution or link to their economic activities as farmers. In addition, certain literacy practices give them an advantage in livelihood, especially those that contribute to their knowledge about crops and planting. However, it is also evident that a lack of literacy skills, especially in the

domains of entrepreneurship and legal rights, can significantly minimize economic opportunities for these women.

The findings likewise indicate how literacy practices build social relationships among the participants and other members of society. Women are viewed as primary caregivers to their children and even grandchildren, overseeing their education and welfare. Literacy practices in the home domain are shared by different generations where women are expected to be the primary source of knowledge and skills. However, in the domain of agriculture, the role of women as source of knowledge is seen to be waning. It is either that children are no longer interested in farming or the parents do not want them to become farmers. Another threat to women's role as the primary source of knowledge at home is the rise of the Internet. Several times, women would comment that their children know more than they do because of access to the Internet and the ability to manipulate gadgets better. This condition displays a shifting power dynamic in society where individuals who have more access to data and the ability to interpret and use them can gain more power than those who do not (Pinney, 2020). In this new power-relations framework, women farmers would seem to have lost authority as sources of knowledge.

In the domain of community affairs and social relations, women share literacy practices with other women. They participate together in social and agricultural trainings and engage in discussions with one another. However, even if some experiences are shared, not all opportunities pertaining to literacy are observed equally. For instance, opportunities to be included in trainings also depend on strong links and ties these women have forged with local government officials. In the participatory discussions, some women commented on not being invited to such trainings, and they did not even know that such trainings exist. When asked about the system of invitation, they shared that for agricultural training, the Department of Agriculture prioritizes those who have land ownership. Usually, it is the male land owner (their husband) who is invited, and they only attend because the husband is not usually available. Hence, there are certain opportunities given to some and are denied to others because of lack of resources.

The narratives, responses to interview questions, and observations conducted in this study reveal how literacy practices are inextricably linked to social practices. They corroborate Barton and Hamilton's (2000) concept of literacy by manifesting the following features: (1) that literacy practices are truly social practices through the observation that literacy activities are practical approaches to achieving these women's varying social goals in different domains of society; (2) that different domains require different kinds of literacies and expect these women to play various roles; (3) that some literacy practices are patterned after long-established social and cultural practices; (4) that literacy practices are influenced by institutionally established power relations and that there are issues about who gains access to knowledge and what kinds of knowledge are acquired; and (5) that literacy practices are not constant but changing like the influence of emerging technologies.

It can be gleaned from the findings of the study that literacy, its presence or otherwise, is not the main factor in affecting women's lives, but the social factors that come along with it. The women are unquestionably skilled in what they do as farmers, but certain social structures inhibit the growth of more economic opportunities for these women. Hence, even if they become more skilled and more literate in farming, it cannot guarantee economic change in these women's lives. The same results were observed by Puchner (2003) in a study conducted among women in a rural community in Mali. She found that even when women developed their literacy (i.e., reading and writing), their life situations did not significantly improve. She argued that certain social structures are more influential in dictating the improvement of these women's lives than just literacy.

The significance of gender is apparent in the ways roles of women are observed within the different domains. Women's roles as the primary caregiver of children perpetuates traditional and stereotypical gender ideologies in which women take care of the home and men work in the fields. Only during the absence of the mother does a husband take the role of the primary caregiver, but this is only witnessed in very rare instances in rural communities such as the one studied here.

Women's participation in parents' meetings and social-development trainings further confirms the role of women in child-rearing.

The agricultural sector is still seen as a male-dominated profession. Even when women are skilled in planting crops and contribute to the family's livelihood through farming, most of these women do not consider farming as their profession. In fact, the Tagalog (local language) term for farmer, "*magsasaka*" is never used to refer to women. When asked how they are called, they said that they are only "*magbubukid*," planters of vegetables. Based on the interviews, terms did not really matter. The more prestigious term *magsasaka* is only attributed to men farmers whose main task is to produce rice. Rice is a culturally significant agricultural product because it is the main source of income in the province for generations. Hence, women's farming activities, although also contributing economically, are seen as less prestigious than the farming of rice. Men's farming literacy is regarded as superior to women's farming skills and knowledge. In an interview, one woman called the men "experts" of farming, and she even commented that farming is a job more suitable for men mainly because of their strength.

It can be deduced from the findings that women view their roles as natural and acceptable. Such a perspective works within a functional framework in which men and women divide tasks to uphold the different needs of the family. Problems arise when the marriage dissolves, and women also lose the rights only appropriated to them as wives of their husbands. The issue here is not the woman's lack of legal literacy. In fact, she is well aware of conjugal ownership, but the lack of financial resources to fight legally inhibits her to pursue her right to the land. Moreover, accepted cultural knowledge is seen as an obstacle for women to ensure their ownership through land titles or certificates. In agricultural societies such as theirs, it is a generally accepted idea that land ownership is passed on through male lineage as they perceive men as more fit to take care of agricultural lands. This is also related to the perceived expertise and physical strength of men in the area of agriculture.

Unconsciously, women participate in the maintenance of certain patriarchal knowledge structures. These knowledge structures are deeply embedded in institutional ideologies that try to maintain the status quo. Language itself is a manifestation of this gender-ideology structure through the use of different terms attributed to men and women as farmers. It is likewise evident in how agencies such as that of agriculture prioritize the participation of men in trainings related to farming, whereas the social agency targets women as participants in social-development seminars. This condition displays an example of how certain institutions have the power to decide who will receive information, what kind of information is given to whom, and how that information is transferred. Hence, trainings and seminars are not really about what these women need and want, but what the authorities think are good for them and the society. In her study, Robinson-Pant (2000) commented on how women's literacy trainings organized and taught by agencies do not really practically address women's needs. They only intend to maintain the dominant literacy and gender ideology, in which women develop their reading and writing skills so they can fulfill their roles as mothers and wives.

Conclusion

Women's literacy experiences may be best understood by analyzing the literacy practices and events they perform in their day-to-day activities. The literacy practices of the women farmers under study are observed to be deeply rooted in their social and economic environment, and literacy events vary according to what they want to achieve and what roles they play in the different domains of doing literacy. In some domains, women play the key role of being the primary caregiver and overseer of education and social values within the family and the community. However, their role as a significant source of knowledge among their children in activities such as farming and schoolwork is waning due to changing circumstances such as the rise of Internet technology and the decreasing interest of youth in farming. Further, it was observed how women

are more interested in participating in literacy events that have direct significance and contribution to their livelihood.

The analysis of power relations likewise reveals how certain issues within literacy are gender-influenced. First, the significance of gender is apparent in the ways roles of women are observed within the different domains. Women's role as the primary caregiver of children perpetuates traditional and stereotypical gender ideologies in which women take care of the home and men work in the fields. Second, the division of labor even in the field is also evident where men's farming skills are seen to be more prestigious and superior to women's. Accepted patriarchal beliefs (e.g., land ownership) are perpetuated in modern cultural societies, and women farmers view these situations and relations as natural and acceptable. The important issue here is not about women's lack of literacy skills in relation to their livelihood and survival, but their inability to overcome long-established, dominant cultural and social structures with their lack of power and resources.

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