Being Old and Poor: The Perceptions of Urban Poor Women and Challenges

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of older women about poverty and the hardships they encounter in their everyday lives. It delved into challenges that are important to stop them from being poor. Using the criteria of sex and age, nine older women, aged 50 to 80 years old, living in one of the poorest communities in the city of Manila, consented to participate in the study. A focus group discussion was the main method used to gather data which were subjected to content analysis. Results of the study show that participants perceive themselves as poor and characterize themselves as such because they lack knowledge, education, means to make a living, and decision-making support. The poor have to work in order to eat. They cannot have a secure job. They do not have survival skills because of old age. Money and livelihood are what they consider important. This is because women are the ones earning and solving problems for the family, take charge of the household budget and childcare. Their hardships stem from vices of family members such as drugs, gambling, and drinking. These vices result to family conflict, depletion of family income and dependence of children on parents. To the older women, what is most important for a person to get out of poverty is education. Next important is to have business and business capital. The rest include family planning, possessing qualities like industry, frugality, perseverance, and keeping away from vices. Faith in God is what makes them cope with the daily life ordeal.

Key words: ageing, gender, older women, poverty

Background

Poverty, gender and aging, are interconnected. In the Philippines, to be “poor” means that per capita income is less than P46 (approximately one US dollar) per day. There are those who are “food poor” who live on P32 (or 75 cents) daily, not even enough to meet the minimum 2000 calories per day (NSCB, 2012). Another defining feature of poverty is being squatters, residing on a property to which they have no right, title or lease. Many of them are living with and living from garbage by collecting, sorting and selling these for recycling. The garbage becomes the poor’s source of livelihood, food, and other basic needs. The risks are serious—living in this kind of fragile environment predisposes people to disease, and scavenging may bring them to permanent disability or even death due to accidents. Charcoal-making also puts their health at risk that comes from inhaling smoke from the burning wood.

Poverty among older women is the result of multiple inequalities that they experience during their lifetime because of their gender, class, and socio-economic status. Philippine literature have shown that the primary responsibility of women is in reproductive, unpaid household work, and caregiving. When they work outside the home to support their families, they...
earn less than men, and experience discrimination (Guerrero 1965; Mendez & Jocano 1975; Licuanan 1979; Lagmay 1983; UPCHE 1985). Gender situation negatively affects women’s power and independence. Ability to move about in public as needed, property ownership and inheritance, and to make important decisions, confidence and sense of self-worth may be restricted by current societal arrangements (WHO 2003). Their situation intensifies their poverty as they grow old, having the least access to food, income, health care and leisure. Through years of hard physical labor, poor nutrition, pregnancies, and childbearing and rearing, the deterioration of their health compromises their livelihood and the means to meet their needs (WHO 2008).

Beyond these inequalities, poor women enter their fifties and 60s in chronic illness compared to elderly men who suffer from acute conditions. Thus, although women live longer than men, many of these years may be spent with disability or illness (WHO 2008). It is hoped that this study will reveal areas of gender and age disparities and reflect priorities of older women who have experienced of living in poverty.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study aimed to explore the perceptions of older women about poverty and the hardships that they encounter in their everyday lives. It also looked into challenges that are important to stop them from being poor.

Methodology

The study was conducted in one of the poorest communities of scavengers and charcoal makers in the city of Manila after an ethics approval was obtained from the University of the Philippines Manila-National Institutes of Health. It was part of the bigger research project on “Assessing Development: Designing Better Indices of Poverty and Gender Equity” in which the Philippines was one of the six countries selected as study setting. Criterion sampling was used in the selection of participants. Using the criteria of sex and age, nine older women who gave their consent, participated in the study. Age criteria for the older group was adjusted to aged 50 and over owing to their context of poverty which makes them age prematurely, manifesting at relatively younger ages physical impairments, declining health, and decreasing productivity. Five of the participants were elementary undergraduates, while 3 were able to reach high school (grades 7 and 8). Majority were scavengers. Others worked as market vendor, water dealer and laundrywoman. Except for a widow who lived alone, the participants lived with their husbands, children and grandchildren. To explore the depth and capture their perceptions about being old and poor, focus group discussion (FGD) was the main method used to gather data on the following topics: constituents of poverty; hardships that are related to poverty and ageing; and, what is needed to get out of poverty. An interview was conducted with the oldest participant, 80 years old, who provided an extreme case albeit rich information about her decades of experiences living in hardships. A collegial relationship with the participants was maintained that facilitated data collection, recognizing them as experts and authorities of their own lives.

Data gathered were transcribed and processed using content analysis. Analysis of data included validation with the participants themselves to verify the information and ensure data accuracy and objectivity in representing the reality of their experience and situation.

Results

This section presents the context of the study and the key findings from the study - the perceptions of older women about being poor, the hardships they experience, and what they believe is needed to stop them from being poor.

The context of the study

Sitio Tulungan is located in Barangay X of the city of Manila. It has an atypical livelihood setting (in a garbage dump) but is typical of an urban poor community -- crowded, stinky, dirty and noisy. People belong to the poorest of the poor and in some corners of the place, there are those spending their time drinking alcohol and gambling.

It became a dumpsite in 2000. The Sitio has a land area of approximately 10 hectares with a population of around 8,500 comprising of 1,960 families (MDSW 2010). Local leaders said that theirs is a neglected place and possible eviction is their constant fear. People named their sitio, “Tulungan,” a Tagalog word that refers to helping each other.
The primary sources of income of the people are scavenging and charcoal making. Scavenging generally refers to gathering of garbage or trash that could be sold. Scavengers use a special pointed tool and segregate the items before selling their merchandise to a buyer who is from outside the Sitio. They earn 100 to 150 pesos on the average daily. Some families had built a ‘spot’, a dugout for use as a kiln in charcoal making. Charcoal making is a very slow process. The scrap woods are burned for 3 to 4 days under low fire. Then the charcoal is packed in plastic bags by workers and sold wholesale to a market retailer. Charcoal-makers earn 3,000 pesos weekly. A coal packer gets paid 40 pesos for eight hours of work.

Whereas women and men in Sitio Tulungan share some problems of ageing such as compromised health and diminishing incomes, older women are disadvantaged relative to older men as revealed by the findings that follow.

Why we are poor

The participants perceive themselves as poor and characterize themselves as such because they lack knowledge, education, means to make a living, and decision-making support. One participant says that another characteristic of poor people is having to work in order to eat:

“We need to work so we can have food on our table every day.” Another says: “If women will not work just like men, then that’s the end of them and they can’t go anywhere.”

No secure job and survival skills

Because of old age, the older women say they cannot have a secure job and do not have survival skills. An 80-year-old woman, who finished fourth grade and living alone, shares her story:

When I was still young, I earned about a hundred pesos a day. My husband was a trailer driver and he earned much. I was generous with people. For example, when a friend or neighbor was sick, I paid for the medical expense. When I became much older, I only earned 50 pesos a day. Today, I don’t go anymore to the Tambakan (dumpsite) as it is risky for me... When it’s time to eat, there’s nothing to eat. And what you want to eat, there’s none at all.

Lack of money

Money is very wanting for older women. They consider money as essential for almost everything one needs to do. This is because women also have to make a living to help augment their husbands’ meagre earnings and for solving financial problems for the family. They take charge of the household budget and it becomes a headache when money is hard to come by. For instance, Celia (not her real name) says that money is really needed to be able to buy water, as allowance for children in going to school, to buy rice and to pay for lighting.

What makes life hard for us

Vices and household conflicts

What makes life hard for older women stem from vices of family members such as drugs, gambling, and drinking. These vices result to family conflict, depletion of family income and dependence of children on parents. Fina complains:

“Even if the men have stable job but belong to a gang who drink alcohol and go home drunk, then you will have no more money since it’s all gone.”

There is also conflict and quarrelling within the household: “When your husband gets drunk and reaches home, he will start quarrelling you,” one participant quips.

Josie also discloses: “In the past, my husband was really a heavy cross to carry but I asked the Lord to change him. He was always drunk and would break things whenever he got drunk.”

Dependency of children and lack of spouse’s support

Children with vices still depend on their mother for food. One laments:

That’s why I scavenge for garbage almost every day because they all depend on me.” She says that financial problem makes life hard for them.

Another says she has no one to depend or rely on but herself: “It is difficult if you are the only one planning. Like in my case, even if I have a husband, I am the one who still think.”

Community resources to ease our hardships

With regard to how they perceive existing community resources, the participants state that these somehow help the poor get through hardships. There are public facilities...
like toilet, water, health services and market, while non-government organizations and faith-based organizations provide day-care services for preschool children. Private vendors supply water services and electric power for a fee. Women use water for cooking, washing clothes and dishes, and bathing of grandchildren. Women fetch water themselves or they stand in line and the male family members carry the buckets back home. The participants say that more women than men access toilet, market, day care, and health center; while more men access barangay services like dispute resolution and security. Men use electricity for activities like watching TV; women use it for doing household chores like washing clothes although very few own washing machine.

**What we need in order to get out of poverty**

To the older women, what is most important for a person to get out of poverty is education. Next important is to have business and business capital. The rest include family planning, possessing qualities like industry, frugality, perseverance, and keeping away from vices. They also mention values like unity, determination and cooperation.

Older women put premium on faith in God as a way to get through the hardships. “It must be God first because if there’s no God then you can’t acquire anything since everything comes from the Lord,” Lourdes asserts. “Even if you are poor here on earth you will be rich in heaven,” Josie assures her co-participants.

**Discussion**

Poverty denies people the right to have the most basic needs, opportunities and choices to make a decent living. In this study, both the scavengers and the charcoal makers share the daily experience of uncertainty about food, money, and schooling. However, while there is an opportunity for scavengers to earn something from garbage that is brought daily, there are days of zero income for charcoal makers the time they wait for the charcoal to be ready usually about three to four days. Due to low-levels of education and training, both women and men in poor communities perform manual and often difficult and dangerous labor such as scavenging to earn a living for their families and to support themselves. Employing physical strength, often the most vital asset of the poor, are reduced in old age.

However, older women are doubly disadvantaged because they are burdened by the stresses of their productive and reproductive roles which started from earlier years. Poor housing conditions, limited access to water and sanitation, unsafe neighbourhoods arising from environmental hazards, put an additional burden to women who are responsible for childcare, cleaning, washing and other household chores. Mudege and Ezeh (2009) argued, however, that women’s lifelong engagement in the domestic sphere can give them a ‘gender advantage’ over men in terms of adaptation to old age in the urban environment. The focus group discussions they conducted with community leaders in a Nairobi slum found that older men were perceived as idle and weak and incapable of caring for themselves as they were not socialized into the domestic sphere.

As women age, they can suffer from ill health, physical impairments, low self-esteem and insecurity. For those who live with their family, older women complain of supporting grown up children, some of whom are hooked on drugs. The situation is even more difficult for older women who live alone because they lack the necessary family support system.

Men and women use resources differently. Although both of them use common resources in the house, women are more inclined to use those that pertain to the maintenance of the household. Similarly, use of community resources tend to differ between men and women and this is often associated with their respective tasks and responsibilities performed until old age. In terms of accessing health services, Mudege and Ezeh (2009) found from an analysis of qualitative interviews conducted in two Nairobi slums that older women were quicker to get free health services than older men.

It appears that spirituality is an important dimension in these women’s lives. They use spirituality to find meaning in their life hoping that in the next life after, they will have richness. Their reliance on God is a source of comfort and relief from stress.

The prime importance older women participants invariably place on education suggests strategic thinking that this could be a more reliable means to get out of poverty compared to luck. Education that builds capability (for better jobs and bigger, regular income) is strategic because children would have better chances.

**Conclusion and Recommendation**

**What constitutes poverty.** For the older women, to be poor means not having enough money, adequate education and good job. Age is a factor that complicates poverty. Older women have more difficulty finding a job or have reduced ability to work hence money is hard to come
by. Although men are expected to work rather than women, the participants also see the need to work because of their poor economic situation. The combination of being female and old age are factors of vulnerability to poverty.

What makes life hard for older women. Being a woman is hard for them because they are expected to fulfill their responsibilities at home. When husbands and children do not do their part in contributing income to the household and instead engage in vices, life gets even harder for women. As they grow old, their children continue to depend on them for survival. They feel insecure about having no assets such as education and sufficient money that should keep them safe in the remaining years of their lives.

Things needed to stop an individual being poor. Education is what older women consider important to improve their lives. Having a good job or a business that will provide them enough money is also guaranteed to alleviate themselves from hardships. Qualities like unity, determination and cooperation are non-material strategies that can be relied on to survive. The poor should also have faith in God (money is only temporary) and perseverance (meaning, the poor should still work hard even if they already have the money).

Being poor, being old, and being women are the “triple risks” that participants in this study view themselves to be. Understanding poverty in old age needs to consider gender factors and differences as these impact on the lives of older women. Provision of programs, services and resources such as education, livelihood, housing, health care and decision-making support that reduce poverty and insecurity among women prior to old age might have long-term beneficial consequences. For poor older women who have no pension but have worked most of their lives in the home or informal sector, social security or income support must be provided to them by the government. For instance, the 4Ps (Programang Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino) should consider the provision of fund assistance not only to Filipino indigent children and pregnant women but to poor older women as well.

As there are very few researches that integrate gender into studies of poverty and aging, promoting research on the interrelationship among these three aspects should be encouraged. In such studies, the voice of older women must be included in research designs and methodologies. Furthermore, the underlying reasons for poverty and the processes that aggravate poverty in the life course of women need to be examined and addressed.

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