

Literacy for Survival: Literacy Experiences and Practices of Women in an Urban Community in Metro Manila, Philippines

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Abstract

Veering away from a traditional and functional view of literacy, this paper espouses a social literacy paradigm that focuses on actual practices of literacy within cultural groups and social institutions. This ethnographic study specifically intends to understand the literacy experiences and practices of women in an urban community located in the Philippine capital, Metro Manila. Through interviews and observations, findings revealed that these Filipino women possess literacy skills and engage in literacy practices to perform their roles in various domains of society effectively. Furthermore, literacy is also considered by these women as a tool for their and their families' survival in the modern urban jungle.

Key words

Women studies, social literacy, literacy practices, survival literacy, urban women

Introduction

Women and Literacy

We have come to a time when it is generally accepted in literacy studies that a more comprehensive understanding of literacy and its issues entails understanding gender and gender relations. In the definition adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2019), gender is more of a performance of roles and responsibilities done by men and women according to cultural norms and expectations. In other feminist theories, the term gender moves beyond the binary categories of men and women and includes all forms and means of practicing gendered identities (Mills & Mullany, 2011;

Mcelhinny, 2003). Both definitions are helpful in understanding the literacy studies of women in a particular context of society. First, it takes a knowledge of traditional gender roles to understand gender relations. In many societies, there is an observed division of roles between men and women, which is necessary for a social system to work. Such division of labor and roles are not necessarily divided equally, and it is usually the women who take the marginal or secondary roles, especially in a patriarchal-oriented society. These unequal gender relations can, therefore, translate into other areas of society, including inequality in literacy, access to knowledge, and opportunities for social and economic security. On the other hand, the second definition of gender as more fluid can bring us to the realization that since gender is not a fixed system, then men and women may also have varying social needs, including specific knowledge and skills that will help them do their particular roles effectively. Furthermore, gender as fluid, varied, and complex can also lead to an understanding that even different groups of women coming from various cultural and socio-economic backgrounds may also have differing literacy needs.

Chlebowka (1992) once mentioned the need for literacy educators and researchers to recognize “...women illiterates ... first and foremost as women, with all the specific connotations that this implies.” (p. 10). This is especially important in the context of a society where there is a division of roles. Historically, women have been viewed primarily as child bearers whose activities are mostly confined within the private or domestic sphere. In a way, this social division and expectation also limited women from participating in other social spheres like access to proper education, participation in political and civic activities, and participation in economic production other than those within the home. Hence, it is not surprising to know that about 73% or two-thirds of the non-literates worldwide are women (Robinson-Pant, 2014). This is why literacy is considered an empowering tool for women to gain access to knowledge and resources that have traditionally been denied to them so that women can use such resources for their economic and social development (Chlebowka, 1992; UNESCO Islamabad, 2007; Robinson-Pant, 2014).

In the Philippines, the literacy gap between men and women does not show a huge statistical difference. In fact, the latest data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (2020) shows that women even outscored men at 92.9 % versus Filipino men’s literacy rate at 90.2 %. Overall, the Philippines garnered a literacy score of 91.6 % in 2019. Anlagan et al. (2022) believe that a higher literacy rate among Filipino women is a positive result of the United Nations’ promotion of gender

equality and local Gender and Development (GAD) efforts in relation to it. However, despite the rather high literacy score and very small gender gap, this rate does not reflect the economic and social condition of men and women in the Philippines. The majority of Filipinos are still living in poverty, of which around ten million are women, falling behind sectors such as residents of rural areas and children (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2023). Considering that women are not a fully independent sector, such poverty conditions can be seen in a layered manner since these women also belong to sectors such as rural folks, peasants, or urban poor who reflect other faces of poverty. Women in the Philippines are found to be third of the poorest sectors in the country, with 9.99 million as stated in the latest Philippine statistics survey, following children (around 10 million) and people residing in rural areas (around 14 million) (PSA, 2023). Hence, in this country, the virtue of being a woman alone already increases the risk of economic poverty and social vulnerability.

According to Laguilles et al. (2015), poverty in the Philippines is seen to be caused by certain factors such as unemployment, the government's prioritization of foreign debts, trade liberalization, and privatization of government services. These factors, interspersed with a neoliberal model of the economy, led to numerous social insecurities in which joblessness and underemployment have become concrete and undeniable social realities. Consequently, this state of poverty and unemployment has pushed Filipinos, especially women, to take jobs in the informal sectors, leading to the vulnerability and precarity of their situation. Laguilles et al. emphasized that such informality of employment is a gendered phenomenon because of the observed overrepresentation of women working in these industries.

The facts stated above testify to how the Filipino women's situation is potentially different from the situation of other women from other social contexts. Hence, this study theoretically adopts a feminism of difference to look into how gender and certain gender relations in Philippine society affect the literacy situation in the country as well. It veers away from simplistic quantitative measures of literacy (i.e., literacy rate) and attempts to assess in a more ethnographic approach how gender, literacy, and poverty are working within the system of Philippine society that is impacted by third-world politics, neoliberal globalization, and continuing patriarchal ideologies.

Social Literacy

This study is an offshoot of a previous study titled *Women and Literacy: Exploring*

the Literacy Experiences and Practices of Women Farmers in the Philippines (Topacio, 2023). In that paper, I explored women's literacy practices in a farming community in Nueva Ecija, a rice farming community in the Philippines. Also, using an ideological and social literacy perspective, it was found that women's literacy practices are deeply rooted in their social and economic environment. They are patterned within Philippine agricultural societies' long-established socio-cultural practices and existing patriarchal structures. Particularly, the literacy events these women farmers engage in always had something to do with the gendered roles they play in different domains of their society. In this present paper, I am interested in knowing how literacy practices observed among women farmers in a rural community are related to or can be different from the literacy practices of underprivileged women in an urban setup.

Like the previous study, the present one also stems from the concept of ideological literacy, which opposes the Western view of literacy that has the tendency to be universalized. For one thing, the concept of literacy adopted in this study does not solely refer to the functional literacy of reading and writing but also includes other forms of knowledge, including Indigenous and culturally specific ones, as a means for individuals or a community to achieve their goals. In the social literacy paradigm, knowledge of doing things resides not only in the mind or the cognitive sphere but is seen as actual practice by social groups within communities and institutions. Furthermore, practices of literacy are always connected to and influenced by the specific socio-political and material conditions of these cultural groups and communities of practice (Mills, 2015; Gee, 2015; Barton & Hamilton, 2000). In the traditional discourse of literacy, the concept of being literate is often likened to the concept of being educated (Robinson-Pant, 2004). Literacy is traditionally seen as a product of formal education, whereas a social perspective sees literacy as a product of culture, social events, and other practices in various domains and institutions of society and not just formal education. The social practice of literacy also resonates with the ideological approach of literacy (Street, 2003), which does not only involve reading and writing but also ways of doing things and ways of thinking and believing that are always integrated with other social and cultural practices. Social literacy and an ideological approach to literacy analysis allow this study to accommodate new definitions and even categories of literacy specific to a particular cultural group. Since the key participants belong to a peripheral social group (women in impoverished urban communities), there is a huge possibility that new perspectives on literacy would emerge from this discourse.

In this paper, I would also like to argue that social practices of literacy are linked to survival. To borrow Bhola's (1990) concept, survival is not purely a physical phenomenon but also considers other aspects of being like social, cultural, political, and economic. Furthermore, Bhola argues that survival in all these domains is intrinsically linked to literacy, although his perspective of literacy reflects more on the traditional concepts of reading and accessing mainstream knowledge as a pathway to individual and social development. In this paper, I aim to focus more on how the social practice of literacy, which are cultural and social ways of doing things, are shaped by the people and the community's need to survive in the present world.

Recent studies on women and literacy tend to focus on themes such as health, digital, and financial literacies. In literacy and health studies, it is common to link women's health literacy, which means understanding and accessing health-related information, to developing women's health-promoting attitudes and behavior, consequently also improving their physical health (Hu et al., 2023; Bandyopadhyay et al., 2022; Budhwani et al., 2022; Eser & Çelik, 2022; Meldgaard et al., 2022; Yusefi et al., 2022). Likewise, digital literacy (Álvarez-Pérez et al., 2022; Mahmood et al., 2022; Sujarwo et al., 2022) and financial literacy research (Zahid et al., 2023; Aguiar-Díaz & Zagalaz-Jiménez, 2022; Andriamahery & Qamruzzaman, 2022) delve into the relations of increasing literacy to development of competencies and empowerment among women, mostly from middle-class groups. Among these researches, there is a common discernment on how such literacies can increase women's chances of physical and social survival through the acquisition of particular knowledge or skills. However, like what has been emphasized in ideological and social literacy, women's studies should be more careful in understanding empowerment and suggesting what can be empowering for certain groups of women. Robinson-Pant (2014), for instance, expressed her concern about the tendency of some research to take a rather homogenous perspective of women, therefore universalizing also their situation. Most of the studies on women and literacy cited above either center on the middle-class utilization of literacy or espouse a more general approach to literacy as solely reading, writing, and arithmetic. It is important to understand that adopting a social literacy perspective should also recognize that women may have varying literacy needs and practices. As of now, there is still a dearth of research on women's literacy, especially among marginalized women's groups in the Philippines.

Through an ideological and social literacy perspective, the general objective of the paper is to understand women's practices in literacy, particularly among adult,

urban, and under-schooled women in the Philippines, which may assist in developing a more empowering culture-based literacy program. Specifically, the study aims to (1) explore the different domains of literacy and literacy practices that these women engage in and (2) understand their views of literacy and how literacy is used as a survival tool in their daily lives. Ultimately, this research intends to address the gap in studies that consider the literacy practices of women in impoverished communities in Metro Manila, Philippines. By considering peripheral communities, marginalized women in the country's capital can be given representation in research, thereby decreasing their invisibility in scholarly discourse.

Methods

Design

The methodological framework of this study is based on qualitative design. In particular, it used ethnographic methods to explore women's lived experiences in urban communities in Metro Manila. Following ethnographic traditions, this paper's methodology relied on the recording of events and human activities within a specific social world to arrive at an understanding of how people live in a community. Adopting a social literacy paradigm, human activities are observed through the literacy practices and the actual texts people in the community use to achieve their social goals. Triangulation techniques (i.e., interviews, questionnaires, observation field notes, and other participatory methods) were used in the study to explore the phenomenon in question, to increase the validity of observations through comparison of notes and data accumulated through different means, and to allow a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon in question. However, this paper also carefully and consciously incorporates an understanding of modern issues on ethnography, veering away from a reductionist approach to research. In this light, Smith's (2005) feminist institutional ethnological framework guides and informs processes of analysis and interpretation, embracing the idea that different cultures have different ways of understanding the world, and such a view questions the validity of 'objective' knowledge. Hence, the literacy categories and events presented here in this study are understood to be specific to a particular group's conditions and do not necessarily define a universal description of literacy, and that categories are flexible and susceptible to changes and modifications.

Subjects and Study Site

The participants were women from the urban community of Barangay Maricaban and Malibay, situated in Pasay City, Metro Manila. The two barangays (the smallest government unit in the Philippines) are considered poor communities and illegal settlement areas in Metro Manila, where houses and other establishments stand close to each other. The barangay, as a local government unit, is headed by a barangay captain. Within the two barangays, there is a church which is also used as a center for community activities. The congregation of religious nuns residing in a convent near the two communities is also recognized by the residents and the local government unit (LGU; i.e., barangay and city) as community leaders.

Initially, there were 20 women, ages ranging from 30-64 years old, who participated in the group discussions. All of them possess basic literacy skills in reading and writing¹, although most of them (90%) are under-schooled or did not finish basic education. Their declared monthly salary is less than 5,000 pesos per month or around 90 US dollars.² Most of them declared that they do not have a fixed income and get their earnings from part-time or temporary jobs and occasional business opportunities. All of them are also married and considered as primary caregivers to their children or grandchildren. Prior to the research, these women were invited through the mediation of their religious sisters to attend a reading and literacy program for parents and their children. Their willingness to participate in the project was confirmed during their attendance at the initial meeting. However, the main and more detailed interviews were only conducted among five women selected from the bigger group. The selection criteria include: those who are 30-40 years of age, under-schooled, have experience working outside their homes, and still taking care of dependent children. The five participants were also selected based on their willingness to participate and share their experiences through video and audio recording, as well as their vast array of experiences in their community events.

¹ According to Philippine Statistics Authority (2013), basic literacy is “the ability to read, write, [sic] and understand simple messages in any language or dialect.” (Table 3E3E4140)

² The Philippine Statistics Authority declared that the poverty threshold for the year 2023 is PhP 13,873 per month. This means income below this threshold categorizes the household as ‘poor’ (terminology as used in the reports).

Data Measures and Data Collection Procedure

To collect data, monthly site visits were conducted over a span of five months. Data were mostly collected through participative methods such as word café (a focus group activity that resembles an informal social talk over coffee and pastries) and other participatory activities such as semi-structured interviews and small group talk. Sharing experiences was mostly done verbally, but the participants were also encouraged to use diagramming tools. Questionnaires, observations, and field notes were also used as sources of data. Questionnaires were used to extract the participants' profiles and demographic data, such as the number of family members, income level, and questions pertaining to reading activities in the household, such as the number of books and priority given to reading as a family activity. The questionnaire's main objective is the profiling of the participants, while the interviews remain to be the primary basis of data for this research. The questionnaires were written in Tagalog, the local language, and had an English translation. More detailed narratives about the subjects' particular experiences with literacy were extracted from the interview data.

For ethical considerations, the women were informed of their rights as participants in the research process. It was explained how the activities are all voluntary and that they have the right to withdraw their participation at any time during the research process. The participants signed consent forms written in the local language to signify their willingness to participate in the research. Prior to the data collection, the research proposal was also reviewed and approved by a certified ethics group committee of a university in Metro Manila, Philippines.³

Data Explication and Mode of Analysis

The data accumulated data from interviews were transcribed and coded. Thematic analysis was used to extract categories for the type of literacy practices and the domains in which they were practiced. In the coding stage, emerging and similar themes were identified. To lessen the subjectivity of the data interpretation, reflexive methods such as reflection, field notes, consultation with colleagues, and inter-coding were conducted. Although this research is a stand-alone project, the community visits were done by a group of researchers, each one researching different aspects of literacy in the community. The consultation with colleagues in-

³ Ethics approval granted by the Philippine Normal University (REC Code 02142023-59)

volved discussion of experiences and comparison of observation notes during community visits, which often focuses on general observations of community practices and interactions. Inter-coding involved asking another researcher in the field of literacy to validate the categorization (types of literacy events, texts, and domains) extracted during the analysis.

Findings

The analysis of women's literacy practices in this research was patterned after the concept of social literacy of Barton and Hamilton (2000). In the framework, literacy practices are defined as "general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon in their lives" (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 7). The practice of literacy includes traditional concepts of reading, writing, and arithmetic but also includes other skills or ways of doing things to establish a particular social or personal goal. Likewise, the practice is not limited only to ways of doing but also considers attitudes, feelings, and social relationships of the people involved in the literacy practice.

Literacy events happen within a literacy practice. These are the more observable events and activities in which people engage and are characterized by the use of "written text, or texts, central to the activity, and there may be talk around the text" (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 8). Literacy events are more specific contexts where there are specific goals to be accomplished. Hence, in trying to understand the literacy practices of the women participants involved in this study, it was deemed necessary to look into the literacy events they engage in, their roles in these events, their purpose for participating, and the kinds of skills or knowledge they use or need to be able to participate. It is also important to recognize that not all literacy practices are the same for these women. There may be changes in roles, goals, and even perspectives depending on which domain they navigate.

The following table shows the literacy events in which women in an urban community in Metro Manila participate, including their corresponding domains, texts used for the practice of literacy, and the reasons for the women's participation in those events.

Table 1.
Literacy Events Participated by Women in an Urban Community

Domain of Participation	Literacy Event	Text	Reasons for Participation
Home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching young children reading, writing, and arithmetic • Teaching children household chores • Values formation: i.e., teaching children self-sufficiency, respect for elders, and the value of hard work • Nursing sick family members • Cooking/baking • Urban gardening • Budgeting money for household needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • textbooks • writing materials • electronic gadgets like cell phones and tablets • medicine packets and doctor's instructions • recipe books/articles • knowledge passed on through tradition (gardening) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To prepare their children for formal education • To train their children how to be independent • To pass on social values to the younger generation • To take care of their family's basic needs, health, and nutrition
Personal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading for pleasure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • magazines • social media feeds, posts, and articles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To read for one's leisure and self-growth
Religious/Spiritual and Other Church Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading the bible/reading for spirituality • Attending group sharing sessions • Preaching • Reflecting (either mental or through writing/journaling) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bible and other religious materials (devotionals) • writing materials • online meeting applications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To practice spirituality
Work and Entrepreneurship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading instructions • Attending seminars as a job requirement • Technical know-how (specific to jobs like bookkeeping, simple accounting, operating CCTVs, candle-making, and baking) • Using gadgets and social media • Selling goods to clients • Managing money for business purposes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • instructional texts • seminar posters and visual aids • accounting books • calculators • gadgets, social media applications, and texting/messaging applications • knowledge passed on through tradition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To gain access to economic opportunities • To solve the financial needs of the family • To practice their own personal hobbies

Community Life and Social Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attending group seminars (i.e., leadership training, anger management, and mental health, skill-building, health, and disaster-preparedness • Looking after other's children • Organizing community activities • Participating in activities spearheaded by either the church or the LGU 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • seminar visual aid, articles in brochures, and posters • knowledge passed on through tradition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To gain access to information that can develop their individual selves and the community • To help the community and show their support to other women and • To show gratitude to the church and the local government (barangay)
Social and Natural Disaster Survival	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading signs for survival • Reading the news, current events information, and other disaster-related information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • signs or signages (i.e., street signs, rules, laws, directions, etc.) • newspapers • social media feeds and posts • official infographics from government agencies like rainfall warning guides and earthquake drill guide 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To know important information for their family's and community's safety

The table above presents the domains of literacy observed in this study, which are home, personal, work and entrepreneurship, community life and social relations, and social and natural disaster survival. The domain of the home has always been regarded as women's space because of their role in childbearing and rearing. In anthropological studies, it was frequently observed that there is a division of labor traditionally existing in societies in which the women take care of the household, and the men work in more public spheres of the domain (Philipps, 2003). This is also apparent in the Philippine society, where women's labor in the household is not regarded as 'work' but more of an 'obligation,' making it count as unpaid labor work (Ibanez, 2022). In the present study, such a situation is still observable among the women participants in the urban community. Based on their narratives, most of these women wake up as early as 4 o'clock in the morning to start their household tasks and continue their labor until the evening before going to bed.

In the domain of the home, it was also observed that some literacy events are regarded as part of the obligation of the women in their household. For example, cooking is a skill that allows women to perform their roles as primary caregivers to family members. Putting food on the table is actually a complex task of following recipes, counting nutrients, buying or raising (urban gardening) the ingredients, and proper budgeting to ensure the family's food security at all times. The women claimed that budgeting is especially a hard task when the family income is not often enough, so they had to find effective ways and means to ensure their family's needs and health with their trifling budget. In an interview, the women recounted how reading is also important in reading new recipes and knowing the nutritional values of the food they prepare. Some women also claimed that their knowledge of urban gardening is an effective means of cutting down on food budgets. Unfortunately, urban living spaces are small, so they can only grow what they can in small plant pots; these primarily consist of leafy green vegetables, tomatoes, and small fruits. Although some women claim that urban gardening is such a great help in their food needs, not everyone can do the task. Most of the women who do urban gardening are from the older generation who were raised in rural areas before moving to the urban community. This practice is not being passed on to the younger generation because the older women claim that the young ones are either not interested or do not have the natural skills or "green thumb" to raise crops effectively, especially with limited resources such as soil, pots, and other gardening materials. Additionally, there were no efforts from the LGU (local government unit) or community leaders to promote urban gardening.

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. However, this is also a domain that is observed to interact 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.

The teaching of reading, writing, and arithmetic, including teaching children to speak English words, is regarded as an important obligation of the women in the household. With this role, they have no qualms, and they do so willingly because they believe in the importance of reading and knowledge to either prepare their children for formal education or train them as better members of the community

and society. Together with the teaching of reading, women are also the primary tutors for their children in doing household chores and teachers of social values. Several times in the interviews, the women emphasized the importance of values formation in raising their children, and the values they see as important are respect for elders, self-sufficiency, and diligence. Women are seen as primary trainers for their children in all aspects of their preparation for society: cognitive, physical, and social. When asked if the fathers of the children have a role in this training, they claimed that they only do it on rare occasions either to discipline them about wrongdoing or just to give children trivial reminders, such as always remembering to listen to their parents. The women claimed that this is because the primary obligation of the father is to provide for the family's financial needs. It is interesting to note that although there is an observed gendered division of parental roles in the household, women do not apply gender discrimination among their children when they train or teach them. For example, both boys are trained to do the same amount and type of household chores as the girls in the family. When asked why, the women said that doing chores is an important skill even for boys because when they grow up and get married, they expect their sons to help their wives with housekeeping, especially after the wife's childbirth. The following is an excerpt from the interview showing one woman's opinion on shared housework:

Excerpt 1:

E1 (Translated to English):

In the past, they would say that men are tasked to earn a living, while the women take care of the household. But nowadays, they should help each other out. Men and women alike should know how to do then laundry. Men should help their wives do the laundry too. It is because nowadays, women had to work (earn a living) also.

While it can be deemed from the narration in E1 that there is a clear effort to destabilize the gendered division of labor inside the home. It was also observed in the interviews that men had more opportunities and the mobility to seek jobs outside their community since they had fewer responsibilities in taking care of their children and the household. Women, on the other hand, can only take part-time jobs near their homes (or do business within their homes, such as baking) so they can juggle tasks between work and household during the day. Hence, women have lesser mobility and job opportunities because of their assigned roles in the household.

The personal domain was added to the list of categories because some observed

literacy practices were not related to home- or community-related obligations. In discussing the importance of literacy and reading in their lives, the women noted that reading is not the same as studying (or formal education) because there are reading activities for personal interests and leisure. In addition to this, they also claimed that knowing how to read does not make one educated since the latter is something associated with formal schooling. In this domain of literacy practice, women usually engage with texts such as magazines and social media materials.

The domain of religious practice and spirituality also occupies a major space in women's lives and literacy practice. However, it was observed that the women's levels of devotion to religious practice differ from one another. The 'more devoted' ones claimed that they read the Bible every day and reflect on the word of God. Aside from the obligatory Sunday mass, they also attend group-sharing activities, prayer groups, and other church activities. The others who are less devoted to their religion seem to join church activities for other reasons, such as camaraderie, as a form of respect and gratitude to the nuns who help their community, and as a sort of obligation to their community rather than the religion itself. Nevertheless, no matter what level of devotion they embrace, all of them agree that literacy, such as reading skills, is important in the practice of their religion as it allows them to participate fully in the various church activities. The personal domain of practicing literacy is deemed important by the women in the community. Aside from the need to practice spirituality, it is a means for them to mentally and emotionally survive the burdens of their everyday lives. As one woman recounted, her poverty and the sickness in her family were enough to drive her mentally insane. She recalled how she is sometimes frustrated about her life situation, but being able to participate in church activities makes her feel grateful for the life she has.

The domain of work and entrepreneurship is a space where women practice literacy to gain access to economic opportunities or gain extra income for their family's needs. Although fairly knowledgeable in certain skills, all the women who participated in the interview session were only doing part-time work at the moment or had experience doing part-time work in the past. Lack of skills is not the primary obstacle to acquiring a full-time, stable job or a sustainable source of income. In fact, the women claimed to have basic knowledge in reading and arithmetic even though most of them did not finish elementary school or high school. They also learned entrepreneurial skills like baking, candle-making, bookkeeping, and online selling either through seminars offered by their local city government, barangay, or the church or learned through knowledge passed on through family tradition. Despite their skills, the women claimed that doing a full-time job was difficult for

them because they had to take care of their children and sick family members. Most of their part-time job sites are actually those that are very accessible and near their homes. Additionally, doing business is very challenging because of the lack of capital and the tremendous labor they have to go through, especially when they do business on their own. In the next excerpt, one of the women recalled during the focus group discussion the difficulties of managing a home-based rice cake business:

Excerpt 2:

E2 (Translated to English):

Interviewee A: It is a difficult procedure to bake rice cake. It is very tiring. Some rice cakes are easier to bake but some are really hard. You have to check them while they baking by the minute, or else it will be a failure. So you really have to be careful during the procedure.

Interviewer: So this means even if you know the process and you have the capital, but if you do not have the time to do all the stages of the process by yourself, it is difficult for you?

Participant B: And also when no one buys from you.

Participant A: Even if I have the capital, but if I will do everything, my body will eventually give up.

In December 2022, the women also recounted how the church provided them with a seminar and capital for a candle-making business through the initiative of a congregation of nuns in their area. The women claimed it was a success during the holiday because they did not have to worry about the capital, the resources, and the marketing part since the nuns from the congregation provided these needs. The income they earned from the business greatly helped them meet their family's needs, especially in buying medicine for themselves and their sick family members. However, such business is not sustainable since the demand is only high during the holidays, and they cannot be left doing the business alone without the assistance of the nuns. The biggest challenge for them is marketing the products since they do not have any connection outside their community. Hence, it can be deduced that the limitations of these women in pursuing a successful livelihood are not primarily the lack of knowledge and skills but other auxiliary and external factors such as lack of capital, lack of mobility, lack of support from local government, and lack of organizational needs.

In the domain of community life and social relations, it was observed that the women participants were most active. In fact, all women interviewed showed full

volunteerism in participating in the different activities organized either by the church or the local government. They are active in attending various kinds of seminars, like leadership training, anger management and mental health, skill-building, health and disaster-preparedness, among others, and active in co-organizing church activities such as prayer groups, catechisms, festivals of saints, and the like. Another notable community activity is how parenting is extended beyond the unit of the family. For instance, several of the women claimed that value formation is the responsibility of all elders in the community and not just the parents. Moreover, one of the women claimed other mothers in the community helped her greatly in looking after her children when she and her husband had to work and they had no one else in the family who could care for the children. In an urban community in Metro Manila, such an arrangement is not surprising since the houses these families occupy are closely built with each other, barely leaving enough space in between households. Thus, the structural features of the community make it easy for one family to know what is happening in its neighbor's vicinity, including the ease of looking after somebody else's children.

The last domain of literacy, which is social and natural disaster survival, is one of the interesting themes that emerged from this study because it is not a domain observed in my last study among the women farmers in a rural community in the Philippines (Topacio, 2023). In this present research, several times, the women talked about the importance of literacy or reading as a tool for survival in society. First, they claimed that reading is important to acquire jobs they need to earn a living; second, reading is a means to acquire vital information such as traffic signs for their safety and to avoid getting lost in the complex urban cityscape of Metro Manila; and lastly, learning reading is a way for them to upgrade their social positions and get away from the shame of being labeled "illiterate" or "uneducated." It is also interesting how the women claimed that being informed on natural disaster survival is an important aspect of urban living. Because of the closely knit structure of their buildings and the congestion of their community, natural disasters are most likely to happen, such as the quick spreading of fire and the speedy rise of rain floods. The community is situated beside a river, which creates a higher possibility of flooding in the area. Hence, fire trucks cannot easily access the place during fire emergencies. The women narrated that information from the LGU seminars and information taken from social media, such as the Philippine standard rainfall warning and typhoon signals, are important information in helping them survive such disasters. However, they also noted that some survival knowledge is not learned during seminars alone but is a product of actual experience and com-

munity traditions. The following excerpt shows a narration of how community knowledge and shared efforts have been necessary for the urban dwellers to overcome disaster in their community:

Excerpt 3:

Participant A: When there is a minor fire, we use the water from the sewers instead of the fire hose (which they learned from the seminar). The hose sometimes malfunction because of the holes made by the rats. When there is fire (and you cannot use the hose), you will just remember to use the wet rags instead to kill the fire.

Interviewer: So there are also helpful information you got from the seminar.

Participant C: Yes. Especially that the community is prone to fire.

Participant B: In our case, there is always fire in our community but they never spread (to a dangerous level). We help each other to fight it. It does not spread widely like in other communities that go down with fire. In our community, we help each other, and do not just give up. We share our efforts. Through God's mercy, the fire has not consumed us yet.

Interviewer: When you say you help each other, what do you exactly do?

Participant B: Through *bayanhan* (a Filipino term that means spirit of communal unity and cooperation). We carry pails, fetch water, pass the pails with water from one person to another (until they kill the source of fire).

Participant D: It is an automatic reaction among the people in our community when there is fire.

Participant B: Someone will call everyone who is young and able. They will go down the river to fetch water. Then pass it on from one person to another.

Based on the interview, it can be construed that knowledge of community survival like overcoming flood and mitigating the spread of fire, is not solely based on individual knowledge and not just a product of formal training. Community efforts, traditional knowledge, and even social values like the Filipino 'bayanhan' (a Filipino concept roughly translated as 'spirit of cooperation') are seen as more important factors in mitigating disaster and ensuring survival in economically-challenged urban communities.

Discussion

How do the women view and value literacy in their lives? In this study, it has been observed that the women view literacy as (1) knowledge of how to do things in various aspects of life and (2) social values and community participation. Their participation in various domains of society is crucial to their and their families' survival, and literacy is a skill that guides them in navigating within these social spheres.

In line with this, they recognize reading skills as (1) a social prestige (model for the younger generation and as a way to avoid social discrimination). It is especially important for these women to avoid people who seek advantage of them. Several

times in the interviews, they expressed how reading empowers them to protect themselves from those who want to abuse or exploit them in various ways. Also, they see reading as (2) a tool for survival - reading helps them avoid getting lost in the city and perform other social roles and obligations. Furthermore, being able to read information pertaining to natural disasters increases their awareness and chance for survival in the complicated and threat-infused urban jungle.

Recently, with the new development in the discourse on women and literacy, the promotion of literacy among women emphasizes the attainment of gender equity and women's rights to challenge the assumption that women and girls only need to be educated so that they can take better care of their families and children, or to be more efficient contributors in the workforce (Robinson-Pant, 2004). Although individual practices of rights and freedom echo the women's literacy practices within the personal and spiritual domains, it can be deemed that most of their practices of literacy are still influenced by their goals of raising their children and ensuring the survival of their families rather than reflecting a more individual practice of rights and freedom. Even in the entrepreneurial domain, women noted that their desire to increase their business skills is related to the belief that such skills can contribute to their families' economic stability. Hence, the empowerment that arises from their discourse is related to the empowerment of families and not only the individual self.

Another important point of discussion is how literacy, as the ability to read and access information, is not always equated to the empowerment of women, as shown in some studies (Mahmood et al., 2022; Sujarwo et al., 2022). As observed in this study, the women in the community are equipped with the necessary skills needed to start business ventures but do not have the resources to sustain them. Entrepreneurial stability becomes challenging because of structural inequalities present in their condition, like lack of access to capital, time constraints (because they also had to do household work), and impossible workload (they usually do all business tasks without staff or help), and limited access to a wider market. In the study of Andriamahery and Qamruzzaman (2022), it was observed that financial and entrepreneurial literacy are only effective as a pathway to women's empowerment if resources are available for entrepreneurial sustainability.

Furthermore, the link between human survival and literacy is an important question in this discussion. It is a widely accepted belief that literacy increases the chance of survival, not merely pertaining to physical survival but also to the social, cultural, and economic aspects. Just like what Bhola (1990) once argued, survival is "... not mere existence but a life of acceptable quality", that is, a life not denied of

“political freedom, economic fairness, social acceptance, and personal fulfillment” (p. 3). For instance, in a study conducted by Berhane et al. (2002), it was reported that literacy is a significant factor in survival among Ethiopians living in poverty. While this kind of survival has become the focus of most literacy studies today, we should not also forget the fact that many impoverished communities in the world are still struggling with ‘mere’ survival. As exemplified by the women in the urban community used as the locale for this study, there is a clear need to re-emphasize literacy skills that serve as tools in surviving the threats of real disasters in their community. Furthermore, it is important to note that survival knowledge is not just an individual effort to acquire information but a kind of community knowledge that can only be achieved through joint efforts and cooperation of the people in the community.

In the 2019 Philippine statistics survey, Metro Manila or the National Capital Region (NCR) garnered the highest literacy rate (per region) in the country, with a score of 96.5%. This may not be contradictory to what has been observed among the women who participated in the study. These women are mostly under-schooled or lack basic education, but they display efficient functional literacy skills like reading, writing, and arithmetic. Aside from the basic literacy skills, the women are also observed to possess other vital knowledge and skills that help them survive their daily lives in the urban community. However, these women remain in poverty, which includes the risks of food insecurity and natural disasters brought about by their urban environment. This is a reminder that assessing literacy in any context should not rely on statistical evidence alone but should also include understanding the social-related processes that affect literacy and its development (Stromquist, 2016; Robinson-Pant, 2014). These socially related processes of literacy can be observed through literacy practices and events that are culturally- and community-based.

Conclusions

The paper focuses on a social perspective of literacy, taking into consideration the literacy experienced by Filipino women dwelling in an urban area. Literacy practices were observed through literacy events these women participated in, the texts they used during participation, and their reasons for participation. Based on the findings of this qualitative inquiry, it was found that women participate in literacy practices that ensure their personal and families’ well-being and survival.

Similar to other studies that acknowledge the significant role of literacy in sur-

vival, this present study also recognizes the importance of particular knowledge and skills on the survival of women in the community. The survival pertained here is twofold: one refers to the literal survival of human beings in societies pervaded with threats and dangers from the natural and social environment, and the other refers to what Bhola (1990) labeled as the “cultural and symbolic” (p.3) survival in which humans not only aspire for mere survival but also for a quality and dignified kind of life defined by economic and social security. The women who participated in this study aspire for both kinds of survival and see literacy as a powerful tool in overcoming the challenges of their situation, such as food insecurity, economic instability, and threats to the natural environment. Despite their impoverished situations, the women have constantly found ways to solve their problems, as evidenced in the literacy practices they engage in, from practical solutions such as financial budgeting, household management, entrepreneurial ventures, and urban farming to more personal, spiritual, and communal means of grappling with their situations. It is also an important finding to note that literacy is not just an individual knowledge, skill, or activity, but as shown through the constant practice of *bayanihan*, the women showed a different perspective of literacy which is based on and activated by communal knowledge and tradition.

The communal aspect of literacy also goes to show that these women, despite their wealth of different survival skills, cannot just thrive on their own. Necessary support from the local government units (i.e., barangays and city governments), community leaders, and other members of the community is needed to support these women in their endeavors. For instance, seminars that teach certain entrepreneurial skills will not work if there are no sustainable business programs in place that will help these women manage their time, finances, and resources. Hence, literacy programs and other similar seminars should not only achieve short-term goals that stop at the individual knowledge level but adopt broader perspectives on how certain knowledge and skills can work within the context of these women’s particular situations. If literacy programs recognize the role of literacy and the specific threats and challenges that these women face, then such programs can lay down better opportunities for their empowerment.

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