

“You’re labor that helps... with no need for pay.” Qualitative researcher insertion and accompaniment in community life

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Qualitative researchers carrying out scientific studies, particularly in small communities, are initially viewed as external agents, almost unknowns. A comprehensible presentation of the research project to participants, authorities and other community members helps to establish confidence bonds (Taylor & Bogdan 1987) that allow a better understanding of the research problem. When rapport has been established in the fieldwork, community and researchers dialogue to contribute for opened spaces in their relationship. Furthermore, opportunities and challenges need to be identified to understand their influence on the research. In this paper we present our experience in a coastal community in which we studied the empowerment of 30 adult women who work in the coastal lagoon, a traditional male sphere. Fieldwork implied total immersion and accompaniment of participants in community life, family and group activities. We applied techniques such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews, surveys and focus groups. Our understanding of the women’s empowerment was based on the rich data we collected, as well as for the accompaniment of them in their daily activities. This research was settled up in a collaborative process, which involved mutual learning and satisfaction

I. THE RESEARCHER DOING PARTICIPATORY OBSERVATION

Studies done within the rural and coastal areas of Yucatan state, Mexico such as by Gavaldón (2004) and Rendis (2003) have pointed out that exists less access to opportunities related to health, education, housing, food and above all, less diversification of family’s livelihoods for women that affect positively on the family and community wellbeing and development of empowerment. Under those shortcomings, women, and other household members, often feel the necessity to work towards improving their life and family by creating spaces which allow them to mitigate social inequality and poverty, develop different livelihoods and influence the social, educational and health policies that affect them (Perez 2001). In this sense, to achieve knowledge about how people, mainly women, under a limited context reach this welfare

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inside their lives, the researcher essentially has to do a full immersion within such a context. Furthermore, the understanding of certain contextual conditions and the development of a participatory way of involvement with people from the community require the analysis of certain issues and establishment of agreements by both sides the researchers and participants.

One of these imperative issues retaken within the qualitative research has been the roll of the researcher and the relationship built with the participants' subjects in a study. Denzin and Lincoln (2000a) have asserted, on the one hand, the qualitative researcher is able to produce a deep understanding of a phenomenon through the construction of a mixture of experiences and images from a determined research context. On the other hand, these same authors affirm the researcher understands and analyzes the own representations more than the experience itself (Denzin & Lincoln 2000b). Considering these both postures, the directed observation of either culture or a particular phenomenon within a community studied by the researcher has been supported as an important technique that allows having a whole understanding of such aspects.

Moreover, Angrosino and Mays de Perez (2000) have supported the named 'naturalistic observation'. Because people behaviors and the settings are observed by the social scientists, these authors have emphasized the naturalistic observation as a way to gain better production of knowledge about the context studied. In addition, Wiesenfeld (2000) assert that the roll of the researcher should contribute to share dialogically life experiences with the participants and learn how these give meanings to those experiences. In addition, it is required the prevalence of mutual respect and reflexive-based dialog between researcher and informant.

Labaree (2002), in a similar view, supports that when a researcher becomes an insider participant in the fieldwork, this increases understandings of determined culture. However, although the idea of becoming an insider in the community provides as well advantages regarding the construction of sound relationships between researchers and people community, it has been proposed that researchers must bring into consideration what ethical issues should be accomplished while researchers are working with the informants (Labaree 2002).

Given the importance about observation inside the natural context, in this paper we analyze how the immersion of researchers in a participatory way within the daily communitarian activities help to understand how a group of women could develop three levels of empowerment through their participation in productive activities in the coastal lagoon. Moreover, we consider important as well present some of the empowerment approaches that can allow us to understand the development process of these women.

II. SOME EMPOWERMENT APPROACHES

An approach for exploring how the equal participation of women in different spaces can help to develop an empowerment process in their lives is that of Longwe and Clarke, which was later adopted by the UNICEF (1997). In this approach, empowerment is highlighted as a process, which prevents discrimination and unequal power relationships among genders. Batliwala (1995, 1997) asserted that empowerment must also contemplate outputs linked to an increased control of material, intellectual and ideological resources in private and public life. Other authors address empowerment as a process in which subjects and groups acquire the ability to make their own decisions and implement actions to reach their goals (Nelly Stromquist (1995) Champeau and Shaw (2002). These goals encompass the power to generate social and political changes aimed at improving quality of life and attaining greater gender equity. Naila Kabeer (1994) defined the concept as a process in which individuals acquire the skills to make strategic life choices initially denied them. During this process, power is remarked as an important element in choosing alternatives that will have significant consequences in their lives. For Kabeer, the empowerment strategy involves the development of a 'power within' that provides women the capacity to reflect upon their condition, to define priorities in their lives and analyze them from different perspectives.

Jo Rowlands (1997) sees empowerment as a process in which people become more conscience of their own interests and how they relate to others, make decisions and participate in a real position of power which guides them to act and interact with elements within their context. According to Rowlands, the essence of empowerment is the development of psychological processes, which allow people to increase their access to power and use it in different ways. In this conception, the empowerment process can be seemed from three dimensions: 1) personal, 2) collective and 3) close relationships. Because the empowerment process involves a complex interrelationship among contextual elements, the core values within each dimension need to be analyzed; this helps to lead people towards transformation and to identify the circumstances that promote or prevent an empowerment process.

For the study done in the coastal community, we have selected Rowlands' model because it allows the analysis of women's participation within these three dimensions and the understanding of the women's inclusion in a familiar and communitarian space, in which has been expressed some characteristics of inequity to access on natural resources available for them.

III. METHODOLOGY

In this research we used as method a case study (Stake 1995) with the purpose to obtain deeply understand from the natural context of the case. As researchers, we applied the named 'full immersion' (Polsby 1974) which implied living full time with a local family in the community. We implemented techniques such as participant observation (Dewalt & Dewalt 2001a, 2001b; Mayan 2001; Rodríguez, Gil & García 1999), semi-structured interviews (Alonso 1999; Bisquerra 2000), and socio-demographic surveys (Bernard 1995; Hernández, Fernández & Baptista 2003). At the end of the research project we explained the results through the focus group technique particularly with two purposes: (1) present the findings project to feedback at the participants, and (2) verify obtained data and collect new information about some emerged issues almost at the end of the fieldwork period (Edmunds 1999; Morgan 1997). Finally, we triangulate the collected data.

The case was composed by 30 women working in activities related to the coastal lagoon system within their community. Raising and planting mangroves and activities in the coastal dune, cultivation and monitoring snails (*Melongena bispinosa*), sanitation and coastal lagoons, and fishing shrimp during the *norte* season, from ending of September to beginning of February, were the main activities in which the women participated. Something important to highlight is that both women and men within this community participate in the fishing shrimp activity.

IV. A PARTICULAR FIELD: THE COASTAL COMMUNITY

The coast of Yucatan state has 365 km along from east to west in the Yucatan Peninsula. Nearly 65,000 people (Insituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía 2005) live in fifteen settlements along the coast. Fishing, traditionally a male activity, is the primary economic activity, although other family members often engage in activities related to the development of social and productive processes and natural resources use, such as salt extraction, construction, tourism, industry, commerce and services. Less frequent activities include livestock rising, seasonal agriculture, horticulture and fruit production.

We assert that the study site is unique among Yucatan's coastal communities because the most important distinctive rely directly on an intensive women participation in a number of productive activities linked to use and management of natural resources, and because of their participation within the coastal lagoon ecosystem, an area traditionally occupied by men and where women commonly do not participate. For instance, women are actively involved in both the production and processing of lagoon ecosystem resources.

V. A DIFFICULT BEGINNING

This community has contributed in a long collaborative working process with external researchers and agents coming from research centers, governmental and non-governmental organizations. On the one side,

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people from community are greatly interested in developing new livelihoods to improve the personal, familiar and communitarian welfare. On the other side, external agents are concerned in understanding how current and new livelihoods would contribute in a management and protection of natural resources, specially done by women in the community. This broad participation by both communitarian and external groups has allowed the insertion of more and new participants and researchers inside the community.

However, even when the final insertion process has been rewarded in successful conclusion of projects by the community, still there were two significant constraints that influenced a difficult beginning in a full community immersion. The first one was the women resistance to accept observations by external and overall unknown people inside their activities. Once this acceptance was given more gradually, the second constraint was related with a little grade of confidence on the researchers.

To illustrate this part, the first obstacle occurred during the rapport process when we sought to present the purpose of the research project to the women, authorities, and community, ask for their participation, determine key informants, and initiate a full participation in the daily activities. Even though we were introduced to the community as novice researchers we were seen as external agents which influenced in few extent the approaching to women daily activities. In addition, we lost some firsts women's meetings and actions with because sometimes the key informants did not provided us time and date information about those ones.

Having a subtle insertion in the community during the first month, attending and overall helping in several key meetings and activities, people and women from the community were accustomed to see us on their daily basis. Hence, during this process we faced with another constraint, which was referred to low grade of confidence put on the researchers. During meetings, there was a gradual acceptance of researcher's presence but sometimes people did not participated in a confidence way. For instance, women seldom gave their opinions or valuable information to solve certain problems that were emerging during their daily practices in the lagoon ecosystem.

VI. A STRONGER CONFIDENCE TOWARD THE RESEARCHERS: BEYOND THE OBSERVATION

Almost two months lapsed within fieldwork the observation was a robust tool but was not enough to gain stronger confidence by the community. Beyond the observation, there were implemented successful attempts to participate in a collaborative way with the people involved in the research. The participation in several activities was considered totally the key issue to develop and increase trust and reliability from people community and women toward researchers within the study site. During the fieldwork community members became habituated to seeing us, they came to trust in us and saw our presence in community ambits or productive groups as "normal". Once more, our participation in these spaces as well allowed us to understand women activities, their forms of organization, their history and main reasons of insertion in the productive groups, as well as several current problems underlying those activities.

We point out that our participation in the shrimp fishing, a very important communitarian activity, describes the stronger confidence by people developed on researchers. This activity is considered by all community one of the strongest livelihood during the *norte* season, from September to February, when fishing activity done by men decrease considerably. From this stage, we identified that the women insertion into lagoon productive activities occurred by means of a series of non-formal educational processes, including workshops, courses and talks given by people from different disciplines and external institutions. These were intended to help the women acquire knowledge that would have a positive impact on community health, protect the diversity of coastal flora and fauna and improve coastal environmental health. Part of this effort was aimed at creating workspaces that could generate goods and services for the community and its families, and to provide information on the methods and techniques needed to achieve these goals.

It was as well in this phase where a second important aspect came up to the surface. It was the stronger commitment by the women in answering the semi-structure interviews which was shown mainly by two

vital elements, the availability on time and a positive attitude toward the questions asked. However, as researchers deal with the time issue because was when women were involved in more activities than before. For instance, women participated in activities related to the scholar program of their children, to the training on health and environmental issues in the clinical center, to the shrimp fishing, and to their main activities inside the lagoon ecosystem and the coastal lagoon such as raising and planting mangroves, cultivation and monitoring snails (*Melongena bispinosa*), and sanitation of those two places. Moreover, the women had worked hardly during this time to accomplish the production of 10,000 of different kinds of coastal plants for a governmental organization working on management and protection of the natural resources along the coast. Furthermore, we had a challenge at the period in doing the interviews because it was when all the women participated in different stages of the shrimp fishing, since the fish activity to the product process.

During this important period, the researchers were involved in each on those productive activities, watching and collaborating in the process, and at the same period interviewing to the participants. It is important to highlight that the interviews time were agreed together women and researchers, and this time was respected by them through the accomplishment with their dates in this part of the research. Without doubt, it was here when the support and collaboration with the interviews were strongly recognized by the women. They felt confident in agreeing with us the best time and form to do the interviews and changing them when these were not suitable to do it.

Almost at the end of the fieldwork, we planned a focus group to provide with feedback to project research participants. In addition, we retook some important issues, which were emerging almost finalizing the fieldwork. For instance, there were two important issues to continue researching and providing foundational knowledge to address in next researches. The first one did reference to the lack of legal authorization to create an Environmental Management Unit which allows them cultivate the snail resource because of its legal protection as a natural resource within the lagoon. The second issue was tied with the complex relationship between people community and other residents from close communities about the use and management of the natural resources within the lagoon ecosystem, a place considered by many people as a public site. As final activity within the focus group we organized a small celebration with all the participants and guests invited there.

VII. THE EMPOWERMENT CASE

Women's empowerment in this community was manifested by using skills and positive attitudes in conflict resolution and the generation and expression of ideas within their groups. Active participation was clearly expressed during meetings, training sessions and work.

In the personal dimension of Rowlands' model, the most significant elements of empowerment are related to self-confidence, self-esteem and a sense of agency. These elements were identified in the skills, knowledge and attitudes of the women participants. They exhibited a sense that things and goals can be achieved through developing individual skills. In addition, they intensely participated and implemented their influence in new spaces, by attending education, health, labour and environmental issues events within and outside their community.

Their ability to learn, analyze and act in these different situations revealed an empowerment process at the personal level. They had developed a body of knowledge that provided them the tools they need in individual and group activities. For instance, their use of personal time to organize and participate outside the home, mainly by entering a large number of paid and unpaid activities, was one of the most conspicuous individual capacities expressed by the participating women. As shown of this, it was arranged to make the interviews with some household whilst they attended to several activities, such as cook and wash, work in their formal groups, meet at the local clinic, the school and also participate in an important community activity, the shrimping. The participants have and create the mobility they need to operate and meet in their groups.

Empowerment at a collective level was also identified. Rowlands asserted that the core values at this level are self-organization and management. During participant observation, for instance, the women demonstrated that they had the knowledge to create new ways of organizing themselves and addressing their needs as a group, a key element in achieving group goals within collective empowerment. Inside their groups, the women could recognize problems that needed to be dealt with, and many of which are still in process. For example, conflicts arose between the women's groups and other community members when meeting and discussing issues related to marine resources access and management, land use, and permit requests for Environmental Management Units (UMA) in the lagoon. Despite the problems the women have faced as part of their groups, and even when these become drawn out and difficult to resolve, they did not perceive them as constraints, which allowed continuing with their activities.

As they took part in an extended non-formal education process such as courses, training sessions, establishment of relationships and contacts within and outside of their community, the women participants also exhibited empowerment at Rowlands' close relationships level. The most clearly identified core value at this level was the women's ability to negotiate and communicate their needs as individuals and as part of a group. They were fully able to exercise their power as a group to negotiate with external organizations for resources and support for their productive activities. Many of their gains were achieved because they were willing to meet and work with organizations such as GOs and NGOs to increase their access to both material (e.g. money, tools) and non-material resources. In some cases, these same institutions are leading several of the women's group actions, which highlight some weaknesses in the empowerment process. The consequent disadvantages are mainly related to decisions on the way government funding is organized for their activities. These close relationships are based on interaction between women and public and private organizations. These interactions need to be analyzed to improve the possibility of positive outcomes in processes involving local groups, governmental and non-governmental organizations.

In Rowlands' model, the empowerment levels overlap and this clearly occurred among the participating women, who developed and manifested empowerment at all three levels through experiences had as part of daily activities, both in family life and group organization. This empowerment has provided them self-esteem, a sense of belonging and recognition that they are acting to improve family and community conditions.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

Approaching the analysis of women's empowerment in a context of unequal power relationships and access to ecosystem resources allowed us to understand how, by participating in non-formal education, they and their families began a process that reverted several unequal conditions that were most frequently culturally defined by unequal gender relations. Development of the empowerment process was clearly present in their implementation of multiple livelihood strategies, also based on gender and power relationships, and their recognition of who exercises power within their groups and families. To better understand this empowerment process, we identified which aspects of it are related to ways of working, organizing and living, and if the relationships between the women participants and others are vertical or horizontal.

The activities of the participating women were affected by external conflicts between them and members of other groups in which they were involved, and between members of their community and nearby localities. The women involved in external work responded by acquiring more knowledge through non-formal education and organizing legal groups related to their primary activities: 1) creating and maintaining a plant nursery and planting mangrove and coastal dunes; 2) cultivation and monitoring of chivita snails; 3) sanitation and coastal lagoons; and 4) shrimping during the *norte* season. Their empowerment process also helped the women become more aware of their work in coastal ecosystems and to participate in transforming, processing and conserving many of the resources in these ecosystems.

We assert that on the one hand, we had a difficult process to immersion inside the life community because our full presence was seen as strange one, even though there had previous experience participating with external people groups in research activities.

On the other hand, by applying a qualitative methodology we acquired a holistic understanding of the strong and intense participation of women in the studied community. We reached a gradual insertion within all the possible activities hold in the community allowed in great extent the acceptance by the women sharing not only their knowledge about productive activities but also their past and present experiences with other people working with them. Being closely involved with the study subjects and comprehending their daily existence allowed us to contextualize significant elements of the coastal community, the women's families and their participation in activities outside the home, mainly in non-formal education activities. This approach also helped researchers and participants alike to acknowledge what a powerful element women's participation can be in self-management and empowerment processes, and, by extension, in efforts to improve social, family and personal welfare.

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