

Beyond the Catch: Exploring the Lived Experience of Child Fishers in the Coastal Communities of Guiuan, Eastern Samar

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Abstract— *This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of child fishers in the coastal communities of Guiuan, Eastern Samar, focusing on their struggles, coping mechanisms, and the meanings they attach to fishing. Using a transcendental phenomenological design, fifteen (15) purposively selected child fishers from the barangays of Sulangan, Ngolos, Baras, Pagnamitan, Taytay, and Bungtod participated in semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in the local dialect. Data were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological steps to identify shared patterns and emergent themes. The findings revealed five central themes: (1) realities of children's fishing experiences, (2) hardships and health issues, and emotional burdens at sea, (3) adaptation and survival mechanisms in the face of difficulties, (4) fishing as a responsibility and lifeline for survival, and (5) fishing as a barrier to academic aspirations. These results illuminate how child fishers balance their roles between education and livelihood amid poverty and cultural expectations. Despite the risks they face, these children exhibit resilience, strength, and a strong sense of duty to their families. The study recommends that local government units, educational institutions, and child protection agencies collaborate to create sustainable interventions that promote children's welfare and safeguard their rights.*

Keywords—child fishers, lived experiences, transcendental phenomenology, poverty, resilience, Guiuan Eastern Samar

I. INTRODUCTION

Fishing is not merely an occupation in many coastal communities; it is a way of life deeply embedded in family survival and cultural identity. However, this reality often draws children into the fishing industry at an early age, exposing them to conditions that may compromise their health, safety, and future opportunities. Globally, child labor remains a persistent issue, with a significant proportion of children engaged in agriculture, including fisheries and aquaculture. According to international reports, millions of children continue to participate in labor that is considered hazardous, particularly in small-scale, family-based fishing operations (FAO, 2021). While some involvement may be culturally accepted as part of skill transmission, the line between acceptable participation and exploitative child labor is frequently blurred.

Child labor in fisheries is widely recognized as work that endangers children's physical and psychological well-being and interferes with their education and development. Studies have shown that children involved in fishing often perform dangerous tasks such as deep-water diving, handling heavy fishing gear, and working long hours under harsh environmental conditions (ILO, 2019; FAO, 2021). In Ghana,

for instance, children engaged in fishing activities were exposed to hazardous tasks and high rates of physical abuse, with many also experiencing limited access to education (Awal, 2022). Similarly, research in Southeast Asia highlights that children in fisheries are particularly vulnerable due to weak regulatory enforcement, poverty, and declining fish stocks, which push families to rely on cheaper labor, including children (Environmental Justice Foundation, 2020; ILO, 2023).

In the Southeast Asian context, the problem is further intensified by economic pressures and labor exploitation within the fishing industry. Vietnam and Thailand, both major exporters of seafood, have been linked to cases of child labor and unsafe working conditions, especially in unregulated sectors (Environmental Justice Foundation, 2020; ILO and Asia Foundation, 2022). Children in these industries are often exposed to hazardous environments, including dangerous equipment, long working hours, and even trafficking-related exploitation. These findings reflect a broader regional trend in which child labor persists despite existing policies and international pressure to protect children's rights.

In the Philippines, child labor in fishing is closely tied to poverty and limited access to education. Studies indicate that children in coastal communities often begin fishing at a young age to support their families, sometimes leading to school dropout and reduced future opportunities (Maliao, 2023; World Vision Philippines, 2022). In areas such as Eastern Samar, fishing serves as the primary source of livelihood, making children's participation both a survival strategy and a social expectation. While some children manage to balance schooling and work, many are forced to prioritize immediate economic needs over long-term educational goals.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND STUDIES

2.1 Children in Fisheries

Children in fishing communities are involved in various activities such as capture fishing, aquaculture, processing, and marketing (FAO, 2010). While some participation may be culturally accepted and age-appropriate, many children are exposed to hazardous tasks that put their safety at risk (Mathew, 2010). In Southeast Asia and the Philippines, poverty and limited opportunities drive children's involvement in fisheries, often resulting in school absenteeism or discontinuation (Maliao, 2023; Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2017).

2.2 Child Labor in Fisheries

Child labor in fisheries refers to work that harms children's well-being and interferes with their education and development (ILO, 2018). Globally, around 152 million children are engaged in child labor, with the majority in agriculture, including fisheries and aquaculture (FAO, 2018). Factors such as poverty, cultural norms, and weak enforcement of labor laws contribute to its persistence (World Bank, 2020). In many cases, children face long working hours, unsafe conditions, and limited access to education and basic services (ILO, 2004; Bangladesh Shrimp and Fish Foundation, 2017).

Policies and Regulations Protecting Child Fishers

International frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and ILO Conventions No. 138 and 182 establish standards for protecting children from exploitation (FAO, 2013). Organizations like FAO promote awareness, capacity-building, and livelihood programs to eliminate child labor (FAO, 2018). However, in the Philippine context, gaps in implementation and monitoring continue to limit the effectiveness of these protections (ILO-IPEC, 2002; BFAR, 2001).

2.3 Challenges of Child Fishers

Child fishers face numerous risks, including dangerous working environments, physical injuries, fatigue, and psychological stress (FAO, 2021). Activities such as deep-sea fishing and diving expose children to accidents, drowning, and long-term health problems (ILO, 2013; Ibrahim et al., 2019). These challenges significantly affect their physical and mental development (UN Atlas of the Oceans, 2016).

2.4 Types of Work and Associated Risks

Children engage in various fisheries-related tasks, including onboard fishing, aquaculture, and fish processing (ILO, 2000; Moreau & Neis, 2009). These activities involve risks such as drowning, injuries from equipment, chemical exposure, and musculoskeletal strain (Lopata et al., 2005). Poor working conditions and lack of safety measures further increase their vulnerability (ILO, 2007).

2.5 Coping Strategies of Child Fishers

Child fishers adopt coping mechanisms such as normalizing work as part of family responsibility and relying on faith and community support (FAO, 2010; DSWD, 2022). Some children maintain hope through education despite limited access (World Vision Philippines, 2022; UNICEF, 2023). However, these strategies often mask deeper structural inequalities and contribute to the persistence of child labor (ILO, 2023).

2.6 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation and Bronfenbrenner's Socio-Ecological Model. Maslow's theory explains that child fishers engage in labor to meet basic physiological and safety needs, especially under conditions of poverty (Maslow, 1943). It also highlights how unmet higher-level needs, such as education and self-actualization, are compromised by child labor. Meanwhile, the Socio-Ecological Model emphasizes that children's involvement in fisheries is shaped by multiple interacting

factors, including individual, family, community, and societal influences (Bronfenbrenner; UNICEF, 2023).

Overall Synthesis

The reviewed literature shows that child labor in fisheries remains a persistent issue driven by poverty, cultural practices, and limited access to education (FAO, 2018; World Bank, 2020). Despite existing policies and interventions, many children continue to face hazardous conditions and exploitation (ILO, 2013). Addressing this issue requires stronger policy enforcement, improved educational opportunities, and sustainable livelihood programs to protect the well-being of child fishers.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology section outlines the plan and method that how the study is conducted. This includes Universe of the study, sample of the study, Data and Sources of Data, study's variables and analytical framework. The details are as follows;

3.1 Population and Sample

The study population consisted of child fishers from the coastal communities of Guiuan, Eastern Samar. The actual sample size was 15 key informants, distributed across six barangays: Sulangan (3), Ngolos (3), Baras (3), Pagnamitan (2), Taytay (2), and Bungtod (2). The researchers employed a purposive sampling technique, selecting participants based on specific characteristics relevant to the study. The inclusion criteria included being a child engaged in fishing, having relevant fishing experience, being a resident of the barangay, and having a willingness to share personal experiences and challenges. Participants who did not meet these criteria or were unwilling to participate were excluded from the study.

3.2 Data and Sources of Data

The research data were collected through face-to-face, in-depth interviews with the selected child fishers in the coastal communities of Guiuan, Eastern Samar. The researchers used open-ended questions to gather rich and detailed narratives about the participants' lived experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms in fishing. Prior to data collection, permission was secured from school authorities, and informed consent was obtained from both the child participants and their parents or guardians. The interviews were conducted in the local dialect (Waray-Waray) to ensure clarity and comfort, especially for participants with limited literacy. Responses were audio-recorded (with permission) and supplemented with field notes to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details. The collected data were then transcribed verbatim and translated into English for analysis. Follow-up probing questions were also used when necessary to deepen the responses. While the exact duration of each interview was not specified, the process ensured thorough and comprehensive data collection in a natural, participant-friendly setting.

3.3 Theoretical framework

This study is anchored on different theories, these includes: The Theory of Human Motivation and Socio-Ecological Model.

Theory of Human Motivation

According to Abraham Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation (1943), particularly his Hierarchy of Needs, human behavior is driven by the desire to fulfill a series of hierarchical needs, beginning with physiological and safety needs, such as food, shelter, and security. Furthermore, Maslow's theory highlights how unmet needs at higher levels—such as esteem and self-actualization—can hinder personal growth, which is particularly relevant when child labor compromises their education, aspirations, and psychological well-being.

In the context of child fishers, their involvement in fishing can be understood as a means of meeting these basic needs for themselves and their families, especially in situations marked by poverty and limited access to resources. Beyond survival, their participation may also fulfill social and emotional needs, such as belongingness and love, as fishing might be a family tradition or a communal activity that fosters a sense of connection and acceptance.

Socio-Ecological Model

This model by Urie Bronfenbrenner posits that human development is influenced by multiple levels of environmental systems, from individual to societal. It highlights the interplay between personal, familial, community, and societal factors in shaping behaviors and experiences. For child fishers, this model underscores how cultural norms, economic pressures, and limited access to education and social services converge to perpetuate child labor in fishing communities (UNICEF, 2023). By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of child fishers. It seeks to illuminate the complex interplay of individual challenges, and socio-cultural factors that influence their daily lives and coping strategies.

3.4 Data Analysis

The study utilized qualitative data analysis following the seven-step process of Moustakas (1994) under the transcendental phenomenological approach. The analysis began with epoche (bracketing), where researchers set aside their personal biases to remain open to the participants' experiences. This was followed by horizontalization, where significant statements related to the phenomenon were identified. Through reduction and elimination, repetitive and irrelevant statements were removed, and meaningful units were retained. These were then grouped into themes, which formed the basis for developing textural descriptions (what participants experienced) and structural descriptions (how they experienced it). Finally, these descriptions were synthesized to capture the essence of the lived experiences of child fishers.

To ensure validity and reliability, the study employed strategies such as member checking, where participants reviewed and verified their transcripts, and the use of a professional transcriber to ensure accuracy of the data. The researchers also maintained a reflexive journal to support bracketing and minimize bias throughout the research process.

In terms of trustworthiness, the study followed the principles of credibility, dependability, and confidentiality. Credibility was

strengthened through accurate transcription, participant validation, and faithful representation of responses. Dependability was ensured by following a systematic and well-documented analysis process. Confidentiality and ethical integrity were maintained by using code names, securing informed consent, and ensuring that all data were used strictly for educational purposes.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Emergent Themes of the Study

The analysis of the participants' narratives using Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach resulted in five major themes: (1) Realities of Children's Fishing Experiences, (2) Hardships, Health Issues, and Emotional Burdens at Sea, (3) Adaptation and Survival Mechanisms, (4) Fishing as a Lifeline Responsibility and Survival, and (5) Fishing as a Barrier to Academic Aspirations. Each theme reflects both the description of the participants' lived experiences (results) and their interpretation in relation to existing literature (discussion).

4.2 Realities of Children's Fishing Experiences

The findings show that child fishers are engaged in physically demanding activities such as hauling nets, rowing boats, and diving, which expose them to exhaustion, fear, and discomfort. These experiences demonstrate that their childhood is largely centered on labor rather than play and schooling. Despite the hardships, participants also expressed feelings of pride and happiness when they successfully contribute to their families.

These results indicate that fishing creates a dual experience of suffering and fulfilment, where children simultaneously endure physical strain and develop a sense of purpose. This supports previous studies which argue that participation in small-scale fisheries provides not only economic benefits but also social meaning and identity. The findings further suggest that poverty and family expectations shape children's early assumption of adult roles.

4.3 Hardships, Health Issues, and Emotional Burdens at Sea

Participants reported various physical and emotional difficulties, including injuries, nausea, dizziness, fear of drowning, and anxiety caused by dangerous sea conditions. Emotional struggles such as envy toward peers and feelings of sadness were also evident.

These findings highlight that child fishing is a hazardous form of labor that negatively affects both physical and psychological well-being. This aligns with existing research indicating that child laborers are more vulnerable to health risks and emotional distress due to unsafe working environments and limited access to healthcare. The results emphasize how continuous exposure to danger and hardship normalizes suffering among child fishers.

4.4 Adaptation and Survival Mechanisms

The study revealed that child fishers employ various coping strategies such as staying calm, resting, taking medication, socializing, and engaging in leisure activities. Some

participants also adapt physically to the demands of fishing over time, while others rely on avoidance or acceptance.

These results demonstrate the resilience and adaptability of child fishers in managing stress and hardship. Consistent with coping theory, these strategies help regulate both emotional and physical strain. However, the reliance on informal coping methods, such as self-medication, also reflects the lack of institutional support systems available to them. This suggests that while children develop resilience, it is largely driven by necessity rather than adequate support.

4.5 Fishing as a Lifeline Responsibility and Survival

Fishing was identified as a critical means of survival, providing food, income, and support for education and daily needs. Participants viewed their involvement as a responsibility and expressed pride in contributing to their families. Poverty emerged as the primary factor driving their participation in fishing.

These findings show that fishing functions as both a necessity and a source of identity, reinforcing children's roles as providers within the household. This supports previous literature identifying poverty as the main cause of child labor. The results further reveal that cultural values of family responsibility and solidarity strengthen children's acceptance of their roles, even under difficult conditions.

4.6 Fishing as a Barrier to Academic Aspirations

Although fishing helps support educational expenses, it also limits children's ability to attend school regularly and pursue long-term goals. Participants reported fatigue, absenteeism, and in some cases, dropping out of school. Some expressed aspirations for professional careers but felt these were difficult to achieve due to financial and time constraints.

These findings illustrate a conflict between survival and education, where immediate economic needs take priority over long-term development. This is consistent with studies showing that child labor interferes with schooling and perpetuates cycles of poverty. The results highlight how structural factors, such as economic hardship and limited educational support, restrict children's opportunities for advancement.

4.7 Synthesis of Findings (Textural and Structural Integration)

The overall results reveal that the lived experiences of child fishers are shaped by the interplay of poverty, family responsibility, and environmental conditions. Their daily lives are characterized by labor, risk, and resilience, while their aspirations are constrained by limited opportunities.

The findings contribute to existing knowledge by emphasizing that child fishing is not only an economic issue but also a social and developmental concern. While children demonstrate strength and adaptability, their experiences reflect the loss of a typical childhood and the persistence of structural inequalities.

V. CONCLUSION

This study provides significant insight into the lived experiences of child fishers in Guiuan, Eastern Samar, revealing how poverty, family responsibility, and survival reshape the meaning of childhood. Through a transcendental phenomenological approach guided by Clark Moustakas, the research highlights that fishing is not only a source of livelihood but also a complex reality where children endure physical hardship, emotional strain, and early assumption of adult roles. At the same time, their experiences reflect resilience, adaptability, and a strong sense of duty to their families.

The findings emphasize the dual nature of fishing in these communities. It sustains daily needs and supports basic education, yet simultaneously limits children's academic engagement and future opportunities. This underscores a critical cycle where immediate survival often takes precedence over long-term development. As such, the study points to the urgent need for integrated responses that address both economic and social dimensions of child labor.

Implications of this research extend to practice, policy, education, and future inquiry. Strengthening child protection mechanisms, expanding livelihood opportunities for families, and enhancing access to healthcare and psychosocial support are essential steps toward improving children's well-being. In the realm of policy, stricter implementation of child labor regulations in alignment with the standards of the International Labour Organization is necessary, alongside community-based monitoring and support systems. Educationally, there is a need for more flexible and inclusive learning programs that accommodate the realities of working children, ensuring that economic hardship does not permanently hinder their aspirations.

For future research, further studies may explore the long-term impacts of child fishing on development, as well as interventions that can effectively balance livelihood needs and child welfare. Broader perspectives involving families, educators, and policymakers may also deepen understanding and inform more holistic solutions. Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing discourse on child labor by illuminating the voices of child fishers, calling for sustained efforts to ensure that they are not only contributors to survival but are also given the opportunity to experience education, protection, and a better future.

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